

Ursula Bitzegeio and Cécile Calla

# Triumph of the Women?

*The female face of  
right-wing populism  
and extremism in  
selected countries*

08

*Right-wing femal leaders in  
Italy, France and Germany.  
An analysis oh charisma by cross-country comparison*

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# Editor's foreword

Since 2018 studies conducted by the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung in the acclaimed series “Triumph of the Women. The female face of right-wing populism and extremism in selected countries” have confirmed that female voters and politically active women are increasingly contributing to the rise of right-wing populism and right-wing extremism in Europe and the Western world. In particular the country-specific case studies (which to date have looked at Austria, Brazil, Germany, Italy, the United Kingdom and the United States) have examined the specific policy offerings that have motivated women to vote for or even join right-wing populist and right-wing extremist parties since the 2010s.

The comparative approach adopted in these studies and the parties under examination are based on a common definition of the concept of right-wing populism. Similarly, these parties share an ideology and a political strategy oriented towards polarisation. Regarding right-wing parties' positions on gender and family policy and the societal tendencies that underlie them, three questions in particular loom large: (i) is the party in question already in government or still in opposition? (ii) What is the significance of the “radical right gender gap”, or in other words, is it true that fewer women tend to vote for these parties than men? And (iii) to what extent do anti-feminist worldviews and anti-gender politics form part of their political programmes?

A fourth dimension is currently emerging in the wake of Giorgia Meloni's appointment as prime minister of Italy and Marine Le Pen's very high approval ratings in France's early elections in 2024. The obvious question, of course, is whether women voters have increasingly been migrat-

ing from the centre to the right because in the past few years women have increasingly been rising to leadership positions in right-wing parties. Inherent in this question is whether women are more attracted to extreme right policy offerings when they are presented by a woman.

In this study, journalist Cécile Calla and political scientist Ursula Bitzegeio develop a political-biography inspired typology of female leaders of right-wing parties based on three “charisma analyses”. They also look behind the protagonists' anti-gender ideology and work out the political consequences of their anti-feminist policies. In a second step, the authors discuss the available strategic options for countering political – and in some instances it is already governing – anti-feminism, both socially and politically.

It is more important than ever to look at the female side of right-wing populism in order to develop political strategies capable of effectively counteracting anti-feminism as a deliberately divisive force. The FES is committed to work on this in its political and civil society network across the world.

*Dr. Stefanie Elies*  
Head of Department

Berlin, March 2026

# Who does the female “concerned citizen” vote for?

## Preliminary considerations

Up until the 2010s the phenomena of neo-Nazism, right-wing extremism and right-wing populism in Western democracies were regarded as a “male dominated development”. It was mainly men who voted for parties on the far right. This finding now seems outdated. Indeed, historical research has uncovered a similar electoral development during the Weimar Republic. The radical-right gender gap with regard to the NSDAP (the Nazi party) narrowed in the 1930s and disappeared entirely after Hitler assumed power. Fewer women had voted NSDAP between 1924 and 1930. This difference is also discernible at the elections for Reich President in 1932, although by that point a clear convergence of men’s and women’s voting behaviour in relation to Adolf Hitler was already becoming evident. At the Reichstag elections in 1932 there were scarcely any differences, at Reich level, between men and women as regards their preferences for the NSDAP.<sup>1</sup> Even if the current political situation shouldn’t really be compared with the period of the Weimar Republic this example is nevertheless revealing.<sup>2</sup> Returning to the present, the following picture emerges: in particular since 2013 numerous investigations have noted that more and more women are voting for right-wing populist and right-wing extremist parties, but also supporting them and taking part in their ac-

tivities. Coming to the 2020s women are rising up to lead right-wing parties and movements in some economically powerful and extremely influential European countries and enjoying considerable success.

According to an Opinionway survey for the financial newspaper *Les Echos*, conducted on the day of the European elections in 2024, more women than men said they had voted for the right-wing extremist Rassemblement National (RN): 33 per cent of women voters as against 30 per cent of men.<sup>3</sup> RN leader Marine Le Pen has been specifically targeting women voters since 2016. She promises a revolutionary emancipatory change in how France is led if she becomes the first woman to ascend to the highest office of state. With her as head of government all ministries would seek to advance equality. As a female politician – and herself a single mother with three kids – the pitch is that she would have a real understanding of people’s everyday lives, including problems in schools and the concerns of those caring for the vulnerable. In this way RN managed to win over primarily workers and low income earners, while Emanuel Macron reached mainly pensioners and higher earners.<sup>4</sup>

Italy’s first female prime minister, Giorgia Meloni, owed her victory in 2022 primarily to male and older voters from the north, but since

1 Jürgen W. Falter, Wer verhalf der NSDAP zum Sieg? Neuere Forschungsergebnisse zum politischen und sozialen Hintergrund der NSDAP-Wähler 1924–1933, in: *Aus Politik und Zeitgeschichte (APuZ)*, 28–29 (1979), online edition of the Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung [Federal Agency for Civic Education] (bpb). Available at: [www.bpb.de/shop/zeitschriften/apuz/archiv/531298](http://www.bpb.de/shop/zeitschriften/apuz/archiv/531298).

2 Cf. Francesca Feo/Anna Lavizzari, *Triumph der Frauen. Das weibliche Antlitz des Rechtspopulismus und -extremismus in ausgewählten Ländern 06, Case Study Italy*, Berlin 2021, p. 10.

3 Trend calculated by Lisa Mahnke, *Wahlrend in Frankreich. Auch Frauen unterstützen den Rechtsruck*, *Frankfurter Rundschau Online*, 24.06.2024. Available at: <https://www.fr.de/politik/national-bordella-wahlrend-frankreich-frauen-rechtsruck-marine-lepen-macron-rassemblement-zr-93146187.html>.

4 Annika Joeres, *Die Wahl der Frauen. Eine Analyse*, in *Die Zeit Online*, 18 April 2022. Available at: <https://www.zeit.de/politik/ausland/2022-04/marine-le-pen-praesidentschaftswahl-frankreich-wahlkampf-frauen>.

2018 the overall proportion of women who approve of her party Fratelli d'Italia (Fdi) and the parties of its right-wing alliance has remained stable at around 48–50 per cent.<sup>5</sup> In her election campaigns since 2018 Meloni has emphasised the issues of Christian families as the heart of Italian society, fears of inundation by immigrants and crime committed by refugees from Africa and Muslim countries, not to mention the slogan “Italy first”, from which she also seems to have attained a particular eminence for Italy within the EU. The latter is currently manifest in the exceptional role attributed to her in relation to US President Donald Trump.<sup>6</sup>

In Germany the extreme right Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) managed just over 20 per cent of the votes in the Bundestag elections in 2025, including 24 per cent of male voters and 18 per cent of females. It should be noted that the party managed to double its vote in comparison with 2021. An Infratest survey inquired directly about AfD voters' voting motivations after the 2025 Bundestag elections: 39 per cent voted for the party out of conviction, 59 per cent of the “new AfD voters” say that their vote was influenced by their disappointment with contemporary politics. For 55 per cent of respondents the party “understands better than the other parties that many people no longer feel secure”, 46 per cent think it's a good thing that the AfD “wants to do much more to restrict the influx of foreigners and refugees” and 45 per cent welcome the fact that “on many issues ... Alice Weidel ... tells it like it really is”. Overall, the AfD has gained ground electorally, but it still has not been able to reach the majority in the centre.<sup>7</sup>

The approval ratings in France and Italy are therefore particularly noteworthy. In those countries the right-wing extremist parties have encroached so far on the centre that in Italy Giorgia Meloni now heads the government and in France a candidate has emerged in the person

of Marine Le Pen who came within a hair's breadth of breaking through in the general elections in 2024. Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) has also made gains since 2013, but has not yet achieved a level of power and influence comparable with that of the parties in the other two countries. But the AfD too has included women in its upper echelons since the very outset. Frauke Petry was one of the party's leading figures until her departure. Today, Beatrix von Storch and Alice Weidel are the focus of attention as far right politicians. Indeed, one of them, Alice Weidel is regarded as something of a rising star by some sections of the public, both men and women.

Charismatic leadership is a recurring theme in research on right-wing populist and extreme right parties. Charisma is clearly key to these parties' success.<sup>8</sup> In this contribution we shall therefore conduct a comparative charisma analysis of extreme right leaders, which we relate to their success among the voters. Our reflections are preceded by three “even though” dimensions, from which we then develop our “64,000 dollar question”:

– *even though* right-wing extremist and right-wing populist ideologies and party platforms constantly call into question the further social and political development of women's and other human rights, of gender justice and equality in the world of work and in relation to care responsibilities, claiming that patriarchal structures are natural;

– and *even though* their largely neoliberal economic programmes promote distortions of capitalism and thus growing income inequalities, particularly old age poverty among women;

– and *even though* their political mantra of a national withdrawal from Europe and the world massively endangers the current security situation of European societies and in particular of women and children as potential victims of

5 Feo et al, p. 13.

6 Cf. Carsten Kühntopp, Meloni bei Trump. Lob, Schmeicheleien und demonstrative Zuversicht, ARD Washington, correspondent's report from 18.04.2025. Available at: <https://www.tagesschau.de/ausland/amerika/trump-meloni-112.htm>.

7 Cf. Infratest survey results, available at: [www.marktforschung.de/marktforschung/a/afd-waehler-herkunft-profil-und-motivation](http://www.marktforschung.de/marktforschung/a/afd-waehler-herkunft-profil-und-motivation) (18.02.2026).

8 Cf. Frank Decker; Marcel Lewandowsky: Rechtspopulismus. Erscheinungsformen, Ursachen und Gegenstrategien, in: APuZ, 10.1.2017. Available at: [www.bpb.de/themen/parteien/rechtspopulismus/240089/rechtspopulismus-erscheinungsformen-ursachen-und-gegenstrategien](http://www.bpb.de/themen/parteien/rechtspopulismus/240089/rechtspopulismus-erscheinungsformen-ursachen-und-gegenstrategien).

violence;

*why* then are women increasingly becoming active in these movements and working to the detriment of the everyday lives of their fellow women in the twenty-first century? *Why* are they getting behind retrogressive plans for the future? Does the fact that extreme right-wing movements are led by women, not men, foster

their ability to reach the political centre and above all expand the pool of potential voters? *Can* female right-wing extremist and right-wing populist leaders be categorised? *What* features of their political biographies and what particular talents propel them to the top of these movements?

## Right-wing populist female leaders – a new type of woman on the extreme right

In the 2020s a new generation of women have fought their way to the top of right-wing populist parties and movements, such as Giorgia Meloni, Marine Le Pen and Alice Weidel. And not in Doc Martens or in cords or pleated skirts. They are “neat”, “well groomed” and “classically styled”, but also “modern”, with social media-friendly make-up and “TV ready”. They are practiced “videocrats”<sup>9</sup> and outstanding platform speakers. They have no problem raising their voices in anger and indignation in parliament and at election events, and react calmly to direct criticisms from journalists and political opponents on talk shows, coming across as professional and authentic. They are aware of their reach on Insta, X (Twitter), TikTok and the rest.

Meloni, Le Pen and Weidel are political influencers who are quick on the draw with (provocative) statements for every occasion and to meet every eventuality, without even picking up their mobile phones themselves. Their every utterance is filmed, edited and processed by likeminded people and channelled to the “right” addressees online. They go viral on virtually every social media platform. In contrast to the male leaders in their parties and movements these women possess the full communicational package and deploy it to full effect. Particularly striking is a kind of attractiveness that, whether intentionally or otherwise, works in two directions. First, their impeccable, sporty and fashionable appearance wins acceptance among likeminded men, especially

<sup>9</sup> On the term “videocrat” see Gerhard Feldbauer, *Giorgia Meloni und der italienische Faschismus*, Cologne 2023, p. 21.

those who generally make sexist comments about female politicians from democratic parties or call for a new “masculinity”.<sup>10</sup>

Second, at the same time they offer female voters an external image and demeanour that may well speak to their own desire for social recognition and self-confidence. It conveys the message that feminine attractiveness, a healthy lifestyle and a sporty look chime perfectly well with extreme right-wing attitudes. In any case, this combination certainly attracts the attention of other people and the mass media, especially the tabloid press. This is a major plus point when it comes to recruiting (right-wing) populist voters.

These new female leaders are very well trained when it comes to media appearances and putting their point across. Their CVs attest to good university degrees, scholarships and proficiency in several languages. Often their qualifications far outstrip those of similar ranking male party colleagues and role models. They have, so to speak, “proven themselves as women”. Constancy, ambition and tenacity for the political cause are part of their core brand. But whatever abilities they clearly possessed in pursuit of academic qualifications, such as scholarly and intellectual reflection on complex problems, analytical depth, ability to cope with ambiguities and dialectical questions, and even a striving for objectivity and impartiality are no longer in evidence.

Extreme right leaders are neither token women nor puppets of their parties and movements. The statements and political texts of Meloni, Le Pen and Weidel testify to their deep fundamental conviction<sup>11</sup> that (i) Western “white” societies deserve their privileges because they are (ii) more culturally developed than other societies, that (iii) in the twenty-first century they are no longer required to shoulder historical

responsibilities, and that (iv) *Blut und Boden* (blood and soil) constitute a kind of natural law that is perfectly compatible with Christianity and trumps human rights.<sup>12</sup>

Under the guise of anti-genderism and the oft repeated narrative of “gender gaga” all three leaders in fact preach the outdated ideal of patriarchy, albeit without explicitly stating or expressing it. They prefer the security blanket of “cultural traditions” and cling to reciting the achievements of male poets and thinkers from the pre-modern era. Central to all this is a return to and consolidation of the “social core”, more specifically the family. This is heteronormative, blessed with a decent number of children and only bears fruit for the future if every member plays their proper role. Pre-eminent here are rhetorical recognition and praise for caring mothers and the elevation of the strong male breadwinner, who protects and guides the family he heads. This is the pole around which they orient their political offerings, despite the fact that in the Western world it has scarcely resembled reality since the late nineteenth century. Although the right-wing populist leaders’ promise of salvation can awaken vague yearnings in the population it is also clearly at odds with feminist aspirations. These leaders’ own political careers represent a standing rebuke to traditional gender roles, a contradiction that can be resolved only by means of grotesque ideological contortions.<sup>13</sup>

In their speeches, Alice Weidel and Giorgia Meloni in particular denounce intersectional feminism, so-called “wokeness” and the “oligarchisation” of democratic elites as (post)modern aberrations.<sup>14</sup> Weidel and Meloni, like political star Marine Le Pen, nevertheless themselves belong to a small “aristocratic” elite of their parties and movements. Their members are without exception self-starters and have a “higher calling”. In the case of these three leaders it is likely that

<sup>10</sup> Cf. Robert Claus, *Maskulismus*, Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, Berlin 2014.

