



Marta Lorimer

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Marta Lorimer: “I’m not sure there is a single country in Europe that is resistant to the rise of the far right”

In an interview with LSE’s Joanna Bale, Marta Lorimer discusses the rise of the radical right, how Keir Starmer should respond to Reform UK and why there’s still space to engage for those worried about the direction of politics.

How did you first become interested in studying the radical right? Was there a particular moment that pulled you in?

It was in a car in Sardinia when I was about 18. I was in this car with friends, and one of my friends thought that an appropriate song to be playing was this obscure neo-fascist song, which is how I discovered that neo-fascist music existed.

A few years later, I was doing an assignment for my undergrad on the far right, and I went back to that song and ended up going down a YouTube rabbit hole that led me to discover the existence of neo-fascist Pan-Europeanism.

To me, this was deeply puzzling because when I thought of the far right, I thought about nationalism. And so that really got me thinking about how these movements would think about Europe, and that’s what I ended up writing my PhD on.

When we talk about the radical right, what exactly do we mean? Is it the same as the populist right, the far right or something more specific?

We usually use three broad terms: radical right, extreme right and far right. With some of these, we will also add the term populist. And these all refer to slightly different things.

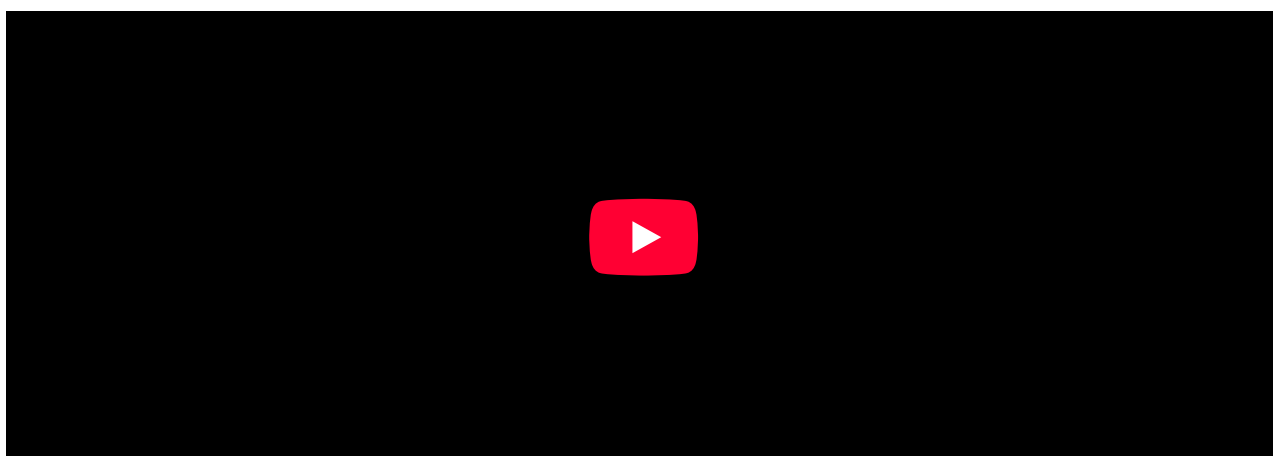
When we talk about the radical right, we talk about parties that are nativist and authoritarian, but who broadly accept the democratic system and work within democratic institutions. When we talk about the extreme right, what we mean are parties that are nativist and authoritarian, but who reject democratic institutions.

The far right is a broader umbrella term that usually covers both types of parties. This is a term that we use when we are trying to make a broader point about these movements.

We've seen a wave of radical right parties gaining ground across Europe. What do you think is driving this surge?

Unfortunately, as in most cases, the answer is it's complicated. To simplify it, some people have cultural concerns about high levels of migration changing the way a country functions or quite simply not liking foreigners. Then there are economic concerns about, for example, people's sense they are doing worse than they were in the past or that others are doing better than they are.

And very often, these factors will compound one another. So you're not just scared of migration necessarily because you don't like migrants, but because you also connect this to your economic livelihood. Very often, they will work in conjunction in explaining why people vote more and more for these parties.



Is the rise of the radical right something new or are we just seeing an old story in a new form?

