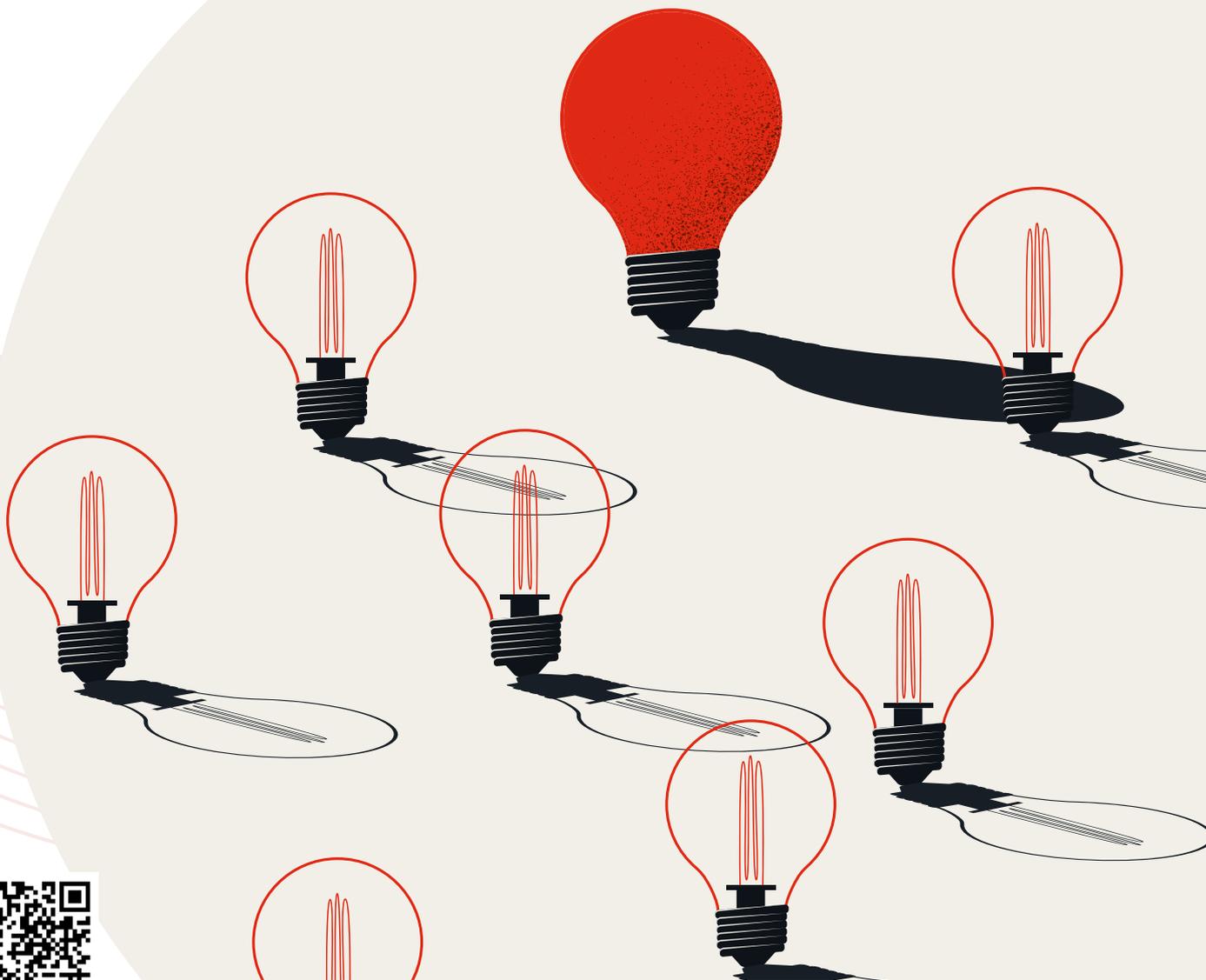# THERE MUST BE AN ALTERNATIVE
AGAINST MAINSTREAM DEFEATISM AND TOWARDS THE REJUVENATION OF THE DEMOCRATIC PUBLIC SPACE

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The rise of far-right politics is one of the major challenges of our times for progressive forces in Europe. While this resurgence is often discussed as almost inevitable, this policy study shows that there are alternatives and that they remain in our hands. Our argument challenges common assumptions regarding the processes of mainstreaming and normalisation, which generally centre on the far right's own actions and/or the people's demands for such politics.