<sup>11</sup> Cf. Giorgia Meloni, *Io sono Giorgia. Le mie radici le mie idee*, Rome 2021; Marine Le Pen, *À contre flots. Autobiographie*, Paris 2011; and Alice Weidel, *Widerworte. Gedanken über Deutschland*, 4th edition, Kulmbach 2023.

<sup>12</sup> Cf. the remarks laid out in Chapters 2 and 3, and, in more depth, Alice Weidel’s reflections on the “unregulated influx” of Muslim migrants with “archaic cultural ideas and values” or on the “National Socialist guilt complex”, Weidel, pp. 18 and 61.

<sup>13</sup> Cf. the analyses in chapters 2 to 4.

<sup>14</sup> Cf. *ibid.* and Colin Crouch, *Postdemokratie revisited*, Berlin 2021, pp. 18ff.

the achievements of feminism and the deconstruction of social, gender-specific roles made their careers in the previously male-dominated worlds of right-wing populism and right-wing extremism possible in the first place. However, contradictions in their own biographies or current lives are not identified as real conflicts from which political motivations may arise. Their personal dilemma is that they themselves have fulfilled none of the life goals they bang on about and that prioritising the injustices arising from “traditional” women’s roles scarcely features in their political utterances and personal testimonies. As a result, critical questions are deflected. Taking up their own conflicting goals with reference to themselves is likely to encounter considerable pushback within their own right-wing milieu. The fact is that by now anti-feminism and “conservative familism” have established themselves as veritable stepping stones in the rise of right-wing populists and authoritarians.<sup>15</sup> Thus ascending to leadership positions on the extreme right can be achieved only via a significant degree of opportunism when it comes to maintaining patriarchal structures. This includes making the right solidaristic noises in support of anti-feminist and sexist discourse. They can also be observed to play down the very social barriers that they themselves had to overcome as a woman or a queer person in politics.<sup>16</sup>

Denouncing feminism from the rooftops appears to provide an extraordinary career boost for women on the right. However, substantive social and political science research on this issue is still lacking, especially any kind of deep dive into the ascent of Meloni, Le Pen and Weidel. One recent exception is the book by Daniela Rütter on the AfD’s “obsession” with sex and the role of the right in the so-called “gender

madness”.<sup>17</sup> It seems evident, however, that anti-genderism as formulated and honed by female leaders has become an effective anchor point of right-wing parties’ electoral strategy in Europe. With a clear focus on future election successes and to cement their internal organisational strength, right-wing women leaders have abandoned any kind of solidarity with people who, on the basis of gender, would otherwise seem to be in a similar social or cultural situation. To put it bluntly, any woman who hasn’t been as successful as them in business, politics or the media is (at least implicitly) dismissed as inadequate or undeserving. But they preach the gospel that for women who aren’t highfliers, “nature” will provide, enabling them to take their rightful place alongside their husband and children in true freedom and contentment. That is how they may best serve an ageing society and the welfare state (for example, with child and adult care), and naturally also do their bit to conserve the “national community”.<sup>18</sup>

Right-wing political leaders often attribute women’s apparent freedom of choice when it comes to how they live their lives to “feminism”. This is in line with so-called difference feminism, which emphasises the idea that men and women have different natures, but also attempts to revalue personal characteristics such as empathy, feelings or caring that “traditionally” are devalued as feminine.<sup>19</sup> The right-wing notion of feminism also includes a missionary component aimed, for example, at freeing “headscarf girls” from “Islamist oppression”. Questions about individual backgrounds, social opportunities, educational equality, equal pay and glass ceilings when it comes to social participation and careers, needless to say, are not answered. Furthermore, the women targeted by the right’s feminist

15 Gisela Notz, *Kritik des Familismus. Theorie und soziale Realität eines ideologischen Gemäldes*, Stuttgart 2015.

16 Christa Wichterich, Die antifeministische Internationale, in: *Blätter für deutsche und internationale Politik* (2019) 12, pp. 103–110.

17 Daniela Rütter, *Die Sexbesessenheit der AfD. Rechte im “Genderwahn”*, Bonn 2025.

18 Cf. The contributions in Anette Henninger/Ursula Birls (eds), *Antifeminismen. “Krisen“-Diskurse mit gesellschaftlichem Potential?*, Bielefeld 2021.

19 Cf. Christine Olderdissen, *Gender-Glossar der Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung*, entry: “Feminismus”. Available at: <https://www.fes.de/wissen/gender-glossar/feminismus>; and Anja Goetz, Gibt es einen “rechtsextremen Feminismus” in Deutschland. Eine Analyse anhand ausgewählter rechtsextremer Frauengruppen in der Bundesrepublik Deutschland, Harriet Taylor Mill-Institut für Ökonomie und Geschlechterfragen, Discussion Paper 27, 07/2015.

mission are confined to those recognised as belonging to the relevant nation-state.<sup>20</sup>

In the early 2000s, researcher into right-wing extremism Renate Bitzan divided “feminists on the right” into three main types, derived from extreme right-wing activists’ views on women. Type one associates womanhood with the task of giving birth to a large number of “racially pure offspring”. Type two is a “somewhat modernised form” of the first type: women are entitled to set their maternal role aside in order to play a public role in politics. Here “as before their difference from men is emphasised, but women should be able, as long as they don’t bother anyone, to contribute their views to political processes”. Finally, there is type three, who “definitely criticise sexist structures, both in society and also in their own milieu. In their case, emancipation and even feminism are sometimes mentioned.”<sup>21</sup>

The feminism of the successful right-wing populists of the 2020s has a new and quite unique property, which means that it qualifies as

a fourth type: women’s role and position are measured in terms of their individual capabilities. If they are competent and otherwise fit the bill they may step out of the “natural order” and assume leadership roles in society, business and politics. In the wake of such elevation empathy, feelings and caring will no longer be expected of them.

It emerges from the personal accounts and speeches of the three right-wing populist leaders that type four is characterised by a vague mixture of (i) constant references to the long-established normative equality of men and women, (ii) the reduction of the terms emancipation, women’s rights and feminism to binary gender and Western origins, (iii) ordo-liberal ideas on genderless capitalist competition, (iv) a strong sense of elite consciousness and (v) as ever, a “traditional” model of the family. The latter takes up elements of main type one, according to Bitzan, focusing on the “reproduction of the right people” (from the national community).<sup>22</sup>

20 “Head scarf girl” has been used in right-wing intellectual circles since 2009 as a provocative term for Muslim women living in Germany. It was first introduced into the migration debate by economist and author Thilo Sarrazin and was already openly defamatory. It was later eagerly adopted by some in the AfD leadership. Cf. Jost Müller-Neuhoff, Kopftuchmädchen und biologische Bomben. Was Sarrazin und die NPD verbindet, Tagesspiegel. Available at: <https://www.tagesspiegel.de/meinung/was-sarrazin-und-die-ndp-verbindet-6366505.html> (accessed 18.02.2026).

21 Renate Bitzan, Kann es einen “Feminismus von rechts” geben?, interview report on her research findings, 29.01.2014. Available at: <https://www.bpb.de/mediathek/video/176398/kann-es-einen-feminismus-von-rechts-geben/> (accessed 18.02.2026).

22 Cf. *ibid.* and chapters 3 to 5.

# Poster girl of the Italian right: Giorgia Meloni

To date, Giorgia Meloni<sup>23</sup> has been very “restrained”, as *Tagesschau* journalist Jörg Seisselberg put it recently. Italian politics professor Piero Ignazi is also “quite pleasantly surprised”, having feared “much worse”. Some observers from abroad even regard the Italian prime minister as “exceptionally moderate”. She is often described as a “national conservative” and her ability to fit in well in European politics has been highlighted. That applies to foreign and security policy, with regard to aid for Ukraine, “but also with regard to economic and budgetary policy”.<sup>24</sup>

But let’s not be too hasty. This may also mean that Giorgia Meloni, who only yesterday was dubbed “the most dangerous woman in Europe” and branded a right-wing extremist,<sup>25</sup> showed not long after taking office that it is conceivable to imagine a future in Italy and Europe without entirely renouncing Italian fascism, with all its political implications, such as a leader cult, authoritarianism, imperialism, revanchism and racism. What’s more, it implies that (neo-)conservative policies and reaching out to the “centre-right” are also a credible option from a (post-)fascist government. However, this is highly dubious and a number of fundamental questions readily come to mind.

So where does Giorgia Meloni really stand on the political spectrum? Can her current behaviour in government really be evaluated independently of her political socialisation in the

Movimento Sociale Italiano (MSI), from the people in her cabinet and from her statements about her proximity, or otherwise, to Mussolini’s fascism? In twenty-first century Europe are (neo-) conservatism or national conservatism really compatible with Italian (post) fascism? And what do these prefixes really mean, when it comes down to it? What do “restraint” and “moderation” really amount to in the current public debate, looking at Giorgia Meloni’s policies? By electing Meloni, has Italian society taken a *svolta a destra* (turn to the right)?

## Giorgia Meloni and (post-)fascism

In Italy, the history books unambiguously categorise fascism as among the right-wing ideologies, even though there have been occasional attempts to define it “beyond right and left”.<sup>26</sup> According to Umberto Eco Italian fascism is a mixture of charismatic *Führerprinzip*, imperialism, corporatism and rejection of parliamentary democracy, as well as racism and antisemitism. Its particular characteristics include a “cult of tradition” and an “abjuration of modernity”, together with “actionism” and “a craving for unanimity”. Its supporters dream of an “ideal of an entire nation in black shirts”. It is an “appeal to a frustrated middle class”, propagates “nationalism” through a “typical friend-enemy rhetoric” and has (paradoxically) a “mass elite conscious-

<sup>23</sup> This section has already appeared as a separate contribution to: INDES. Zeitschrift für Politik und Gesellschaft, Demokratie unter Druck (2024) 1–2, pp. 323–333.

<sup>24</sup> Jörg Seisselberg, Ein Jahr Meloni in Italien. Die Schein-Gemäßigte?, in: tagesschau.de, 25.09.2023, including an interview with Piero Ignazi and Nino Galetti. Available at: <https://www.tagesschau.de/ausland/europa/ein-jahr-meloni-100.html>.

<sup>25</sup> Luisa Brandl/Andrea Ritter, Wenn Italien wackelt, schwankt die EU: Darum ist Giorgia Meloni die gefährlichste Frau Europas, in: Stern, 25.09.2022. Available at: [www.stern.de/politik/ausland/wahlen-in-italien--ist-giorgia-meloni-die-gefaehrlichste-frau-europas--32742572.html](http://www.stern.de/politik/ausland/wahlen-in-italien--ist-giorgia-meloni-die-gefaehrlichste-frau-europas--32742572.html).

<sup>26</sup> Markus K. Grimm, *Die problematische Neuerfindung der italienischen Rechten. Die Alleanza Nazionale und ihr Weg in die Mitte*, Wiesbaden 2016, p. 5.

ness". It dons the cloak of heroism and machismo and elevates the "will of the people" over the individual. It also endorses the primacy of the national language. Having said that, Italian fascism is not "necessarily totalitarian" because no coherent and "consistent philosophy" underlies it.<sup>27</sup>

Researchers remain divided on whether Italy's fascist successor organisations merit the attachment of prefixes such as "neo" or "post" because although they invoke the ideology they also declare historical fascism to be a thing of the past. According to Grimm, however, the self-image of these groups clearly exhibits "diffuse borrowings" and "glassy-eyed nostalgic reminiscences" of historical fascism, not to mention a "glorification" of fallen authoritarian and fascist regimes. Furthermore, neo- or post-fascism is not necessarily synonymous with right-wing extremism. The latter refers to Italian parties that no longer invoke the ideas of traditional fascism, but rather are eager to take up arms against the pluralistic "system" in post-industrial societies with new "extreme" methods and views. Since the demise of communism post-fascism and right-wing extremism have been united above all by their identification of common foes. These include the so-called New Left, which emerged from the 1968 student revolts; the emancipatory women's movement; proliferating individualism; the environmental movement; since the 1990s, intersectional feminism; as well as novel ideas on diversity and post-migration social models, as well as, from the 2010s, the rising tide of refugee migration.<sup>28</sup> On this basis, Giorgia Meloni's political roots are firmly embedded in post-fascism.