I don't think we should think about this rise as something entirely new. We started seeing the far right do better in elections in the 1980s. What I do think is happening is that we are seeing a much more extreme version of this because it's not just that they're becoming successful in a few elections. We are seeing them getting into governments and we are seeing larger numbers of them.

They're still a minority, which is something that we should really remember. If we look at the **2024 EU elections**, the far right were a big group, but they were still 25% of the European Parliament – they weren't 50% or 60%.

But we are certainly seeing a growth in these parties that is different to anything that we've seen before. We are seeing them in more and more positions of responsibility. And we are also seeing changes to the broader tenure of politics, where their ideas are not just being discussed by themselves, but where others are starting to adopt them and discuss them more explicitly.

These parties often claim to be anti-establishment, but many are now part of the political mainstream. Has their message changed as they've gained power?

It depends a little bit on where you're looking and who you are looking at. One of the really interesting cases is Giorgia Meloni. When she arrived in power, people were very concerned that she was going to be strongly against the European Union.

But Meloni has been quite intelligent in this case because she has greatly moderated her rhetoric on the international stage, being supportive of Ukraine and generally trying to be constructive in her dialogue with the European Commission. However, at the same time, **she has adopted quite harsh measures back in Italy.**

So sometimes, these parties will play the respectability card when they're in government. Other times, they will keep the anti-establishment rhetoric going by saying things like, "I wish I could do this, but the system is against me".

When these parties do get into government, do they tend to soften their positions or do they double down?

It depends a little bit on what position they're in. Sometimes, they do soften their positions partially because power requires them to do so. But what frequently happens is that they might soften their positions on issues that don't matter quite as much to them.

Say you're a radical-right party and you're now in government, you might stop saying things such as, "we should overhaul the current pension system, or we should go after big banks". Instead, you will say, "okay, fine, we'll keep the pension system. We'll tinker a little bit around the edges. But you know what? We're going to stop the boats". And that is the kind of measure that you really focus on in your discussions.

And again, stopping the boats, you can do that, you can show that. But at the same time, and Italy is a master case of this, you might still be getting more legal migration. So, they will have to play both sides. They have to look like they're moderating in certain areas, but this doesn't really mean that they're giving up on any of their real core commitments.

Do you think the internet has made these movements more connected across borders?

We are seeing more attempts on their part to organise transnationally. And perhaps it's not even that we're seeing them doing this more, it's just that they're becoming better at it.

It used to be the case that there were, first of all, very few far-right parties that could collaborate and that whenever they tried to do this, things ended up in disastrous nationalist squabbles. A good example of this is the attempt to create a far-right group in the European Parliament in 1989 that didn't really work out because of fundamental nationalist disagreements between the Italians and the Germans.

In 2007, something similar happened where an Italian MEP said something offensive about the Romanian MEPs and that group fell apart. What we have seen is these parties being better at keeping these kinds of issues under wraps and actually engaging with one another and meeting.

One of the reasons they do this is because they get a lot of coverage when they do. They're aware of the fact that if they hold a far-right meeting, the newspapers the day after will be covering it and talking about their ideas. And that is precisely the kind of media attention that they want, so they hold these meetings and try to make as much of a success of them as they can.

Why do you think some countries like Italy and Hungary seem particularly fertile ground for the radical right while others are more resistant?

At this point, I'm not sure there is a single country in Europe that is resistant to the rise of the far right. One of the interesting developments over the last few years is that until the early 2010s, there were some countries that seemed to be immune from the rise of the radical right. This was particularly true of Portugal and Spain and one of the theories was that because these countries had recently had far-right dictatorships, they would not want to go through it again.

However, now Portugal and Spain also have their very own far right movements who are quite successful. So, it's not really that some countries are immune, it's just there are some countries where the far right has been more successful.

Italy is a very good case. One of the reasons why the far right is so successful in Italy is because they have been normalised for decades. The first government that included the far right in Italy was in 1994 when Silvio Berlusconi of the populist centre-right Forza Italia brought the neo-fascist Italian Social Movement, which then became the 'post-fascist' National Alliance and is pretty much now Meloni's Brothers of Italy into government along with the Lega.

