

**[Link: The rise of many far-right governments sparks fear for Europe’s democracy - is it warranted?](#)**



*The European Union flags outside of its headquarters in Brussels, Belgium. Photo: Yves Herman/Reuters/Ritzau Scanpix*

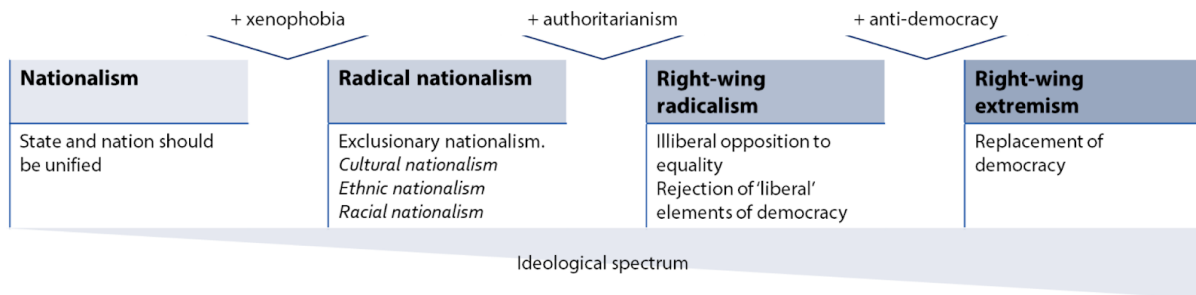
**By Ernst Calitz**

A fatal shooting at an LGBTQ+ bar in Bratislava on the 12th of October has added to and sparked more debates on the supposed rise of far-right and right-wing extremism throughout Europe.

According to a 2022 study requested by the LIBE committee (European Parliament's Committee on Civil Liberties, Justice and Home Affairs) titled: “Right-wing extremism in the EU”, there is a definite rise in violence that can be linked to far-right ideologies. However, the crux of the matter, and the study, is that it is difficult to precisely define and pinpoint right-wing extremism and the far-right.

The study proposes that in order for an ideology to be defined as right-wing extremism, it needs to adhere to a very specific set of criteria. Otherwise, the ideology would fall somewhere else on a proposed ideological spectrum.

**Figure 1: Spectrum of ideologies from nationalism to right-wing extremism**



Source: Cas Mudde adapted by Asterisk Research and Analysis

This presents a new problem to the debate on the supposed rising far-right in Europe: What is it precisely, is it threatening Europe's democratic ideals, and what are the legal frameworks to combat it?

### Why we are seeing a rise in right-wing ideologies

James Mosher, an associate professor of European Politics at Ohio University, proposes that many of the current voters shifting towards the right and the far-right are doing so because they feel as if the left has failed them in some way. Moreover, he added that these "voters are offering voting against something, as opposed to voting for something."

Andrew Turner Howard, a Ph.D. candidate also at Ohio University, further adds to the idea of a growing distaste towards modern liberal parties in the EU. "Economic discontents, frustrations at what is perceived as the failings of modern liberal democracy" said Howard.

Thus, the potential and current rise in more extreme conservative ideologies could possibly stem from voters opening themselves up to more extreme trains of thought, once they start buying into surface-level right-leaning ideologies. "It's like a first gateway drug in terms of starting to accept the broader mission. You might not have been upset about LGBTQ+ politics initially, but now that you're in the party - you internalise the identity and its beliefs and start to buy into more radical ideas" said Mosher.

This "gateway" into far-right ideals can potentially lead to an appeal to fascism. Howard elaborates on this by stating that: "One of the elements of fascism I try to emphasize in my teaching is it gives people a sense of belonging that modern liberalism doesn't. In a liberal society, you are free, but that can untether you from structure or stability, and many people have difficulty finding belonging and purpose in a modern liberal society - something I think is exacerbated by the cold, impersonal way we design our cities and communities, which does not need to be this way. On the other hand, Fascism tells people they are important because they have an intrinsic identity, almost always tied to the national identity, which they should be proud of and promote as the key characteristic defining them."

## **How this threat manifests itself in the lives of EU residents**

The shift of political ideology in many European governments allows far-right politicians, such as Giorgia Meloni, Italy's new prime minister, to gain significant political capital. The power shift enables the far-right to implement policies that are potentially highly problematic for marginalised groups in the country.

Vinciane Cordemans, a social worker from Belgium who hosts refugees, worries that tighter immigration policies from the far-right could have a negative impact on not only new refugees, but also those who have already entered the EU.

[INSERT VIDEO] Caption: Vinciane Cordemans details her experience housing immigrants and how a more right-wing government hinders her ability to do so. (by Olivia Roman)

A large problem in combating the rise of fascism in Europe is identifying when a party or group can be considered as right-wing extremists, and when their political actions and discourse actually pose a threat to the country's democratic values. However, this is becoming increasingly difficult to do in a large number of EU member states, as their political discussions and policies move further right.

## **Why it is imperative to use the right terminology when addressing threats from the right**

Quentin Liger, a researcher that worked on the study requested by the LIBE committee, commented on this problem and on the fluidity of political ideology in the public debate, and how it has changed throughout the years. Liger proposes that "looking at Italy and France, there has clearly been a shift to the right in the political discourse, which means that some ideas that would have been considered extremist 5, 10 or 20 years ago, are now seen as mainstream." Thus, he further added that in public discourse, it is essential to correctly label what you are talking about, otherwise, the discussion becomes skewed.

The definitional problems surrounding far-right and right-wing extremism pose a large problem to the current discourse on what the threat is and how to take legal action against it. Public and governmental debates on how to address this issue become near impossible when the definitional challenges of what the far-right and right-wing extremism is still remain. Thus, it becomes increasingly difficult to take legal action against any potential right-wing extremism in a large number of European states when far-right and extremism become normalised.. Liger added that "I think that the fluidity of the movements, parties and individuals in that whole spectrum makes it a very difficult topic. It also makes it very difficult to have any form of legal framework to protect democracy once the cultural debate is so far to the right."

However, some parties that lean more towards the right and far-right in the European Parliament oppose many of the ideas the LIBE committee's requested study discusses. Representatives from these parties called the study biased and unfactual. When approached for comment on the matter, members of these parties declined to be interviewed.

## **Legal frameworks combating far-right movements and extremists**

Liger stressed that many of the member states in the EU are solely responsible for combating the far-right in their own political spheres. He stated: “when we looked at the effectiveness of the legal frameworks, one thing that became very clear is that in order to assess the effectiveness of the responses in different member states, it was really interesting to look at the objective of the policies trying to fight for right extremism”. He stressed that many of the member states’ policies differ greatly from one another in their objectives when it comes to combating any potential threat from the far-right.

Liger highlights that countries such as Germany believe all of this is very cultural and historical. Germany's attempt to fight right-wing extremism is an attempt to bring back individuals, who might be attracted by right-wing extremist movements, into the fray of democracy.” Where countries such as France, which have a legal framework that bans these far-right organisations, make it rather difficult to deal with individuals and reinstate democratic ideals.

### **Is it a threat to Europe's democracy?**

Before it becomes remotely possible to identify whether or not the rise of more conservative ideals and the acceptance of the far-right poses a threat to Europe’s democracy, we need to be able to unanimously agree on what right-wing extremism and the far-right is - which is a debate still in its infancy.

Thus, it becomes the responsibility of each EU member state to combat any potential threat to its democracy. According to Liger, this becomes increasingly difficult to do when the political discourse in a member state leans too far to the right, as mentioned above.