Giorgia Meloni is relatively young for a career politician at the head of a European state. Born on 15 January 1977 she followed in the footsteps of her mother Anna Paratore, who was a member of the Movimento Sociale Italiano

(MSI), a direct successor party of Mussolini's Partito Nazionale Fascista (PNF / after 1943 Partito Fascista Repubblicano, PFR). On 28 October 1992, the seventieth anniversary of Mussolini's "March on Rome", Meloni joined the Fronte della Gioventù, the MSI's youth organisation, charged with fostering a cadre of future party leaders. She later became its leader. On entering the government of Silvio Berlusconi in 1994 the MSI movement adopted the party name Alleanza Nazionale (AN) in order to develop a broader political front. The young acolyte soon learned that it's possible to appeal to non-fascist groups without entirely abandoning the traditional historical path and nostalgia for the past. Historian Gerhard Feldbauer underlines in this regard the fact that even today Giorgia Meloni still cherishes the MSI's party emblem, a flame in the form of the Italian tricolour, which "blazes over Mussolini's black coffin as a symbol of encouragement from the spirit of "il Duce".<sup>29</sup> As late as 2022 Meloni still openly expressed her commitment to the "legacy" of the "Duce del Fascismo" and professed herself "relaxed" about this period of Italian history.<sup>30</sup> According to Feldbauer's research she publicly gave the Roman salute at the funeral of Assunta Almirante in April of the same year. Furthermore, Meloni raised no objection when in 2012 a memorial was erected in his birthplace on the outskirts of Rome to Mussolini's defence minister Marshall Rodolfo Graziani, who had taken part in the March on Rome in October 1922 and, among other things, was responsible for the barbaric massacre of tens of thousands of Ethiopians.<sup>31</sup>

Her keen interest and active participation in fascist remembrance culture indicate that she feels close ties to Italian fascism. Her involvement suggests far more than the loose affiliation that tends to be the perception abroad these days. There is no sign here of a sustained cultural purification on the part of Meloni or any

27 Umberto Eco, Robert Saviano et al., *Der ewige Faschismus*, München 2020, cited in Grimm, p. 6.

28 Grimm, p. 10.

29 Feldbauer, p. 15f.

30 Giorgia Meloni cited in Kay Walter, Italien: Was droht, wenn Mussolini-Fan Meloni Regierungschefin wird?, in: Vorwärts-online, 27 September 2022. Available at: [www.vorwaerts.de/international/italien-was-droht-wenn-mussolini-fan-meloni-regierungschefin-wird](http://www.vorwaerts.de/international/italien-was-droht-wenn-mussolini-fan-meloni-regierungschefin-wird).

31 Cf. *ibid.*, p. 23.

insight into the fact that historically Italian fascism must be understood as undisputedly a part of the murderous history of the twentieth century. In our view, explaining away her historico-political commitment as a political ruse designed to retain the attachment of the remaining “hard core” of Mussolini fascists is a considerable stretch.<sup>32</sup>

## Giorgia Meloni, the “centro-destra” alliance and right-wing populism

Another term that is frequently used in connection with the right-wing party spectrum is right-wing populism. Right-wing populists put less emphasis on ideology and are more economically individualistic and liberally oriented than the “old right”, although without renouncing ideas about a “community-building nation” or a “folk community”. They derive their notions of the autonomy and differences of all “races”, “peoples and individuals” from the ideas of the European intellectual network of the “New Right”. They often advocate elements of direct democracy and pose as “anti-party parties” or as movements. They stir up vague anxieties about, in particular, foreigners and pursue an effective PR strategy and media presence, although it doesn’t have much to underpin it. Although Italian right-wing populists comport themselves – just – within a constitutional framework they can be extremist. This manifests itself primarily in their xenophobic and anti-feminist utterances, a “disregard for dissenting opinions and a contempt for anyone who fails to embrace their ‘truth’”. Even if Lega (formerly Lega Nord) cannot really be classified as a right-wing extremist party the political rise of Silvio Berlusconi exemplifies the early successes of right-wing populism in Europe.<sup>33</sup> Within the framework of Italian politics Markus

Grimm thus proposes to regard right-wing populism as another “kind of classification” to supplement fascism, post-fascism and right-wing extremism.

When she was running for the office of prime minister Giorgia Meloni committed herself to the goals of the “centre-right” in line with the aims of successive Berlusconi governments. She stressed that their worldview and objectives were generally known and thus that it was a matter of “putting them into practice”.<sup>34</sup> Originally, the government coalition comprising Democrazia Cristiana (DC), the Liberals and the Social Democrats was characterised as centre-right and the post-fascist MSI were excluded. Berlusconi took up this classification in 1994 and used it to designate his alliance with Lega and AN (National Alliance, formerly the MSI). For Feldbauer the sole purpose of this manoeuvre was to mask the alliance’s “fascist character”.<sup>35</sup>

Contemporary accounts from Italy portrayed right-wing populism as a continuation of fascism in the following political era without resorting to armed force to defeat its enemies and to achieve its radical aims. A “whole country can be turned fascist ... through the manipulation of democratic means ... without mentioning the word ‘fascism’ even once”.<sup>36</sup> This refers to the “reign of videocracy” established by Berlusconi and his Forza Italia, later “refined” by Lega party secretary Matteo Salvini on social media and talk shows. Giorgia Meloni is also a master at this and was able to ensure that her possible victory as reported day in, day out by the media fixed this securely in the minds of many Italians.<sup>37</sup>

Meloni did not merely draw on the media strategies of her political role models Berlusconi and Salvini when they were at the height of their powers.<sup>38</sup> Rather she emerged as the star pupil

32 Cf. *ibid.*, p. 25.

33 Cf. Grimm, p. 12.

34 Giorgia Meloni's Ankündigung zur Kandidatur, cited in Feldbauer, p. 20.

35 Feldbauer, p. 20 f.

36 Michaela Murgia, *Faschist werden: Eine Anleitung*, Berlin 2019, p. 32 f.

37 Writer and activist concerned with (refugee) vessels in distress Michaela Murgia on the politics of Silvio Berlusconi, Matteo Salvini and Giorgia Meloni, translated by Feldbauer, p. 21 and cf. *ibid.*

38 Cf. Sofia Ventura, *Giorgia Meloni und ihre Partei Fratelli d'Italia. Eine personalisierte Partei zwischen rechtsextrem und rechtsradikal*, Fried-

of the *Centro-destra* government, who did not stand up against its extremely aggressive and racist policies in relation to vulnerable minorities. In May 2008 as a 31-year-old minister for young people and sport in the right-wing government coalition she encountered the then leader of Lega Umberto Bossi, as well as Roberto Calderoli and Roberto Maroni. The first decrees and regulations that cabinet adopted were very much directed against migrants. They were preceded by several weeks of state sanctioned attacks and violence against supposedly “criminal foreigners”, characterised by some on the left as virtually “racist pogroms” to which the state had turned a blind eye.<sup>39</sup> Even during its election campaign Lega called for illegal immigrants to be interned in camps. It is not known whether Giorgia Meloni attempted to exert a “moderating” influence over her cabinet colleagues when Umberto Bossi publicly declared that it would be “easier to exterminate rats than to get rid of gypsies”.<sup>40</sup> Also when on New Year’s Eve Italian Minister of the Interior Roberto Maroni made good on his statement that any migrants who land on the island of Lampedusa would be deported immediately and without using kid gloves she did not line up alongside his international critics. When Maroni died in November 2022 she praised him as a “friend” and one of the “most capable people” she had ever met.<sup>41</sup> According to Feldbauer, the leader of Fratelli d’Italia, who claims to be an advocate for women’s rights merely “looked on in silence when her head of government abused under-age prostitutes at sex orgies dismissed as ‘bunga bunga parties’”.<sup>42</sup> When Berlusconi resigned on 12 November 2011, beset by numerous scandals, affairs and allegations of corruption the *Centro-destra* alliance also foundered. AN

leader Gianfranco Fini ended his support for Forza Italia and switched instead to the social democratic Partito Democratico. This was model student Meloni’s chance to show what she had learned in the MSI cadre training scheme and in government with the media mogul and right-wing populist Silvio Berlusconi. Together with AN supporters and current Senate president and admirer of Mussolini Ignazio La Russa she founded the party Fratelli d’Italia (Fdi), whose leadership she assumed in 2014. The party ostensibly retained the policy of rapprochement with the “centre-right” with a view to becoming a catch-all party on the back of wedge issues. According to Feldbauer, however, Fdi’s underlying strategy is discernible in its “maintenance of a fascistic movement as precisely what it always has been for capital: a reserve force in times of crisis”.<sup>43</sup> Indeed, in his view Meloni was even a “hardliner” in the centre-right coalition, who in contrast to Berlusconi and Salvini was strictly opposed to compromises with the democratic and left-wing parties. As a result, she did not join Mario Draghi’s “government of national unity”. When it comes to tackling allegedly unbridled refugee migration she appears almost to have outstripped even her mentor. In her 2022 election campaign she demanded that the Italian coast guard should detain Libyan refugees right off the Libyan coast and forcibly return them to the reception camps there, in which torture, rape and human trafficking, among other things, are known to be rife. However, even before 2022 the future prime minister had stated that he would not be opposed to a government under Giorgia Meloni. Whatever hopes he might have had of controlling the poster girl of (post-)fascism in this way still seem a very distant prospect.<sup>44</sup>

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rich-Ebert-Stiftung, Rome 2022, p. 5.

39 Stefan Steinberg, Berlusconi Government Incites Racist Pogroms, in: World Socialist Web Site, 27.05.2008. Available at: <https://www.wsws.org/en/articles/2008/05/berl-m23.html>.

40 Süddeutsche Zeitung, 16.04.2008, cited in Feldbauer, p. 20. In fact, Bossi used a pejorative term to designate Sinti and Roma that is in common currency among those on the extreme right, but which the authors of this report and the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung expressly regard as racist and abjure as such.

41 ANSA, 23 November 2022, cited in Feldbauer, p. 23.

42 Feldbauer, p. 23.

43 Ibid.

44 Ibid., p. 23 ff. and p. 29.

## Giorgia Meloni, (neo-)conservatism and the party's U-turn

At least in the past, up until she entered government, Giorgia Meloni was characterised by a not inconsiderable portion of both the domestic and international press as both fascist and post-fascist, but also as right-wing populist or right-wing extremist. The characterisation of her politics as neo-conservative or national conservative, by contrast, is a rather newer development. Alongside her premiership, however, there has been a discernible about-turn, a change of direction towards Europe with her self-designation as an “Atlanticist”, ushering in a period of domestic rapprochement under the aegis of *realpolitik*. With regard to foreign policy this is proven not only by Italy's consent to support for Ukraine in its war against Russia and to the rule of law proceedings against Viktor Orbán. The friendly message sent by Ursula von der Leyen, a powerful European conservative politician, to Giorgia Meloni when she took office is another indication.<sup>45</sup>

When it comes to domestic policy Meloni's constant avowals that she is a woman, a mother, an Italian and a Christian are intended to highlight the country's new course set in a broadly conservative and Catholic direction.<sup>46</sup> At the centre of all this is the care-providing family, which basically consists of a man and a woman, the rejection of abortion and also restrictions on and criminal prosecution of surrogacy. Having said that, when she encountered strong push-back among some Catholics, for example, against the curtailment of abortion rights, she moderated her reactionary stance somewhat. However, her current gender policy is very much anti-feminist and not at all in line with the contemporary orientation towards equality. Feld-

bauer points out that she remains politically “obdurate” in this respect.<sup>47</sup>

Giorgia Meloni has also reoriented herself with regard to history. Even before President Sergio Mattarella invited her to form a government she had distanced herself – credibly – from any kind of proximity to national socialist regimes or Holocaust denial, not to mention, albeit somewhat less credibly, from the historical roots of her own party in Italian fascism. It is important not to underestimate the significance of the past when it comes to appealing to conservative voters; after all, conservative thought, not least in Italy, is deeply “historical”. The ordering or governance of human society is not merely a task of the present, to be handled on an ad hoc basis, but rather dependent on the “river of history”. That by no means rules out cautious development and reforms, but it does veto radical revolutionary changes: the watchword is “preserve and develop”. A distinction is drawn in relation to twentieth century theories between structural conservatism, with its idealisation of historically grown ordering structures, and values conservatism, which upholds the importance of human dignity, loyalty and mutual care within the family, besides other virtues.<sup>48</sup>

Similar to German conservatism, Italian conservatism sees itself as a “corrective to hectic modernism and the belief in progress for its own sake”. Such ideas are clearly built on democratic foundations, the internationally intertwined market economy and above all on notions of moral obligation.<sup>49</sup> Neo-conservatism, which for example, Italian political scientist Stefano Feltri applies to Meloni's political stance, is distinct from traditional conservatism in terms of its specific and historical opposition to communism and other social movements. It also includes a protectionist foreign policy, encompassing defence

<sup>45</sup> Cf. Michael Braun, Ein Jahr Meloni. Die disziplinierte Populistin, in: Die Tageszeitung, 24.09.2023. Available at: <https://taz.de/Ein-Jahr-Meloni/15959210/>.

<sup>46</sup> Cf. From Giorgia Meloni's election campaign speech, prepared by Massimo Marano, “I am Giorgia. I am a woman. I am a mother. I am a Christian”, 15 January 2023, in: *Telepolis, online at www.telepolis.de* (accessed on 19.04.2024).

<sup>47</sup> Feldbauer, p. 74 and cf. Ventura, p. 6 ff.

<sup>48</sup> Gerhard Köhler/Ansgar Klein, Politische Theorien des 19. Jahrhunderts, in: Hans J. Lieber (ed.), *Politische Theorien von der Antike bis zur Gegenwart*, Wiesbaden 2000, pp. 317–361.

<sup>49</sup> Grimm, p. 13.

against “mass” migration, and insists on traditional gender roles and family values.<sup>50</sup> But both conservatism and neo-conservatism as a rule do *not* tolerate fundamental changes to the established organisation of the state for the purpose of maintaining the personal power of the head of state or government. Before her election victory, Giorgia Meloni originally planned to revive Silvio Berlusconi’s plans and considerably expand the role and significance of the office of president in the constitution. Both the state president and the prime minister were to be directly elected and the second chamber of parliament abolished. Feldbauer interprets this as a desire to establish a “presidential regime”, while president of the Italian Constitutional Court Ettore Gallo has described such ideas as tantamount to an attempted coup d’état. Once in office Meloni announced that she would first seek to establish the direct election of the state president. Plans of this kind separate Meloni decisively from traditional Italian conservatism, with or without a prefix.<sup>51</sup>

The so-called “national conservatism” attributed to Giorgia Meloni is also currently regarded as a variant of conservatism among Italian scholars. It emphasises the emotional level, such as “nationalist feelings” or “cultural, ethnic and national identities”. In contrast to the conservatism of the post-war era it has a sceptical, even hostile attitude to migration and European integration. The term “national conservative” is sometimes also used to refer to “non-völkisch” parties and movements to the right of the political spectrum. Taking a closer look at the platforms and political statements of the national conservative camp it quickly becomes evident that it is scarcely possible to draw a clear-cut distinction between them and the ideas of the so-called “New Right”.<sup>52</sup> For quite a while now political science, whether in Italy or Germany, has regarded the New Right as no longer merely

a kind of grey zone of right-wing conservative thinkers but rather as a network of intellectual right-wing extremists aiming to achieve cultural hegemony and discursive supremacy.<sup>53</sup> According to this view, national conservatism functions within the intellectual sphere of right-wing extremism. How and in what form it will establish itself as a political concept and gain ground during Giorgia Meloni’s term of office or how influential its narratives will become remain to be seen.