In places like Hungary, it's slightly more complex. Hungary's communist history plays a role as there's a certain part of the political spectrum which is not the far right that is considered problematic. Viktor Orbán has also created an electoral system that favours his party. Orbán is still popular, but the system is constructed in such a way that rural constituencies that tend to be more conservative count a lot more than the more progressive ones in places like Budapest.

Do you see differences between how these movements look in Western Europe compared to Central or Eastern Europe?

Increasingly less so. We used to think of these parties as being quite different in Central and Eastern Europe as opposed to Western Europe, particularly with the idea that in Central and Eastern Europe, they were more extreme because they had shorter experiences with democracy and also had a different way of thinking about fascism.

But at this point, I think there's a case to be made that they are actually quite similar across different countries. And the fact that they are learning from each other and are working together makes them also look progressively more similar. They will still respond to national and local conditions, but it's not as radical a difference as we used to think.

Do you see these parties continuing to grow or do you think we're nearing a plateau or even a backlash?

I think a useful way to think about these parties is as political parties like any other, not in terms of the ideas that they espouse, but in terms of the way they function. And we know that a political party's success tends to ebb and flow.

This is something that we might see with the radical right. Some of these parties have gone through a period where they could credibly claim to be anti-establishment and where people saw them as articulating their own ideas. But voters' ideas change. The societies in which these parties exist change. It's not impossible that they will, like all other parties, start ebbing and flowing a little bit.

One of the real difficulties is that when these parties get in power, they tend to push for measures that make it very difficult for them to lose that power or for others to counter what has happened. Poland is a good example. The previous government put in place a reform that has affected the impartiality of the Polish judiciary. The new government has been trying to undo this reform and is really struggling with it. So once these changes get embedded, it is very hard to change them.

What should people be doing if they're concerned about the direction of politics right now?

There's still space to engage. I think people should be trying to resist the ideas of the radical right, not copying them, which is unfortunately what we see. We see a lot of mainstream politicians in particular saying, "well, look, if these parties are successful, then maybe we should be lifting their ideas".

That's not a very intelligent strategy. It only legitimises the far right, and it legitimises their solutions, which means they are just going to keep winning elections, and everyone is just going to shift to the right. We don't necessarily have to disengage with the topics that the radical right is bringing

forward. We can talk about migration, but we don't have to talk about migration on the terms that the radical right talks about it.

We also don't have to copy their policy solutions. We do not have to copy their analysis. And I think that this is really the exercise that one who is worried about the far right needs to engage in. It's thinking, "how do I resist thinking about this as 'normal' or 'the new normal'?"

If you were Keir Starmer, how would you deal with the rise of Reform UK?

I would, first of all, stop parroting Reform and saying things such as, "**we don't want this to become an island of strangers**" and try and think about what are the local conditions that are leading to this rise? And how can I address them through policies? Because sometimes the problem with migration is not necessarily with migration.

Sometimes, the problem is migration, but you are targeting different voters. The key is to try and get to the ones who don't necessarily have a problem with migrants per se, but who, for example, are worried about public services. And you're going to solve that by putting more money into public services rather than by trying to stop the boats.

Think about what is your strength as a party? What is the kind of society that you want to pursue? And then sell that to voters. As a politician, you have agency. You don't have to completely give up on your ideas just to try and follow whoever is currently leading in the polls.

*This interview features extracts from "**How is the far right shaping our future?**", an **LSE iQ** podcast episode.*

*Note: This article gives the views of the interviewee, not the position of EUOPP – European Politics and Policy or the London School of Economics. Featured image credit: **Christopher Penler** / **Shutterstock.com***

About the author

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Dr Marta Lorimer is a Lecturer in Politics at Cardiff University and a Visiting Fellow in the European Institute at the London School of Economics and Political Science. She is an expert on European far-right parties and the author of “Europe as ideological resource: European integration and far-right legitimisation” (Oxford University Press, 2024). Her research has been published in the Journal of European Public Policy, Journal of Common Market Studies, Ethnic and Racial Studies, Nation and Nationalism, Swiss Political Science Review, Comparative European Politics, and East European Politics and Societies.

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