

How populist radical right parties have eroded the EU's human rights agenda in the Mediterranean

*It is often assumed that populist radical right parties will support disengaging from the European Union by default. **Adrià Rivera Escartin** writes that although many of these parties do support disengaging from the EU, there is the potential for a different approach to be adopted in future which might be termed 'informal and illiberal Europeanisation'. Italy's capacity to shape EU relations with Tunisia and Hungary's efforts to influence the EU's relations with Egypt offer two recent examples of how this trend might materialise.*



Matteo Salvini speaking at the European Parliament, Credit: © [European Union 2015 – European Parliament](#) (CC BY-NC-ND 4.0)

The days before the 2019 European elections, Steve Bannon, the guru of the populist radical right, pledged that an alliance of Eurosceptic parties orbiting around the figures of the former Italian Interior Minister Matteo Salvini and the Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán would be able to secure a substantial share of seats in the European Parliament. Their proclaimed objective was to block EU politics from within and to combat the spectre of a federal EU. Although they fell short of expectations in the European elections, they have performed well at the national level across the continent. Consequently, populist radical right parties have been able to secure important executive positions in countries such as Poland, Hungary, Italy and Austria.

As far as the member states are key in the making of EU foreign policy, one might wonder how the formation of governments that include these parties could affect the activity of the EU outside its borders. This question appears even more pressing in the case of the Mediterranean, firstly, because of the high importance that populist radical right parties give to the region for its role in migration governance and security matters, and secondly, because the EU has a strong presence in Northern Africa, through instruments like the European Neighbourhood Policy, in terms of trade and diplomatic cooperation.

One possible outcome of the increasing power of populist radical right parties is the replication of the Brexit model in their home countries or, otherwise, the adoption of a de-Europeanisation strategy, namely remaining in the EU while advocating for strategic partial exits in specific policy fields like foreign policy. In this case, the member states might try to undo cooperation mechanisms and return to an intergovernmentalist logic in those dimensions where the Commission has strong powers, like trade or cooperation aid.

Yet, there is a third possible outcome that could be labelled informal and illiberal Europeanisation. It might be that populist radical right parties in power try to influence EU foreign policy so that it reflects their own values and expectations. The adoption of such a strategy is more likely when the costs of leaving the Union are too high, and when member states profit from the EU's political and economic umbrella to pursue their national agendas.

Informal and illiberal Europeanisation entails a different understanding of Europeanisation, which in the past was associated with the expansion of liberal values and with two vertical power dynamics: uploading – through which the member states project their national preferences towards the EU level – and downloading – the process whereby a member state adapts its national foreign policy to the EU foreign policy objectives and/or its institutional framework.

Instead, the informal dimension of Europeanisation is characterised by an increasing importance of horizontal contacts between states in the making of EU foreign policy. Some member states, including those with populist radical right parties in government, create informal groups of like-minded countries to convince other member states to adopt their policy preferences and eventually influence politics at the EU level. The Visegrád Group is one example.

In the case of populist radical right parties, they do so through directional leadership (leading by making the first move) and using an emotional anti-migration discourse that tries to legitimise radical and unilateral action. The illiberal dimension of Europeanisation comes when governments with populist radical right parties advocate for the adoption of their own illiberal norms and values, which entail restrictive migration policies and a watering down of human rights agendas.

Two examples can be put forward in order to illustrate the dynamics of informal and illiberal Europeanisation. Under the leadership of Matteo Salvini's Lega, Italy created an informal coalition of member states in favour of setting up 'disembarkation platforms' for irregular migrants in Tunisia during the summer of 2018. These plans were adopted by the Council but were never implemented given Tunis' rejection.

For its part, Hungary sought to normalise relations with Egypt after the 2013 coup and make other member states follow suit. For example, Orbán was the first EU leader to visit the country after the assassination of young researcher Giulio Regeni and repeatedly proclaimed that the EU should avoid 'lecturing' Egypt about human rights issues.

As a result, in the case of Tunisia, Italy's first Conte Cabinet reinforced conditionality in migration, further frustrating the expectations of the Tunisian authorities and civil society about the EU and its support for democratic transition. In Egypt, the EU became increasingly disengaged from a human rights agenda, a move that Orbán had been defending in the framework of the Visegrád Group.

Populist radical right parties might not pose a challenge to the territorial integrity of the EU. However, their arrival to power might change or at least influence the nature of the policies that the EU tries to put forward. Informal and illiberal Europeanisation can deepen existing inconsistencies in EU foreign policy in the Mediterranean.

These inconsistencies imply contradictions between a proclaimed objective of EU foreign policy in the Mediterranean, such as promoting human rights and assisting democracy, and, on the other hand, other priorities like defending self-centred economic interests or short-term stability. As many researchers have signalled, inconsistencies are not new, but the coming into power of populist radical right parties exacerbates these dynamics and further erodes the EU's human rights agenda in the Mediterranean.

The two examples presented above are circumscribed to EU foreign policy in the Mediterranean. The plausibility of these observations should be thus tested in other scenarios of EU foreign policy as well as in other policy fields. Of course, it is also possible that informal and illiberal Europeanisation is not a real possibility in other contexts. Also, one has to take into account that these dynamics can be reverted after populist radical right parties lose power.

This was the case in Italy, when Lega left the first Conte Cabinet in August 2019 and a new government was formed with a different approach to EU politics. One important thing to retain is that, besides the debate around leaving and remaining in the EU, it is vital to research and reflect on how populist radical right parties can shape EU policy and, as a consequence, impact citizens' everyday lives inside and outside its borders.

For more information, see the author's accompanying paper in the [Journal of European Public Policy](#)

This article gives the views of the author, not the position of Democratic Audit. It was first published on [LSE's EUROPP blog](#).

About the author



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