## Conclusion

Notwithstanding the controlled slalom course navigated by model student Giorgia Meloni through Italy’s right-wing landscape since the 1990s, culminating in an election victory and ascent to one of the most powerful positions in Italy, it would not be accurate – in the opinion of Stefano Feltri – to talk of a *svolta a destra*, a turn to the right based on a broad societal consensus. In particular the election victory in 2022 provides no real evidence that the Fratelli d’Italia came to power as a result of seismic societal and cultural changes in political attitudes. Rather two specific and unforeseeable circumstances put victory within Giorgia Meloni’s grasp. On one hand, FdI’s “dominance” in the centro-destra alliance, and on the other, the fact that the social democratic PD and the 5 Star Movement (M5S) pretty much “never showed up”, having ruled out any kind of electoral or government alliance of their own in the run-up to the election. After all, all the parties that ran independently against the Centro-destra taken together garnered 49 per cent of the vote and thus 6 per cent more than its centre-right rivals. Because Italian electoral law strongly favours electoral alliances the Centro-destra gained 80 per cent of direct mandates. Furthermore, as Feltri explains, voter turnout hit an all-time low of 63.9 per cent. Taking

<sup>50</sup> Stefano Feltri, *Eine brüchige Macht. Giorgia Meloni und die neue Rechte. Ein Jahr nach der Macht*, Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, Rome 2023, p. 2.

<sup>51</sup> Feldbauer, p. 21.

<sup>52</sup> Grimm, p. 5 f.

<sup>53</sup> Cf. Armin Pfahl-Traughber, *Intellektuelle Rechtsextremisten. Das Gefahrenpotential der Neuen Rechten*, Bonn 2022.

all the factors into account Feltri describes the outcome as a “victory without a breakthrough”. But nothing less than a crystal ball would be able to determine whether a shift in the ideological axis will enable Giorgia Meloni to win future election victories.<sup>54</sup>

For former editor-in-chief of *Il Manifesto* Norma Rangeri, however, although the (post-) fascist party official and party leader has become a respected head of government, but that is far from making her respectable, professional or good for Italy. She has “done her homework when it comes to those” looking at Italy from the outside. She claims to have repudiated authoritarianism and fascism, but without gainsaying media reports of her “passionate admiration for Mussolini”. For Rangeri, in many respects the Italian prime minister is merely carrying on the “illiberal”, “obscurantist” and “fascist” policies of her mentors.<sup>55</sup> Italian political scientist Piero Ignazi, too, whom we cited at the start, is adamant that Giorgia Meloni poses a serious danger to the continued existence of Italian democracy and the future of European integration.<sup>56</sup>

<sup>54</sup> Feltri, p. 2.

<sup>55</sup> Norma Rangeri in *Il Manifesto*, cited in Feldbauer, p. 13.

<sup>56</sup> Cf. Seisselberg's interview with Piero Ignazio.

# Marine Le Pen and her successful de-demonisation strategy

Nothing can stop Marine Le Pen from becoming the first female president of the Republic in 2027. At least, that was the view promulgated for years by various journalists, writers and political scientists and it was becoming increasingly difficult to gainsay.

The earthquake triggered by her conviction for embezzlement of EU funds on 31 March 2025, resulting in the loss of her passive voting rights for five years with immediate effect, could turn everything upside down and keep her out of the 2027 presidential election. An appeal to be held in the course of 2026 will decide this question, which is of the utmost importance for the whole country. To be sure, if the ruling is upheld, Marine Le Pen could cede her place to the very young RN party leader Jordan Bardella. But whether he would be as capable as Le Pen of mobilising as many people remains to be seen.

Marine Le Pen's father Jean-Marie Le Pen (now deceased) founded the party, initially called the Front National (FN), in 1972 and it first came to political prominence in the early 1980s. It was subsequently renamed the Rassemblement National (RN) and has expanded its voter base from a fringe party to a "normalised" party, which in 2024 emerged as the leading party in the parliamentary elections. In fewer than four decades it has managed to establish itself throughout France as an alternative political force, whose ideas are now socially acceptable. The majority of French people (57 per cent)<sup>57</sup> now regard Marine Le Pen as a defender of dem-

ocratic values; half the electorate even consider her a "feminist".<sup>58</sup> This development can be attributed to her skilful efforts at "de-demonisation" since she took over from her father as party leader in 2011. But what does this de-demonisation mean and what does it say about the true intentions of Marine Le Pen and her party? Are they really still a right-wing extremist party? What fundamental political changes in France have favoured and accompanied this development? How has Le Pen's party been able to win over the working class and even women as well as men? And what are Marine Le Pen's intentions as regards women's rights?

## The inheritor

Born in Paris in 1969 the youngest daughter of patriarch Jean-Marie Le Pen, who died in January 2025, Marine grew up in a political cauldron and from an early age had a front row seat for the pitfalls and risks that beset her father, as well as his failures and successes. This was an ideal vantage point from which to learn from his mistakes and ponder possible changes. In her autobiography *À contre flots* (Against the tide)<sup>59</sup> she describes, for example, how her father's political activities were brought home to her in 1976 by an attack on the family home in Paris.

Marine Le Pen inherited a party as her father's legacy, the *Front National pour l'unité française* (known as the *Front National*). The party, founded by nationalist-revolutionary activ-

<sup>57</sup> Survey by IFOP-Fiducial for Sud Radio, April 2023.

<sup>58</sup> IFOP-Sondage from 20.04.2022, available at: <https://www.ifop.com/article/enquete-aupres-des-francaises-sur-la-question-du-genre-et-du-feminisme-dans-leur-vote-au-second-tour-de-lelection-presidentielle/>.

<sup>59</sup> Published in 2006 by Grancher Editions.

ists, former Waffen-SS members, supporters of a French Algeria and the Vichy regime, was undoubtedly on the extreme right and was long disdained by the Establishment even after its first breakthrough in Dreux at the local elections in 1983. At that time Jean-Marie Le Pen was known as the “*diable de la République*” (devil of the republic) and he did his utmost to cultivate that image in the media through regular gaffes and provocations. The most notorious came in 1987 when he declared that “the gas chambers were merely a detail in the history of the Second World War”. From the very outset the party made the issues of security and migration the centrepiece of its programme. The Front National’s first electoral successes – at the local elections in Dreux in 1983 and the parliamentary elections in 1986, in which it won 35 seats and so ascended to the National Assembly – coincided with the emergence of the issue of immigration from the Maghreb in the political debate. It was the period of the “*Marche des Beurs*”<sup>60</sup> and the founding of SOS Racisme, which was backed by François Mitterand’s Socialist government. Nevertheless, the left made a mistake, according to Aquilino Morelle, former advisor to President François Hollande, in treating the “integration of immigrants” as no longer a “legitimate aim, but as an discredited idea”.<sup>61</sup> The party of Jean-Marie Le Pen was able to capitalise on this mistake.

With this political and family heritage Le Pen’s youngest daughter took her first steps into politics. She participated in her first election campaign in 1993 at the age of 24, running for a seat in Paris’ 17th Arrondissement. But it was only ten years later, in 2002, that the face of this young woman with striking blonde hair and blue eyes was first seen on French TV screens, after her father surprisingly got through to the second round of the presidential election. From then on, however, she became a regular guest on television, as the media was attracted to her youth and, compared with her father, more moderate political formulations. During this time, in the

early 2000s, she began to refashion the party’s position, a process that came to be known as “de-demonisation”. Marine Le Pen is a qualified lawyer, although she practiced for only a few years before committing herself to the party. After attaining local office a number of times in the regions of Nord-Pas-de-Calais and Hauts-de-France her father appointed her deputy party leader in 2003 and from 2004 to 2017 she served as an MEP.

## Transformation and gaining power

When Marine Le Pen succeeded her father as party leader in 2011 she pressed ahead relentlessly with the de-demonisation strategy that FN officials had been developing since the late 1980s. These officials, especially former FN “number two” Bruno Mégret (who left the party in 1998), wanted to launch an ideological counteroffensive to overcome the extremely strong moral opprobrium that overhung the party. Marine Le Pen took a firm stance against antisemitism, racism and homophobia, expelled the more radical party members and National Catholics in order to secularise the party and put forward a more socially oriented policy offer. She also broke with the FN’s old strongly anti-Gaullist tradition and took up the issues of national independence, the centrality of the state and its authority. This about-turn led to a violent conflict with her father, who was finally expelled from the party after further provocations. The renaming of the Front National “*Rassemblement National*” in 2018 was part and parcel of this. This strategy quickly bore fruit. Since 2011 votes and seats for the party have experienced constant growth. While initially its electoral successes were confined to certain regions, such as the deindustrialised and impoverished north and east, as well as the Mediterranean south, which was based among other things on the votes of the so-called “*Pieds noirs*” (people with Algerian roots), today there is no region or *département* in

<sup>60</sup> Known officially as the “*March for Equality and against Racism*” it was also referred to in the media as the “*March of the Arabs*” (“*beur*” is backslang for “*Arab*”). It was a demonstration against racism that took place from 15 October to 3 December 1983.

<sup>61</sup> Aquilino Morelle, *La parabole des aveugles. Marine Le Pen aux portes de l’Élysée*, Paris 2023, p. 137.

which the RN's voice is not heard. At the last parliamentary elections in June 2024 Rassemblement National won 123 seats right across the country and garnered a lot of votes. Even regions long impervious to right-wing extremist discourse, such as western France, were now more receptive. And in recent years the RN has become particularly strong in rural areas, which have traditionally voted right.

The popularity of Rassemblement National can be explained primarily in terms of the resonance of its platform among broad swathes of the French population: 66 per cent of French people believe there are too many foreigners in the country, 85 per cent that the notion of authority receives too much criticism, and 65 per cent that the unemployed could find work if they really wanted to.<sup>62</sup> The upshot is that it is no longer justified to dismiss this as votes cast merely out of spite or in protest against the current political establishment. Marine Le Pen allegedly embodies a France in touch with the people. Some 67 per cent of workers voted for her in 2022.<sup>63</sup> She is France's candidate for those in work but also for the unemployed, and attracts voters from other social strata (such as the civil service) and age groups (increasingly, young people).<sup>64</sup>

Women now vote for the Le Penist party as much as men do. The radical right gender gap, which amounted to around 8 per cent during Jean-Marie Le Pen's time, has gradually narrowed and, since Marine Le Pen took over the leadership, has vanished. Since 2012 gender has ceased to exert any influence over voting RN, at least not in presidential elections. There has been a veritable "Marine Le Pen effect" according to researcher Nonna Mayer,<sup>65</sup> who has worked intensively on this issue. Many Marine Le Pen voters are under 35 years of age, lower class, work in services or care giving, and are poorly

paid. Opinion surveys show that for these women issues related to sexism are less important than issues concerning the cost of living and security.<sup>66</sup>

## The legacy of the "Manif pour tous" and the shift to the right

Marine Le Pen's party benefited from the shift to the right that set in from the 2010s, especially because of the mobilisation of conservative voters around the time the Taubira law on same-sex marriage – so-called "marriage for all" – was adopted in 2012 and 2013. This major reform, one of François Hollande's campaign promises, which legalised same-sex marriage and gave homosexual couples the right to become parents, unexpectedly triggered a massive mobilisation effort. Hundreds of thousands of people, including French Catholics, but also members of identitarian groups, right-wing extremists and left-wing voters, took to the streets for several months, the length and breadth of France. In the wake of these demonstrations new collectives, newspapers and right-wing women's groups have emerged, centred around a conservative discourse on the role of women, and have instrumentalised the campaign against sexual violence in order to stir up a xenophobic debate hostile to immigration. Some profess themselves to be feminists, such as the Nemesis collective, or eco-feminists, such as the authors and intellectuals around the publication *Limites*. Others are unambiguously anti-feminist. What they all have in common is a rejection of abortion rights. The return of anti-feminism coincided with the latest wave of feminism, which has been developing since the 2010s and has taken over the internet and social networks. Beyond these movements, against the background of terrorist threats and growing anxiety about globalisation,

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62 Enquête Fractures françaises, conducted in September 2024 by Ipsos for Le Monde, Cevipof, the Fondation Jean Jaurès and the Institut Montaigne.

63 Survey by Ipsos and Sopra Steria, 21–23 April 2022.

64 Ibid.

65 Nonna Mayer, Sur les femmes et le vote d'extrême droite vom 10.01.2023. Available at: <https://www.sciencespo.fr/centre-etudes-europeennes/fr/actualites/nonna-mayer-sur-les-femmes-et-le-vote-d-extreme-droite/>.

66 IFOP, Sondage, 20.04.2022.

public opinion has hardened and polarised. The unprecedented series of bloody attacks that hit the country from 2015 put the issues of security and Islamism back at the centre of public debate.

