

Opinion – Polarisation and Collective Action: The EU at a Crossroads

Written by Jamal Abdi

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JAMAL ABDI, MAR 19 2025

Donald Trump's return to the White House and his administration's handling of the ongoing war between Ukraine and Russia, thus far, have affirmed rather than revealed the structural challenges facing the EU in positioning itself as a serious actor on the International political stage. In an increasingly multipolar world, characterized by realpolitik, efficient decision-making capability is more important than ever. Herein lies an implacable challenge for the EU. Unlike other major actors in international relations, the EU is not a state with the legal competence to make swift major decisions. It is an international organization consisting of twenty-seven sovereign states, which implicitly rules out the possibility of a permanent alignment of interests among its members.

The requirement for consensus on major decisions adds further complexity. Hungary's reluctance to continue economic and military support to Ukraine serves as an example at hand. The decision-making process within the EU's governance apparatus is bureaucratic and tedious. This is not to say that the EU completely lacks independent agency, but that it often faces collective action problems in ways that states normally do not. Major decision-making within the EU requires addressing challenges associated with collective action, such as free-riding, defection, and obstruction. Other major actors, such as the United States, Russia, and China, do not face similar obstacles. They, unlike the EU, are characterized by a powerful executive. The ideological underpinnings of their political systems are, in this context, irrelevant. Most states, whether liberal democracies or dictatorships, share this attribute. States do not normally have to deal with spoilers like Hungary's Viktor Orbán. The EU's collective action problems, inherent in its governance architecture, hinder its ability to become a serious independent player in international relations.

The obvious solution to the above-discussed challenges, inhibiting the EU's ability to secure a seat among major players in international relations, is further European integration. The single most formidable challenge to further EU integration is far-right populism. Far-right parties are currently represented in government in six EU member states: Italy, Finland, Slovakia, Hungary, Croatia, and the Czech Republic. In the latest elections in France, Marine Le Pen's National Rally (RN) secured 33 percent of the votes. In Sweden, the Sweden's Democrats (SD) is currently the second largest party in parliament. Most recently, the Alternative for Germany (AFD) became the second largest party in Germany, having won 20 percent of the votes. Not even Germany, Europe's economic powerhouse with its complex history, is exempt from the right-right wave that has recently swept across the EU. Elsewhere, such as Denmark, far-right parties have been so dominant in the past decades that their views, particularly on immigration, have been copied by virtually all mainstream parties.

Two key common factors among most far-right political parties in Europe are a staunch opposition to further EU integration and xenophobia rooted in Islamophobia. According to the EU Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA), one in two Muslims in the EU experience racism and discrimination in everyday life. Ernest Gellner (1983: 1) defined nationalism as "a political principle, which holds that the political and the national unit must be congruent". According to Gellner, ethnic boundaries should not cut across political ones. There should, in other words, be congruence between those in power and the subordinates. Incongruence between those in power and the people, leads to a violation of the nationalist principle.

Gellner's theory, while not without limitations, rings true when applied to the psychology of far-right populism in

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Europe. It is not unusual for European politicians, and some media, to rhetorically present the arrival of migrants and refugees as an “invasion” and a threat to the preservation of national identity. Since ruling parties have allowed this “invasion”, they are not serving the “people”, thus violating the nationalist principle. A similar logic applies to the issue of EU integration. The far-right views EU integration as a loss of national sovereignty to elitist bureaucrats in Brussels. In short, both the opposition to immigration and the EU are accompanied by the conviction that an often-unspecified elite has betrayed the “people”.

The mainstream media in Europe tends to portray itself as being wrongfully accused by the far-right of being complicit in the betrayal of the “people” —that is, by furthering inclusivity, multiculturalism, wokeism, etc. This is only partly true. What is seldom discussed is the role the mainstream has played in legitimizing the underlying logic that has driven millions of Europeans to embrace the far-right. However inconvenient it may be, the fact remains that mainstream media in Europe has significantly contributed to the vilification, dehumanization, and othering of Muslims, and by extension, Islam. The attacks on the World Trade Center in September 2001 were not only horrible terrorist attacks that killed three thousand innocent people, but they also ushered in a period in the West, characterized by the revitalization of the Muslim “other” in public discourse.

How the West should cope with, for instance, the threat from Islamism, radicalization, Islamic terrorism, and the like, were mainstay themes in public debates in the decades following September 11, 2001. It is imperative to stress that the above-mentioned themes were generally not treated and debated in a balanced, rational, and useful way. Too often, debates around these and similar themes were devoid of meaningful substance and effectively blurred the distinction between Muslims in general and politically driven terrorists. Following this line of reasoning, the same mainstream media in Europe that currently emphasizes the importance of further EU integration and laments the challenges hindering further integration have inadvertently fueled the far-right. While only blaming the mainstream media for the success of the far-right is unmerited, shirking responsibility is equally problematic. Both mainstream political parties and the media have contributed to the right-wing shift of European societies.

More and rapid integration is not a choice but a necessity if the EU is to be taken seriously in the emerging multipolar world. Overtly pushing for integration may fuel the far-wing in some member states. Appeasing the far-right further, by fundamentally compromising, is a step away from the EU’s self-proclaimed values and may engender resentment from the far-left, creating a new challenge. This puts the EU and its proponents in the member states in a precarious strategic situation. Excluding “problematic” states like Hungary or Slovakia is also not an easy solution. First, such a course of action is accompanied by the risk that those states may forge stronger ties with Russia. Second, the rise of the far-right and recent elections in EU member states imply that even major countries like Germany or France may become the new Hungary in the foreseeable future. Trump’s victory in 2016 taught us that politics in the West is no less predictable than elsewhere in the world.

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