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The backlash against green capitalism and the battle for Europe's future

Europe's failure to deliver a socially just green transition has exacerbated insecurity and created an environment conducive to far-right mobilisation. The backlash against climate policy, women's rights, LGBTQ+ communities, refugees and others is fuelled by fear and a rejection of neoliberal individualism. As global crises accumulate, progressive forces have struggled to address the root causes of this anxiety.

The rise of Kris Kärner is an example of this shift. A young Estonian far-right TikToker with a large online following, Kärner recently won a seat in local elections after posting videos in which he called for Social Democrats to be "put against the wall and shot with a pump gun" and declared that women should be excluded from politics. Kärner belongs to the conservative Isamaa party, which has long been a coalition partner of the Social Democrats. What was once dismissed as fringe online extremism has become a pathway to electoral influence in a major party. His success reflects broader European dynamics of austerity, social precarity and politics of fear. Far-right youth movements are proliferating across the continent, from Italy to Finland. In Latvia, the push to exit the Istanbul Convention shows how misogyny has become a symbolic vehicle for anti-liberal revolt.

Neoliberalism and fascism share an underlying worldview that defines human beings by competition and fear. Europe's faltering transition to green capitalism has reinforced this logic. By demanding individual sacrifice while protecting profits, it perpetuates the conditions that legitimise authoritarianism and incite backlash. Market-centred climate policies that emphasise personal responsibility suggest that survival is a private matter rather than a collective endeavour, which is precisely the narrative exploited by far-right movements.

Disinformation networks exacerbate this dynamic by denying climate science and fuelling resentment towards elites, feminists and migrants. The cost-of-living crisis, combined with widespread feelings of humiliation, has created a volatile political atmosphere. Radicalisation

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does not arise in a vacuum but thrives in the fractures of a broken social contract where resentment provides fertile ground for reactionary mobilisation.

Authoritarian movements exploit anxieties by promoting a sense of control. Under economic and social strain, rigid norms of masculinity transform fear into anger, which the far-right channels into misogyny, racism, anti-LGBTQ+ sentiment and opposition to climate action. Conservative concerns about same-sex adoption or the 'breakdown of traditional order' often reflect deeper insecurities about masculinity and an inability to navigate the structural pressures of neoliberal capitalism individually. When vulnerability is prohibited, and survival is framed as an individual task, fear can only manifest as aggression. These fear-driven conditions nurture authoritarian attitudes and a desire to punish difference. The convergence of anti-feminism and climate obstructionism is no coincidence, as both reject interdependence and a fear of weakness or losing control.

Research by Simone Cremaschi and his colleagues into Italian municipalities that have experienced significant cuts to public services shows that "public service deprivation fuels support for the radical right by generating grievances that align with rhetoric linking declining services to immigration".[1] When schools, hospitals or train lines close, people feel abandoned by the state. Such communities are significantly more likely to vote for parties such as Salvini's League or Meloni's Brothers of Italy. The lesson is clear: rebuilding and expanding public services is not just a matter of social policy; it is also a form of democratic self-defence. Robust public services are also essential for climate policy. Restoring the visible presence of the state in daily life can undermine the narratives of abandonment that fuel exclusionary politics.

The far right appeals to emotions of belonging. However, young progressive leaders. such as Zohran Mamdani in New York, Magid Magid in the UK and Sumaya Kassim in Germany, have demonstrated that authenticity, humour and digital proficiency can galvanise disenchanted audiences without compromising principles. You do not need to throw trans rights under the bus to appeal to the masses, but your main message must be formed around tangible changes to existing material conditions. Mamdani's campaign, rooted in tangible improvements to everyday life and collective action, offers a template for re-energising democratic politics in Europe.

The social democratic movement must cultivate such voices. Across Europe, many young people are ready to build a new synthesis of justice and hope.

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1   Cremaschi, S., P. Rettl, M. Cappelluti et al. (2024) «Geographies of discontent: Public service deprivation and the rise of the far right in Italy". Working paper no. 24-024. Harvard Business School, 1 November.