Besides Marine Le Pen new figures have emerged on the extreme right. First and foremost her niece Marion Maréchal, whose views are even more radical than those of her aunt; then essayist and journalist Eric Zemmour, who has acquired a wide following with his masculinist and anti-feminist positions. Capitalising on this popularity in 2021 he founded the *Reconquête* party and stood as a candidate in the 2022 presidential elections. This rivalry, which could have weakened Rassemblement National, instead has helped to normalise it, among other things because now it appears relatively moderate by comparison. This radicalisation of public opinion is reflected in a number of mass media outlets, in particular those of Breton billionaire Vincent Bolloré. In recent years he has bought up a number of renowned media outlets and publishing houses (Europe 1, Journal du dimanche, Fayard) and turned them into communication media for the extreme right, taking over their editorial offices and dismissing journalists unwilling to get with the programme. To cite only one example, RN leader Jordan Bardella's autobiography was published in November 2024 by prestige publisher Fayard. The book became a bestseller, selling over 180,000 copies by February 2025. These changes in the media landscape have facilitated the embedding in common usage of extreme right tropes, such as the so-called "*grand remplacement*" (great replacement) or "*territoires*" (colonial territories) when referring to the suburbs.

## The demise of the Republican dam

The so-called Republican dam that long obstructed the rise of Rassemblement National appears to have weakened among the voters. President Emmanuel Macron, who made combating

the extreme right one of the priorities of his first election campaign in 2017, has contributed to the breakdown of the "cordon sanitaire" by systematically swallowing up parties on both right and left, positioning his party *En Marche* – renamed *Renaissance* in 2022 – as the sole credible alternative to Rassemblement National. Macron's strategy of "neither left nor right" has in any case long been part of Marine Le Pen's discourse. While in 2002 Jean-Marie Le Pen's passage to the second round of the presidential elections led to violent demonstrations in Paris and other cities (1.5 million people marched throughout France) and an election turnout of 75 per cent for Jacques Chirac, the presence of Marine Le Pen in the second round in 2017 and 2022 triggered no major mobilisation and her increasing share of the vote (33.9 per cent in 2017 and 41.46 per cent in 2022) testifies to the normalisation of her candidacy.

Marine Le Pen's party is also reaping dividends from its status as political newcomer – it has never been in government and Madame Le Pen has never been elected president before – and from a climate permeated by extreme mistrust of all institutions. Of all European countries France is the one in which the voters have least trust in their politicians. Only 26 per cent of French men and women say they have trust in politics, compared with 39 per cent in Italy and 47 per cent in Germany (Cevipof Barometer published by Sciences Po).<sup>67</sup> Similarly, 52 per cent of respondents took the view that there is no reason to be proud of France's democratic system, in contrast to 42 per cent in Italy and 33 per cent in Germany. What's more, 41 per cent of French people approve of the idea of a "strong man who does not need elections or parliament", an unprecedented result since 2017. Such findings indicate a profound legitimisation crisis and a decisive shift away from democratic institutions. For many French people Marine Le Pen embodies "the last hope that anything will finally change".

Although the "Republican dam" has held,

<sup>67</sup> CEVIPOF trust barometer, 11.02.2025. Available at: <https://www.sciencespo.fr/cevipof/fr/actualites/barometre-de-la-confiance-politique-du-cevipof-2025-le-grand-desarroi-democratique/>.

preventing Rassemblement National from coming to power in the last parliamentary elections in June and July 2024, it may well have been its swansong. Rassemblement National failed in its bid to achieve an absolute majority, but it did manage to increase its number of seats substantially.

Some of those who are on board with Rassemblement National's message now even contest its designation as extreme right. The party claims that it is no longer anti-Semitic, xenophobic, homophobic or anti-republican. And for many members of France's Jewish community, most prominently among them the Klarsfelds, who hunted Nazis for decades, this claim now rings true. Serge Klarsfeld declared in 2024 that in a contest between the extreme left and Rassemblement National he would vote for the latter, which he now considers to be a "pro-Jewish party".<sup>68</sup> For Aquilino Morelle the party has shed its "extreme" label and they cannot be tackled effectively if one continues to demonise them. "It would be right to take Rassemblement National seriously", he writes.<sup>69</sup>

Two visions are juxtaposed in Marine Le Pen's doctrine: unbridled globalisation and her own, "patriotic" or "national" creed. She identifies two enemies without naming them explicitly: on one hand, foreigners and among them immigrants and Muslims, and on the other hand the cosmopolitan elites, who are characterised in a similar way to the anti-semitic images of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. "The semantic strategy of Rassemblement National thus does not involve spelling out its targets but rather creating a subliminal picture of them", according to Michel Eltchachinoff,<sup>70</sup> essayist and chief editor of *Philosophie* magazine. Similarly the party has toned down its rhetoric, shifting from a rhetoric of national preference (developed by the Front National in the 1980s to

soften the message of expelling foreigners) to national priority. It is unclear whether the leaders of Rassemblement National will radicalise their positions as soon as they come to power.

### **The femo-nationalist strategy: instrumentalising women's rights for a xenophobic and anti-immigrant discourse**

Women have been central to Marine Le Pen's strategy from the very outset. She cannily understood how to link the difficulties of her life as a woman to her political message. She dedicated a whole chapter in her 2006 autobiography to her life as a recently divorced single mother of three very young children. She used her personal journey as a platform on which to showcase the main women's policy ideas of the Front National at that time: condemnation of abortion rights and parental benefits for women who choose to stay at home with their children. Both measures were dressed up as "freedom of choice"

A few years later, even the Front National had taken the notion of gender parity on board. When Marine Le Pen became party leader a new women's rights doctrine was developed, the femo-nationalist turn.

The extreme right had once vilified feminism, along with secularism, but henceforth these issues were to become part of its very patrimony, serving as markers of civilisation. This strategy found expression in the party's response to the sexual assaults and rapes perpetrated in Cologne on New Year's Eve 2015. In a guest article published in *L'Opinion* on 13 January 2016 Marine Le Pen wrote "I fear that the migration crisis heralds the end of women's rights", calling on President François Hollande to hold a "referendum on immigration in France".<sup>71</sup>

Internally, the party expanded these argu-

<sup>68</sup> Documented online by Tagesschau, [www.tagesschau.de/ausland/europa/frankreich-klarsfeld-lepen-100.html](http://www.tagesschau.de/ausland/europa/frankreich-klarsfeld-lepen-100.html). At a summit in Israel in 2025 the extreme right positioned itself firmly on the side of Benjamin Netanyahu. RN leader Jordan Bardella was also there. Cf. <https://www.sueddeutsche.de/politik/israel-rechtsextreme-antisemitismus-konferenz-kontroverse-li.3225000>.

<sup>69</sup> Morelle, p. 81.

<sup>70</sup> Michel Eltchachinoff, Le RN est-il encore d'extreme droite? Available at: <https://www.philomag.com/articles/le-rn-est-il-encore-dextreme-droite>. 4 July 2024.

<sup>71</sup> Marine Le Pen, Un référendum pour sortir de la crise migratoire, 13 January 2016. Available at: <https://www.lopinion.fr/politique/marine-le-pen-un-referendum-pour-sortir-de-la-crise-migratoire>.

ments in preparation for the presidential elections in 2017, positioning their candidate as champion of women's rights. A kind of think tank, *Cercle fraternité*, was set up in 2016. This is not so much a vehicle for militancy as a venue for exchanging views on how women's affairs are intertwined with the question of national identity. The idea is to redefine the concept of "women's rights" by displacing women's right to decide what happens to their own bodies with the right to protect their bodies against sexual assault. Two chief enemies were identified in this context: Islam and gender equality policy. The party turned its policy upside down, claiming that Rassemblement National was not racist, but a defender of women and other population groups, such as Jews and homosexuals, against Muslim fundamentalism. Marine Le Pen has no compunction about characterising herself as a feminist, regularly invoking such famous figures as Olympe de Gouges or Simone Veil. And the voters believe her. Her personal journey as a hard-working single mother with three children has even made her a role model for many women. She has smartly used this to her advantage and posed as the mother of the nation at the last presidential elections in 2022.

## Talking about women's rights without really supporting them

When one actually looks at Rassemblement National's programme, however, as well as the role it plays in the European Parliament and the National Assembly it becomes all too evident that this purported ideological turn is purely cosmetic. Rassemblement National has either abstained or voted against most laws aimed at promoting greater gender equality. Testimony to this is provided by the fact that all RN representatives stayed away from the plenary vote on the Rixain law in 2021, which was intended to accelerate occupational equality between men and women.

In 2015 and 2016, moreover, Marine Le

Pen voted against several resolutions in the European Parliament to do with women's rights and equality between men and women. In 2020 the majority of RN MEPs voted against a resolution aimed at speeding up the closure of the pay gap between men and women in EU Member States. In 2021, the whole party also voted against the resolution "Me too and harassment: consequences for the institutions of the European Union".

Furthermore, the programme of candidate Marine Le Pen at the last presidential elections in 2022 was notably lacking in this regard. Only two of her 16 campaign publications contained anything on this, peculiarly, security and national preference. There was nothing on the prevention of sexual violence. The party is much more interested in fertility issues. There were numerous proposals on boosting the birth rate (especially child benefit), although only in relation to French families. Women are defined in terms of their "desire to have children"<sup>72</sup> and their roles as mothers and wives are mentioned, a familiar notion in right-wing extremist thought. Women are expected to serve as vehicles for passing on their biological and cultural inheritance.

There is one issue in particular on which Marine Le Pen and her party colleagues have undergone a significant transformation: abortion rights. Rassemblement National, which formerly was vehemently opposed to the Veil Law, has shifted its position under Marine Le Pen's influence. She and a number of other members of her parliamentary group voted in 2024 to have the right to an abortion enshrined in the French constitution. Nevertheless, her party is still split on this issue and both the votes in parliament and Marine Le Pen's statements testify to at least a certain ambiguity. In 2022 she spoke out against extending the legal deadline for an abortion from 12 to 14 weeks. At EU level, Rassemblement National MEPs did not back the resolution to enshrine the legal right to abortion in the EU's Charter of Fundamental Rights adopted in April 2024. Already in 2020 RN had spoken out

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72 Kenza Tahrî, Marine le Pen et les droites des femmes. Le risque d'une marche arrière forcée. Available at: <https://www.lagrandeconversation.com/politique/marine-le-pen-et-les-droits-des-femmes-le-risque-dune-marche-arriere-forcee/> (last accessed on 18.02.2026).

against the condemnation of Poland's de facto abortion ban (except in cases of incest or rape, or if the health of the mother is directly at risk).

## Conclusion

Despite the real threat posed by Marine Le Pen's party it is not clear how it can move forward. Too many factors and unknowns – such as geopolitical instability, the ability of left- and right-wing parties to resist it, the development of economic growth, the emergence of new actors and anticipation of Marine Le Pen's legal appeal in 2026 – mean that there is no clear path for Rassemblement National and its candidate Marine Le Pen to attain power. Nevertheless, Aquilino Morelle has demanded that “we ... speak the language of truth that the French people expect, recognise the mistakes and misdeeds of the past, take responsibility for our culpable silence on certain issues, all these missteps and unspoken words”.<sup>73</sup> The fact is that it will take nothing less than a national awakening to reverse its momentum. Time is running out: the next presidential elections are set for spring 2027.

<sup>73</sup> Morelle, p. 81 f.

# Still outside the tent

## Right-wing populist female leaders in Germany

The principal terrain that the right-wing populists would like to conquer, invoking protectionism and/or their “advocacy of ordinary people”, is the “lower” middle class. Hit by successive crisis waves, it has been preoccupied by worries about loss of status and income for the past 25 years. To be sure, right-wing populist parties have been gaining ground with this target group, increasingly also in Germany. However, if female right-wing populist leaders are to be successful in Europe it is vital that they conquer the terrain of conservatism and win support for a national withdrawal from Europe and the world. Their path towards taking control of the state also depends on how strong and successful the established parties are that represent the traditional and familiar ways of life of the Christian-conservative model or traditional “leading cultures”. It was not protest voters but rather political and personnel gaps in the centre parties that made it possible for Meloni in Italy, a “woman, mother and Christian”, and Le Pen in France, an emancipated republican of the “Grande Nation”, to forge centre-right alliances.

In the wake of the Second World War the Christian parties helped to rebuild democracy in Germany and even Europe as we know it today and can now look back on many years in government. The SPD, too, has been so much a party of the centre since 1959 that it has repeatedly been able to enter coalition with conservative parties both at federal level and in the *Länder*. Even though their approval ratings have been falling among voters Germany’s established centre parties have so far been able to provide a kind of fire door for democracy based on their

stable memberships or core electorates.

That is why, at least to date, no single woman at the helm of right-wing populism and right-wing extremist movements in Germany has been able to unite broad-based power and approval in her own party and win above average election victories. While the “lower middle class” and even young voters already feel heard, a broad embedding in political conservatism is still lacking. Neither AfD founding member and Eurosceptic Frauke Petry nor aristocratic networker Beatrix von Storch, and not even 2025 “chancellor candidate” Alice Weidel have been able to pull this off. For that reason, unlike Giorgia Meloni and Marine Le Pen these politicians have not been able to exercise decisive influence over their political backrooms.

A particular feature of the AfD is its constant need to test the boundaries when it comes to both flirting with and distancing itself from its right-wing extremist and anti-constitutional wings and the extreme right outside it. This covers a broad spectrum, ranging from neoliberal anti-Europeans and democracy-sceptics to the sectarian cult of leadership and nature in identitarian movements, neo-Nazi youth engagement, aristocratic hunting and imperial romanticism, so-called *Querdenker* (self-styled “lateral thinkers”) and conspiracy theorists, “Reichsbürger”, angry and protesting citizens, and even members who want to reform German conservatism to the right. Although right-wing leader Alice Weidel exerts some influence on the echo-chambers of right-wing social media and, as opposition leader, on citizens nursing a sense of betrayal, she has only sporadically been able to unite

the party divisions, as others dominate the party, especially in the eastern *Länder*.<sup>74</sup> To be blunt, without the openly right-wing extremist Björn Höcke in eastern Germany it is likely that many of those who voted for the party at the federal elections in 2025 would have defected.

In their attitudinal research on so-called “trigger points” sociologists Steffen Mau, Thomas Lux and Linus Westheuser come to the conclusion that political faultlines in German society do not run in the pattern of two large camel’s “humps” (extreme right and extreme left), but rather, as before, within the span of a single hump, indicating what one might call a “dromedary society”.<sup>75</sup> Naturally, here too, current conflicts, for example, with regard to the immigration issue, in the debate on self-determination for vulnerable groups, in relation to ongoing climate change and regarding inequality between social classes, among other things, are “ignited, triggered and exacerbated” in the media by right-wing populist forces.<sup>76</sup> The study concludes that only a minority of respondents favour a radical politics hostile to migrants and refugees, the rights of transpeople or for fundamental reforms to roll back climate-friendly measures or the welfare state (including a citizen’s allowance). The attitudes are distributed along a hump-like curve pretty much on a liberal democratic spectrum. With regard to immigration policy, a core issue for right-wing populist parties and movements in Germany, a mixed picture emerges of a “conditional openness to inclusion” on such issues as “internal-external inequalities”. Most people recognise immigration as economically beneficial and even necessary. Having said that, there are also major reservations concerning the number and origin of immigrants, as well as competition between locals and immigrants. Only minorities completely reject the notion of a country of immigration. A clear majority ac-

knowledge that German culture is enriched by migration.<sup>77</sup> Taking this on board, we can say that the AfD is “absolutely not a mainstream” party. This is despite the fact that Alice Weidel in particular attracted a lot of attention in 2024–2025 for her appearances and inflammatory speeches in the Bundestag, as well as in surveys, and in some quarters won approval on social media among people who previously did not belong among the traditional electorate of right-wing and right-wing extremist movements.

What is worrying for Germany, however, is the finding that what have been called “unsettled conflicts” play a role here, which Mau et al. describe as “restless, unsatiated and barely institutionalised disputes”, in which it would be difficult to reach a democratic compromise. They are not particularly “entrenched” and are characterised by “considerable volatility and strong amplitudes of mobilisation”.<sup>78</sup> One of them is the struggle for political equality and representation of women and minorities. Although sociologists are fairly optimistic that this conflict is gradually being resolved, “they are beginning to emerge in a policy of recognition, whose juridification is progressing and where, despite all the forces of resistance, there have been considerable gains in terms of visibility and representation of women and minorities.”<sup>79</sup> That also probably applies to progressive developments in the world of work. There would appear to be little support in Germany for any obstruction or turning back the clock on measures towards more equality across the board for women in the world of work (for example, gender pay gap, gender pension gap) or a rolling back of the expansion of childcare facilities and all-day care in schools or improvement of medical care for women (gender data gap).

In this arena it is therefore much more difficult for Alice Weidel, Beatrix von Storch and

<sup>74</sup> Cf. Patrick Bahners, *Die Wiederkehr. Die AfD und der neue deutsche Nationalismus*, Stuttgart 2023, p. 235 ff.

<sup>75</sup> Stefan Mau, Thomas Lux and Linus Westheuser, *Triggerpunkte. Konsens und Konflikt in der Gegenwartsgesellschaft*, Berlin 2024, p. 8.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 23.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 402 f.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 372.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*

other female actors on the Right to find a window of opportunity to promote “the traditional Western family in the Federal Republic” or patriarchal role models drawn from the right-wing reactionary ranks. Dismissive attitudes as regards the LGBTIQ+ community and towards transgender people, or pushing back against gender-sensitive language may cause a stir in op-ed columns and on social media, but in particular denigrating queer families is never going to be on openly gay Alice Weidel’s agenda.

Access to the political centre ground may be easiest in relation to immigration and climate protection. The complexity and scope of these issues goes well beyond the coping capacities of the state. On top of that, these conflicts affecting the whole of humanity can be solved only via European, multilateral and global political efforts. The relevant problems are so great and complex that they offer the biggest target for right-wing political mobilisation, or incitement, by stirring up fears, fake news and stoking group-based enmities. According to Mau et al., all that is left for the established democratic parties is to react with a “politics of feelings”, at least in an effort to hang on to voter support.<sup>80</sup> In this context, the question arises for our country comparison approach whether societal divisions are already opening up favourable angles of attack in Germany by means of which right-wing populist and right-wing extremist influencers will be able to forge alliances with the centre-right. So far, a big enough power vacuum doesn’t appear to have emerged in Germany for this to happen.

Since German reunification, substantial economic and societal inequalities and differential voting patterns between western and eastern Germany have been evident with regard to right-wing parties. But economic and cultural disparities are a lot worse in France and Italy. Economist Helmut Reisen writes of France that it is “traditionally divided (*la France Fracturée*)”: “divisions have deepened since the end of *les*

*trente glorieuses* (Fourastié 1979), the just under 30 wonderful years from 1945 to 1973, the counterpart to Germany’s *Wirtschaftswunder*. France is split between Paris and the provinces; between prosperous big cities and poor small towns; urban and rural; young and old; elite education and low education; rich middle class and poor; EU supporters and EU sceptics. This division was not only confirmed in the 2022 presidential elections, but had even intensified in comparison with 2017.<sup>81</sup>

## The March for Life and the tip of the iceberg

If any of the aforementioned right-wing populists is capable of uniting a broad social base beyond party lines it is perhaps not Alice Weidel, but Beatrix von Storch. She is the political figurehead of the “March for Life”, an annual large-scale demonstration organised by the Federal Association of the Right to Life movement in Berlin. It has been bringing together opponents of abortion in Germany since 2002. The protest is directed not only against terminations of pregnancy and forms of euthanasia, but also against stem cell research and pre-implantation diagnostics. The Association encompasses lawyers’ and doctors’ associations, as well as civil society bodies and church groups (Christian and evangelical). Traditionally, the demonstrators receive messages of greeting from senior church representatives, and it is not uncommon for Catholic bishops to take part. In February 2024, however, the German Bishops’ Conference for the first time clearly distanced itself from the participation of the AfD, noting that the march had been hijacked by the party and other groups. On the Protestant side, the German Evangelical Alliance also expressed its regret that the demonstration might have been infiltrated by right-wing populists, remarking that pro-life views may also be expressed by people with whom they otherwise have nothing in common. In fact, among the so-

<sup>80</sup> Ibid., p. 372 f.

<sup>81</sup> Helmut Reisen, Präsidentschaftswahl zeigt Frankreichs Spaltung, in: *Ökonomische Trends*, 102 (2022) 5, pp. 408–410. Available at: <https://www.wirtschaftsdienst.eu/inhalt/jahr/2022/heft/5/beitrag/praesidentschaftswahl-zeigt-frankreichs-spaltung.html>.

called “protest tourists” there are many women whose motivations go well beyond a Christian concern for human life. First and foremost among these in terms of media attention is Beatrix von Storch.<sup>82</sup>

The journalist Liane Bednarz sees the anti-abortion movement as a harbinger of a growing affiliation between conservative Christian milieus and right-wing extremist positions. Beatrix von Storch and associations such as “Christians in the AfD” could thus become pivotal integrating figures. At every major demonstration that gathers under the umbrella of the March for Life there are always church representatives and Christians from the liberal-conservative sphere (including CDU/CSU), as well as people who are motivated solely by their faith without any explicit party political alignment: “such events are always a little bit like family get-togethers” a “well dressed gentleman” told journalist Lina Dahm in an interview on the fringes of the March for Life in Munich in 2021, identifying himself as a philosophy professor at Pope Benedict XVI Philosophical-Theological University. As far as Dahm could see, the participants in this supposed family get-together were “fundamentalist Christian, conservative or (extreme) right. Some have close links, others only share similar ideas or are not distancing themselves. Some make no secret of their views, while others would prefer to keep them hidden. Some pretend to be harmless Samaritans, while others do so only to mask their misogyny”.<sup>83</sup> Beatrix von Storch, as a right-wing populist influencer has managed to retain close links to this broad clientele for quite some time and through the media to develop the public narrative of a common religious basis and thus to address (old-style) observant Christians who otherwise belong socio-economically and politically to the centre. In the medium to long term this could turn into an

anchor point for a centre-right shift. Like Giorgia Meloni, von Storch portrays herself publicly as a “wife, mother and Christian”, who, coming from an old and conservative Christian family purports to stand for traditional values. She along with other pro-life activists receive financial, formal and informal support from a transnational and trans-Atlantic network.

In the study “The Tip of the Iceberg” Neil Datta, researcher and secretary of the European Parliamentary Forum, has uncovered and analysed the financial and personal links between religious extremist donors – referred to here also as anti-gender activists – for example, from the United States and Russia, but also from Europe and Germany.<sup>84</sup> The study concludes that, in addition to financial transfers from anti-gender activists from Russia and the USA the largest proportion of anti-gender funding in Europe comes from Europe itself, at 437.7 million US dollars. Datta has identified 20 foundations alone that contribute financially to specific anti-gender mobilisations. In analysing where all the money comes from, the author describes the different mechanisms used to mobilise resources (➔ Box 1).

82 Gisela Notz, “Die Politik fürchtet die Kirche”, interview with taz, 20.09.2014. Available at: <https://taz.de/Soziologin-ueber-den-Marsch-des-Lebens/15032841/>.

83 Lina Dahm, Eine schrecklich reaktionäre Familie, Gastbeitrag für Braunzone, Antifaschistisches Infoblatt AfB 139/2.2023, 20 September 2023. Available at: [www.antifainfoblatt.de/aib139/eine-schrecklich-reaktionaere-familie](http://www.antifainfoblatt.de/aib139/eine-schrecklich-reaktionaere-familie).

84 Neil Datta, Die Spitze des Eisbergs. Religiös-extremistische Geldgeber gegen Menschenrechte auf Sexualität und reproduktive Gesundheit in Europa 2009–2018, Brussels 2021, pp. 43–74.

## Four mechanisms for mobilising resources for the religious right

(1) **Fund raising within the framework of a grassroots movement and the mobilisation of “active citizens” via social media.**

“Religious extremists” make use of petitions and the sale of “Catholic gift items” of the German Society for the Protection of Tradition, Family and Private Property. People are also mobilised via social media “to bring religious extremists to the centre of public debate through new alternative and extreme right-wing political parties in Germany and Spain”.

(2) **Support from socio-economic elites, and two groups in particular: “high net worth individuals from the private sector, as well as people from clerical-aristocratic networks.**

Especially “members of aristocratic families”, according to Datta, are “prominently represented at anti-gender events and in leadership positions”.

(3) **Drawing on public funds, for example, within the framework of “services” commissioned by public authorities that in fact “provide women with misinformation about their options if they become pregnant, and foster the conservative socialisation of children and young people”.** Raising funds to promote a “civil society that is well disposed towards conservatism”, which can then also provide a basis for a state “soft anti-gender diplomacy”.

(4) **Mobilisation of material resources and platforms through Christian networks.**

Although these are separated by religious denomination (Catholic, protestant, orthodox), those involved are in dialogue with one another, according to Datta, to “bring about a new conservative, illiberal and anti-democratic ecumenism”, laying the foundations for the new age. The aim is to win people’s trust to give them the feeling that the new government is truly the government of the people.

Source: Neil Datta, *Die Spitze des Eisbergs. Religiös-extremistische Geldgeber gegen Menschenrechte auf Sexualität und reproduktive Gesundheit in Europa 2009–2018*, Brussels 2021, p. 7.

The study found that in Germany the foundation “Yes to Life” (“Ja zum Leben”) has established itself as one of the main sponsors of the so-called “One of Us Federation Germany”. The donation-funded foundation describes its purpose as to help pregnant women in dire need. Support is to be given to pregnancy counselling centres that receive no state funding because they do not offer “counselling on [the legal option of] abortions without penalty”. Support is also available for disabled children, along with pro-life

and family assistance projects.<sup>85</sup> The foundation was founded in 1988 by Countess Johanna von Westphalen. According to Datta, it has backed many “initiatives aimed at undermining women’s and LGBTQI human rights in Germany and Austria”, as well as networks such as the Alliance Defending Freedom International (ADF). Among other German foundations the study also identified Count Albrecht von Brandenstein-Zeppelin’s European Family Foundation, a “community of donors” that funds activities promoting a tradi-

<sup>85</sup> Website of the foundation Ja zum Leben, available at: <https://ja-zum-leben.de>.

tional model of the family, such as the “Demo für Alle” initiative, a flagship project of Beatrix von Storch, among others. The other co-founder of the European Family Foundation, according to Datta’s research, is Hubert Liebherr, heir of the Liebherr family with an estimated fortune of 7.8 billion euros. A third German foundation is the Foundation for Human Values (Stiftung für Familienwerte), founded in 2008 in Trier, which also backed the “Demo für Alle”. There are a number of aristocrats and members of the “business elite” on the board of the foundation, including Hedwig von Beverfoerde, who together with von Storch was the main organiser of the “Demo für Alle”, as well as belonging to the “Civil Coalition” and funding a series of anti-gender initiatives.<sup>86</sup>

Datta concludes that within the European anti-gender networking milieu above all AfD politician Beatrix von Storch is primarily responsible for building up “civil society and social media empires through which active citizens were [won over] to support right-wing extremist political parties”. The study therefore pays particular attention to her and her husband Sven. The couple started out in Germany in 2005 by building a social media empire and, together with other aristocrats, founded the online protest platform “Civil Coalition”, although it did not attract much attention until 2008. In the wake of the social protests during the financial crisis the von Storchs “expanded”, launching a whole series of social media initiatives for the purpose – in Datta’s view – of “exerting political pressure”. This was followed by the founding of the “alternative” media organisation “The Free World”, as well as several anti-gender platforms: “they were all aimed ‘besides criticising the euro, at bombarding MPs with emails,’ mainly with calls to ‘safeguard the family’”. In this way the von Storch organisations were able to develop into “a nexus of mutually intertwined platforms, websites and initiatives”.<sup>87</sup> The relevant issues ranged from “a business- and private property friendly agenda to anti-left, anti-gender, anti-Isl-

lam and anti-immigration topics”. According to the study these function as a kind of “‘data kraken’ by means of which the personal data of users who have registered with a website are shared with other organisations so they can contract them for donations”. For Neil Datta the couple was thus able to create “‘the biggest and most detailed collection of contacts on the German right-wing extremist scene’”, with more than 100,000 active users. Beatrix von Storch herself is now the undisputed leader of a Christian fundamentalist wing of the AfD, making up around a third of the party. She was able to secure a nomination at the European Parliamentary elections in 2014. Datta claims that the von Storch’s data empire played a major role in the AfD’s success in the elections in 2017, when 94 AfD MPs entered the Bundestag.<sup>88</sup>

But what is the effect of von Storch’s aristocratic background on issues that would seem to be more at home on the centre-right? Presumably a long tradition of aristocratic “Blut und Boden mysticism” plays a role, which dictates that socially the German forest, so to speak, should be protected from the top down along with its foresters, hunters and the families living on their (former) land. After all, aristocratic families like the von Storchs were featured, at least in West Germany, in high circulation glossy magazines long before the age of social media, and especially in women’s magazines, such as *Frau im Spiegel*, *Gala* and so on. They long figured as bastions of the so-called good old days and the Old Order, widely perceived among broad swathes of the population as the epitome of conservative values.

## The unequal sisters of right-wing extremism

In fact, in comparison with Giorgia Meloni and Marine Le Pen, Alice Weidel most closely matches the fourth type of extreme right-wing leader: she is well groomed, she is tele- and photogenic,

<sup>86</sup> Datta, p. 33 ff.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid., p. 46 f.

and she has an academic background. Political scientist Benjamin Höhne, however, denies that Alice Weidel is capable of being a charismatic leader. Her “coldness” and inability to sell herself to the broader population will prevent her from rising all the way to the top of the AfD, which sees itself as in tune with ordinary folk and as a representative of the “little people”. And in her political appearances Weidel vacillates between extremist and misanthropic rants and respectability.<sup>89</sup>

Alice Weidel is the female AfD leader who appears most frequently in the media but her political clout cannot (yet) be compared with that of Giorgia Meloni or Marine Le Pen. This is because, in contrast to the leading right-wing female politicians in Italy and France, the AfD’s joint parliamentary leader and party chair has not yet ascended to the summit of a centre-right alliance and is not on the cusp of becoming president or taking the reins of government. Furthermore, AfD MPs do not form part of a right-wing party family or a broad right-wing alliance in the European Parliament. Quite the contrary, in the course of her efforts to find a right-wing populist alliance partner Alice Weidel’s advances to Marine Le Pen in spring 2024 were vehemently rebuffed. She has called on Weidel along with her party colleagues to go on the record to distance herself from notions of “remigration”.<sup>90</sup> Le Pen was referring to a meeting involving, among others, members of the AfD, the WerteUnion (Values Union) and the Identitarian movement in Potsdam in 2024, at which the Austrian right-wing extremist and activist Martin Sellner laid out a “master plan for the remigration” of asylum seekers, foreigners and “unassimilated” Ger-

man citizens. According to an investigation by Correctiv, in New Right circles the apparently innocuous term “remigration” refers to measures for the expulsion, extradition, displacement and/or deportation of people with a migrant background. Even though Correctiv’s reporting on the meeting was subsequently criticised by some conservative media scholars as a “mixture of factual claims and expressions of opinion”<sup>91</sup> the report on the meeting made a splash in the international press and led to the rift with Le Pen. The CDU’s reactions and party disciplinary proceedings related to the Potsdam meeting and the nationwide uproar about the interference of Tesla boss and sometime Trump insider Elon Musk in the German federal elections are further indications that Alice Weidel and her party have not yet been able to forge centre-right alliances in Germany, of the kind achieved in France and Italy. This was also ensured with the adoption by almost every democratic party in the Bundestag elections of migration policy issues in the run-up to the elections of 2024/2025.

But what links the AfD leader with Meloni and Le Pen?

## Historico-political objections for concerned citizens

Alice Weidel’s political apprenticeship and career are similar to those of her two peers. Her political socialisation to the right did not take place overnight. Nor was it a decision that emerged from worries about undesirable developments in Germany. Instead, it was probably personal, based on early contacts with nationalist and right-wing ideologues and role models.<sup>92</sup> The re-

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<sup>89</sup> Benjamin Höhne, Mit ihrer Kälte torpediert Alice Weidel eine zentrale AfD-Strategie, Parteienforscher im Interview, Focus online, 22.02.2025. Available at: [https://www.focus.de/politik/deutschland/parteienforscher-im-interview-weidel-ist-keine-charismatische-patriarchin-sie-muss-sich-um-zustimmung-bemuehen\\_id\\_260738861.html](https://www.focus.de/politik/deutschland/parteienforscher-im-interview-weidel-ist-keine-charismatische-patriarchin-sie-muss-sich-um-zustimmung-bemuehen_id_260738861.html).

<sup>90</sup> For press reports on this subject see: Der Spiegel-Online, 25.02.2024. Available at: <https://www.spiegel.de/politik/deutschland/marine-le-pen-fordert-von-alice-weidel-distanzierung-zu-remigration-a-87a74740-1df4-4f07-a700-24b1b13518ed>.

<sup>91</sup> Cf. Marcus Bensmann, Correctiv: Niemand kann sagen, er hätte es nicht gewusst. Die ungeheuerlichen Pläne der AfD [No one can say they didn’t know. The monstrous plans of the AfD], Berlin 2024; and Benjamin Stibi: Ein Jahr danach. Was vom “Correctiv“-Bericht übriggeblieben ist [One year later. What remains of the Correctiv report], in: *Die Welt*, 13 January 2025. Available at: [www.welt.de/politik/deutschland/plus255091998/Ein-Jahr-danach-Was-vom-Correctiv-Bericht-uebrig-bleibt.html](http://www.welt.de/politik/deutschland/plus255091998/Ein-Jahr-danach-Was-vom-Correctiv-Bericht-uebrig-bleibt.html).

<sup>92</sup> Alice Weidel has thrown a cloak of silence, for the time being, over the story of her grandfather Hans Weidel, a member of the Nazi Party and the Waffen SS, as well as a military judge. She denies any ideological and private proximity to her grandfather and it would be wrong to speculate. Weidel shares this culture of silence with the majority of German families when it comes to their relatives’ involvement in the Nazi regime. On this see the study by Harald Welzer, Karoline Tschuggnall and Sabine Moller, *Opa war kein Nazi. Nationalsozialismus und Holocaust im Familiengedächtnis*, Frankfurt am Main 2002.

relationship to and dealings with European history and in particular National Socialism loom large here. As with Meloni and Le Pen, elements of right-wing extremist ideology can clearly be identified in Alice Weidel's utterances, in the form of both explicit remarks on history itself and omissions. In her statement of intent entitled *Widerworte* (Objections) her political arguments are constantly accompanied by references back to German history, but there is no reckoning with National Socialism. Instead, her historical interpretations emphasise Germany's victimhood at the time of the two great world wars.<sup>93</sup>

It is nothing short of astonishing that a woman born in 1979, who graduated top of her class at a traditional *gymnasium* can resort to such language to reverse the roles of perpetrator and victim. Since the *Historikerstreit* of 1989/90 not even conservative theorists of totalitarianism have framed events in such a way.

Although in contrast to Meloni and Le Pen Weidel attained the highest academic qualification, a completed doctorate, her thoughts as laid out in her would-be rebuttals give no evidence of any ability acquired in academia to develop her own standpoint or her own recommendations out of a discursive and, at least cursory, critical reflection on the problems, the literature and the sources. Ignoring the evidence and the latest historical or social science research her book is a mixture of namedropping and historical half-truths. Her attempts at historical interpretation stand in a tradition of New Right authors from the 1990s, such as Rainer Zitelmann (*Hitler. The Politics of Seduction*) or Armin Mohler, who sought to canonise right-wing tendencies from the twentieth century under the banner of the "conservative revolution" and to distinguish them from National Socialism.<sup>94</sup> Weidel's claim that "Hitler was on the left" re-

flects a right-wing populist translation of the "old" New Right canon and the "conservative revolution" in the context of the election campaign.<sup>95</sup> She appears to be an adherent of an "economic history of dogma" (not an established term in historical studies), according to which "Stalin and Hitler are brothers in spirit" and the Holocaust was part of the history of socialism.

If only from a historico-political perspective neither Marine Le Pen nor Giorgia Meloni can even consider a public show of solidarity with Alice Weidel and the AfD for the simple reason that French collaboration and Italy's fascist history must at all costs be strictly separated from the taint of National Socialism. This is despite many overlaps with the AfD, such as the national retrenchment from Europe and hardline migration policy. Nevertheless, what they have in common is precisely what divides them. Alice Weidel's relationship to history appears similarly ambivalent to those of Meloni and Le Pen, with calls for national withdrawal and pride in the flag flanked by the standard of a new historical master narrative. The history card is played to stir up the audience. In the arena of parliamentary debate, when the issue is human and fundamental rights as lessons from the past, a kind of historical amnesia prevails.

For political scientist Anna Vogel, historico-political utterances most clearly reveal how the "limits of the sayable [have shifted] in public discourse". She points to a speech given by Björn Höcke in January 2017 in which he condemned the Berlin Holocaust memorial as a "memorial of shame".<sup>96</sup> Even if in 2015 Alice Weidel still expressed a certain scepticism in relation to right-wing extremist Höcke she has since come to the conclusion that "he is a very good top candidate and he's doing a great job."<sup>97</sup>

What is perhaps most dangerous about

<sup>93</sup> Alice Weidel, p. 12.

<sup>94</sup> Cf. Pfahl-Traugber, pp. 41–53.

<sup>95</sup> Alice Weidel, "Adolf Hitler war ein Linker" – Alice Weidel in conversation with Nikolaus Blome, 09.01.2025, Sender ntv. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kEqDks-h-qM>.

<sup>96</sup> Anna Vogel, Rechtspopulismus in den sozialen Medien. Eine Fallstudie zu Donald J. Trumps Twitter-Kommunikation, dissertation forthcoming, Bonn 2025, p. 47.

<sup>97</sup> Alice Weidel in an interview, Weidel: AfD geht gegen "albernes" Höcke-Urteil in Berufung, ntv-Nachrichten. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nUJWBotCsus>.

the historical narratives or historical omissions of Meloni, Le Pen and Weidel today is the fact that the media, whether it be on talk shows, in the press or on social media make little effort to properly highlight post-factual historical narratives, to call out omissions or to explain to the audience how history and its significance are being distorted. It needs more than a couple of minutes' research and a short video to establish the facts and to achieve clarity. Extreme right-wing influencers, of course, are all too aware of that and take full advantage of the void, confident that they will not be called out on their historical references.

### Protecting women, “gender woo” and ethnicised sexism

Anti-feminism, framed by political femo-nationalism, is another ideological link between Meloni, Le Pen and the AfD's extreme right-wing influencers. Anti-feminist attitudes, misogyny, homophobia and sexism are all too evident in German right-wing populism and right-wing extremism, above all in anti-genderism. The core principle here is that there are only two biological sexes: sex is binary. The “instrumentalisation of traditional gender roles and heteronormative family relations” occurs within the framework of a “thin-centred’ ideology” and right-wing populist “criticism of elites”.

To this way of thinking, social positions are assigned on the basis of gender. Biological arguments and models are the point of reference here. Deviations from behaviours and identities determined by nature, such as transgender people, or people who are non-binary or queer, are, in contrast, seen as unnatural and framed as enemy combatants.<sup>98</sup>

The anti-feminism of extreme right-wing

influencers and politicians manifests itself in parliaments, on talk shows and in social media in a raucous denunciation of gender equality measures and intersectional feminism, along with the related deconstruction of gender. The spectrum ranges from the repeated condemnation of the “crippling” of the German language through new usages affecting “pronouns” and the like, the defamation of women's and gender studies, the rejection of pluralistic sex education, but also in the realm of the family and reproductive rights. Anti-feminism is roped together with racism and group-based enmity in a concerted effort to appeal to “concerned citizens”. Particularly striking is the enemy-image of the “abusive foreigner”, of the young libidinous Muslim male from New Year's Eve 2015, against whom “German women” must be protected.<sup>99</sup> Islamophobia and sexism manifest themselves pre-eminently in the image of the “women in a headscarf”,<sup>100</sup> depicted as downtrodden and uneducated beings who are beyond integration. The headscarf here is a symbol of the “betrayal” of the achievements of the old women's movement, of the old white feminism, which fought at national level for equality between Western men and women in Germany. Both these constantly repeated metaphors go, in their group-based enmity, far beyond a “preference” for the “native” and German traditional families as opposed to “foreigners”, which some voters may well hanker for.<sup>101</sup>

Alice Weidel is constantly trying to shift the limits of the sayable. Her words uttered in a speech to the German Bundestag in 2019 have become particularly infamous in this context: “Burkas, headscarf girls, knife-wielding men on benefits and other good-for-nothings will do nothing to secure our prosperity, economic growth and, above all, the welfare state.”<sup>102</sup>

No distinction is drawn in the AfD's elec-

<sup>98</sup> Leonie Herz, *Antifeministische Diskurse der Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) in den sozialen Medien. Eine kritische Analyse*, Bonn 2025, outstanding BA thesis, forthcoming, p. 15 ff.

<sup>99</sup> Ibid.

<sup>100</sup> Cf. Müller-Neuhoff: *Kopftuchmädchen und biologische Bomben*.

<sup>101</sup> Herz, pp. 17 ff. and cf. Alice Weidel im Bundestag “Kopftuchmädchen und andere Taugenichtse”, *Der Spiegel* on Youtube, 17.05.2018. Available at: [www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZEGj1T0pnR0](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZEGj1T0pnR0).

<sup>102</sup> Alice Weidel im Bundestag “Kopftuchmädchen und andere Taugenichtse”, *Der Spiegel* on Youtube, 17.05.2018. Available at: [www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZEGj1T0pnR0](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZEGj1T0pnR0).

toral programme between refugees, migrants and citizens with a migrant background. The dominant word is “foreigners”, which is often linked together in the narratives with illegality, criminality and child benefits paid abroad.<sup>103</sup>

Young researcher Leonie Herz has shown, based on the social media activities of leading AfD politicians, that the ethnicisation of sexism is regularly tied together with migration issues. Campaigns on this sexist connection are stepped up precisely in the run-up to celebrations of women, such as International Women’s Day or International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women. Under the guise of wanting to protect women against “imported Islamic contempt for women” sexualised violence, misogyny and sexism are “generally made into a problem concerning men of the Muslim faith”. The posts are based on the meta-narrative that “misogyny” in general arises only when immigration is permitted and is linked to Islam. Beatrix von Storch, for example, regularly posts on “imported violence against women”. According to Herz, ethno-sexism is even more important to their social media strategy than femo-nationalism.<sup>104</sup>

Among extreme right-wing influencers lawyer and AfD MP Mariana Iris Harder-Kühnel, who has long been the party’s spokesperson on family policy, is the most prominent exponent of femo-nationalism. According to her Wikipedia entry she corresponds to a type four right-wing leader: she is always well turned out for the cameras, she was a high-flyer at leading auditing firms, married and the mother of three children, as well as a practicing Roman Catholic. In the Bundestag debate on International Women’s Day in 2023 she declared in her speech that, despite its “socialist roots” the original intentions behind Women’s Day had been good, but that it had “now become obsolete”. Women are supposedly “equal” and International Women’s Day is “abused” by the political left for the purposes of

identity politics and “increasingly intrusive trans propaganda”. Women’s welfare does not lie in “gender nonsense” or a feminist foreign policy: “deportation, securing the borders, punishing rapists with the full force of the law would be the best present we could give to German women on Women’s Day”.<sup>105</sup>

## Conclusion

It has been apparent for years that leading female political leaders in the AfD are pulling in two directions on the rope of German conservatism and the Christian centre. On one end, there are the abrasive speeches and borderline confrontations with the CDU and the Union in public plenary sessions of parliament, while at the other end there is the informal networking with Christian Democrats within a civil society context, supposedly on the basis of “common” values and issues. This strategy is still hindering a broad centre-right alliance along the same lines as in France and Italy. Nevertheless, German democracy has been under extreme pressure for years.

For Daniel Mullis, in the federal and state parliaments the AfD leadership, with its “constant transgressions and provocations”, has gradually widened the space of what is “sayable and thinkable” towards the right. The fact that the Union parties “entered this space so blithely and so willingly” has promoted its “normalisation”. For Mullis, this is an indication of the “regression of the centre” in Germany.<sup>106</sup> This can be observed in election campaign mode, in individual Bundestag speeches and in the political contestation between the major “people’s parties”, the Christian-conservative and the progressive-left. The CDU’s election campaign, oriented towards migration policy, which offered so-called “concerned citizens” a say on the issue in 2025, is particularly telling in this regard. In

<sup>103</sup> Cf. AfD, Zeit für Deutschland. Programm der Alternative für Deutschland für die Wahl zum 21. Deutschen Bundestag, adopted on 11 and 12 January 2025 in Riesa, pp. 100–111.

<sup>104</sup> Herz, p. 34 f.

<sup>105</sup> Deutscher Bundestag (ed.), Dokumentation der vereinbarten Debatte zum Internationalen Frauentag, 17.03.2023. Available at: [www.bundestag.de/dokumente/textarchiv/2023](http://www.bundestag.de/dokumente/textarchiv/2023). And see Herz, p. 34.

<sup>106</sup> Daniel Mullis, *Der Aufstieg der Rechten in Krisenzeiten. Die Regression der Mitte*, Bonn 2024, p. 118.

terms of political issues that deeply affect fundamental, women's and human rights, however, it is important to remember that in Germany, as in Italy, (Christian) conservatism is rooted in the notion of democratic, humanitarian and social responsibility. Compassion and charity (such as church sanctuary) are clearly the preferred framework when it comes to interpreting the free democratic basic order. A famous example of this is then Chancellor Angela Merkel's welcoming in of refugees from Syrian war zones in 2015 ("we'll make this work"). Conservative democrats have actively stood up against nationalist and right-wing extremist tendencies in society, and a large proportion of Christian Democrats are committed to retaining the "AfD firewall" in parliament.<sup>107</sup>

<sup>107</sup> Verbände appellieren an die CDU: "Stehen Sie zu Ihren christlichen Werten" [Party associations appeal to the CDU: "Stand by your Christian values"]. Tagesschau-Redaktion online (ed.), article published on 03.02.2025. Available at: <https://www.tagesschau.de/inland/bundestagswahl/kritik-verbaende-cdu-100.html>.

# Europe needs the right strategies to fight back

It is vital to understand that none of the new breed of female political influencers emerging in Europe's right-wing populist and extreme right-wing movements and now enjoying electoral success are breaking new ground – for example, as female heads of state – or starting a new chapter in the modern history of women's emancipation. Our considered conclusion is that the current far-right leaders are rather the offspring of the old political and economic elites and are intellectually affiliated with the old right, the conservative revolution or Christian fundamentalism. Their ability to push the envelope of what can be said in a democracy under the aegis of right-wing extremist ideas is also foreshadowed in their political biographies. What is new is their political and media self-presentation in today's multifarious media landscape, adapting effortlessly to a changing pop culture, as photogenic career women, dutiful mothers and Republican Christians, leading the country, statesman-like, with sensationalist rhetoric and big promises out of every crisis and putting the nation, the people, the family and the status quo above all other political interests. Also new is the political flexibility they display in their efforts to gain the political centre and women's votes (femo-nationalism), and which they scarcely still need to justify over against their male party colleagues and right-wing extremist movements. Their approval ratings in social media are too high and they are invited, because they are telegenic and powerful, onto talk shows too often. The example of France has shown that it is possible, by means of a strong democratic instrument, to halt, at least for now, Marine Le Pen's seemingly unstoppable rise to the presidency, even if she appears to have reached the full extent of her ability to mobilise support. Furthermore, Giorgia

Meloni, too, may be stopped in her tracks legislatively within the confines of the separation of powers. Legally reinforcing the separation of powers, at both national and European level can thus be an effective bulwark against charismatic leaders and right-wing populists.

## Organising democracy on social media platforms professionally and unceasingly

Right-wing extremist and right-wing populist influencers in Europe in particular have mastered the art of effective political campaigning and are known for their successful PR strategies on social media. They have recognised the major mobilising potential of anti-feminism and anti-genderism and often address femo-nationalism directly, woman to woman. At the same time, they are active on platforms with appealing posts and videos on which users can consume edgy content or fake news “undisturbed” and without undue “editorial interference” from critical journalists. They tap into the childish fantasies of omnipotence and princesses of insecure young people who react to multiple crises with powerlessness, sometimes with internal and external aggression. On TikTok, Instagram and so on they hitch their anti-gender wagon to the train of trendy and youthful formats, for example, the glorification of backward-looking lifestyles using cooking, cleaning and fashion videos in the contributions of so-called tradwives or life coaching for men to enable them to regain their alpha status in relation to the “weaker sex”. Their own charisma, powered by femininity, success and attractiveness, on one hand, and compelling radical rhetoric on the other, give them a starring role in the media circus of promotional short videos.

Especially on TikTok, currently perhaps the key platform for younger people, it is now important going forward to achieve hegemony in the democratic discourse on gender issues. Culture wars over feminist demands always have a strong generational and socio-economic dimension, taking in also the urban-rural divide. One task of feminism and gender politics must be to engage in democratic negotiations in each of these dimensions, while at the same time strengthening alliances based on the smallest common denominator. Improvements in the law to foster gender-equitable living and working environments and a decent immigration policy based on the International Bill of Human Rights can indeed bridge and/or prevent divisions in society. The financial and political downgrading of civil society actors and political education in the fight against right-wing extremism, as is currently being discussed and in some cases already practised by the democratic parties in the German Bundestag, could have fatal consequences.

For the benefit of future generations and at the level of political communication, the messages of progressive parties must be disseminated better and faster in order to reach younger women (with and without a migration background) in particular with a view to reinforcing solidarity. Strengthened by media and political efforts to establish comprehensive equality, socio-economic opportunities, parity in parliament and implementation of the Istanbul Convention, they may turn out to be the most important supporters of European democracies in the future.

## Protecting the independent press and critical journalism

It is also vital to ensure pluralism in independent media outlets. France is a good example of how a high concentration of media ownership in the hands of a few industrialists can pave the way for the creeping spread of right-wing extremist ideas in numerous media outlets. France is unique in that 90 per cent of national daily

newspapers and all private TV stations are now owned by only seven large industrial and financial companies, which are not primarily interested in the media sector. The case of Vincent Bolloré, an industrialist who became a media mogul within a period of fifteen years, is a particular cause for concern. He makes no bones about the fact that he would like to impose a far-right ideological agenda on his editorial teams. For example, in the 2022 presidential elections he used his 24-hour news channel CNews to promote the candidacy of far-right political commentator Eric Zemmour, who has been convicted several times of inciting racial hatred. Numerous legal campaigns have also been instigated against journalists over the past few years. Businessmen, first and foremost Vincent Bolloré, have launched a cascade of lawsuits following the publication of investigations, forcing financially weak media outlets to pay high legal and court costs.<sup>108</sup> Another special feature of French media is that France has the most heavily state-subsidised press in Europe. The state spends more than 1 billion euros on direct and indirect subsidies. This system of press subsidies has long been criticised, among other things for its inefficiency, distortion of competition, opacity of award criteria and the resulting difficulties faced by new market entrants, not to mention the lack of support for innovation.

## Learning from one's mistakes: paths to progressive self-criticism

Progressive parties and the feminist movement need to undergo a certain self-criticism. Have they always paid sufficient attention to the concerns of the majority of women? The fact is that women voters are increasingly receptive to right-wing extremist discourse. At the Bundestag elections in 2025 the AfD managed to double its share of the women's vote from 8 to 17 per cent. The CDU obtained 27 per cent, while the SPD lost 9 per cent in comparison with 2021. It's still true that more men vote AfD than women, but

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<sup>108</sup> Cf. L'invasion migratoire, la destruction de l'école et les folies wokistes ne laissent derrière elles qu'un champ der Ruines. Le discours d'Eric Zemmour à Budapest, video. Available at: <https://www.cnews.fr/monde/2025-03-10/linvasion-migratoire-la-destruction-de-lecole-et-les-folies-wokistes-ne-laissent>

this gap could soon be closed. Of particular cause for concern is the political polarisation of people under 24 years of age, among whom women vote left, while the men go for the AfD.

Opinion surveys have shown that half of French women regard Marine Le Pen as a feminist, and also that sexism is not a priority concern for most voters, but rather affordability. This standpoint is also discernible in the closure of the radical right-wing gender gap. Many women are employed in the service and care sectors and find it difficult to make ends meet financially and socially and thus are less likely to entertain what some have called “luxury beliefs”. This point was addressed six years ago in a manifesto entitled *Feminism for the 99%*, in which three professors – Tithi Bhattacharya, Nancy Fraser and Cinzia Arruzza – called for equal living and working conditions for all women, not just for a few well educated career women.<sup>109</sup>

It may well be that media reporting and the resulting distortion of certain feminist demands (such as inclusive speech) have nurtured a feeling in many women that their problems are not seen or recognised.<sup>110</sup> Progressive parties should put more emphasis on social and distributional issues (equal opportunities and educational equity, youth employment, low wages in the care sector) and above all promote and develop local youth employment. It is important to focus on the working middle (“*arbeitende Mitte*”) but that doesn’t go far enough. Taking a bird’s eye view, a narrative needs to be developed that does justice to everyday realities and poverty, based on a serious interest in worries about the future, and can convey a realistic prospect of real progress. Young people with a migration background and their broader reserves of cultural and post-migrant knowledge, not to mention in many cases their multilingualism, have the

potential to strengthen democratic societies. To that end, however, they need discrimination-free spaces and real opportunities. If political parties extend a hand – beyond declarations of intent and “quotas” – for them to participate in politics, across the board, they could enhance social cohesion and German and European economic development, as well as function as bridge-builders in countries throughout the world to strengthen democracy, both internally and externally. This requires regular self-criticism of structures, formal and informal habits and practices and even more far-reaching opening up of hierarchies.<sup>111</sup> A practicable and transparent procedure for rapid naturalisation in Germany, which after all is an immigration country, could help to bring home to right-wing extremists the extent to which the state and democracy are intrinsically bound to basic and human rights and thus women’s rights.

109 Cinzia Arruzza, Tithi Bhattacharya, Nancy Fraser, *Feminismus für die 99%*. Ein Manifest, 2nd edition. Berlin 2019.

110 Cf. on the 2025 Bundestag elections Catrina Schläger, Jan Niklas Engels and Nicole Loew, *Analyse der Bundestagswahl 2025. Eine harte Niederlage mit einer doppelten Herausforderung für die Sozialdemokratie*, Berlin 2025. Available at: <https://collections.fes.de/publikationen/ident/fes/21862>.

111 Concrete proposals have already been formulated in: Hanna Haag and Raj Kollmorgen, *Demokratie braucht Demokratinnen. Barrieren der politischen Kultur für Frauenkarrieren in Politik und Gewerkschaften – und Ansätze für ihre Veränderung*, edited by Stefanie Elies and Ursula Bitzegeio at the behest of the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, Bonn 2019. Available at: <https://collections.fes.de/publikationen/ident/fes/17072>.

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## Triumph of the Women? 08

Authors Cécile Calla and Ursula Bitzegeio develop a typology of female leadership styles in right-wing parties in France, Germany and Italy and analyse the political fallout from their anti-gender strategies. The short study puts forward ideas on how politics and civil society could tackle the rise of anti-feminism.

Since 2018 the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung's series "Triumph der Frauen?" has investigated how women have helped to shape the rise of right-wing movements, both as voters and actors. Country-specific case studies analyse what links them politically.

In focus here are the gender policy strategies of right-wing parties, their positioning in government or opposition, as well as anti-feminist ideologies, and the influence of female leaders.

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