Instead, we argue that the process finds its source in the mainstream itself and in a predominantly top-down manner. This means that mainstream elites, and progressive actors in particular, have a key role to play in countering this trend.

Accordingly, we put forward seven key recommendations to mainstream elites, which must be adhered to if the rise of the far right is to be halted:

1. Progressive elites, from parties to intellectuals and the media must take responsibility and lead on progressive issues rather than place the blame on a reactionary construction of "the people"

Having privileged access to shaping public discourse means that elites are best placed to shift attention away from far-right issues and onto matters that would benefit the left, as well as social justice.

This requires an uncompromising rejection of far-right politics, both in formal settings, such as coalitions and during elections, and in wider public discourse.

This also requires radical (social) media reform, as these are key to the process of mediation: there can be no democracy without a healthy media eco-system, and here again, progressive

forces should use the powers available to them to shift the balance.

2. The left cannot allow the far right to dictate what is common sense

Progressive forces must not only reject the far right's understanding, but promote a convincing alternative based on radical intersectionality, where communities are not pitted against each other but instead are included in a community of equals based on inalienable rights.

3. Terminological precision is a precondition for any successful strategy

Progressive actors must prevent the far right from hiding behind euphemising labels such as "populist", which they themselves advocate for. Euphemisation is one of the key paths to normalisation. Instead, when they apply, they must turn to more precise, but also more stigmatising, terms such as "racist" and "far/extreme right" or even "fascist".

4. Embrace populism and accept polarisation

There is no progressive alternative without constructing and energising a people. There can be no progressive alternative without acknowledging the increasingly elitist nature of our democracies and the damage this has caused. Populism – when understood in its more emancipatory manner as a way of building a diverse coalition of marginalised groups – is, therefore, a weapon for progressive forces rather than its enemy.

Similarly, as the far right becomes increasingly normalised and accesses power, progressive actors need to accept that polarisation is unavoidable. This means that we must be bold

in constructing a future that involves everyone and, therefore, uncompromisingly reject the reactionary politics of the far right in all its guises.

5. Public opinion is constructed and predominantly shaped in a top-down manner

Politicians are agenda setters, not people followers, and arguing otherwise is not simply counterfactual but a dereliction of duty. Opinion polls cannot lead politics, as politics plays a key role in shaping polls. Politicians and the wider mainstream elite cannot displace the responsibility for their actions and choices onto "the people" by using opinion polls as justification without accounting for their role in shaping the agenda and public discourse.

6. Don't panic

Moral panics have not only been core to the resurgence of far-right politics, but they have also helped splinter progressive forces by pitting our communities against each other. In a media environment prone to them, progressive forces must refrain from fighting the far right on its own turf and, again, remain uncompromising in their opposition to far-right politics and division.

7. Radical intersectionality

Progressive resistance against the far right must be uncompromising and, as such, must be radically intersectional. Some communities cannot be sacrificed to appease the far right and all must be protected. An injury to one is an injury to all.

INTRODUCTION

The mainstreaming of far-right politics – how far-right politics has become increasingly accepted in public discourse – has become the focus of much discussion in recent years. This is hardly surprising considering the resurgence of far-right parties and politics, once thought to be consigned to the dustbin of history. As it has become clear that the resurgence of the far right is a pressing reality, attention has turned to elections and parties, focusing predominantly on the actions and results of far-right parties themselves.

This approach is appealing, as it provides a seemingly easy way to measure the progression of the far right through its electoral fortunes. Yet it ignores key factors, such as the role played by mainstream actors in mainstreaming far-right ideas. This policy study aims to uncover the role played by mainstream actors in the mainstreaming process and offer alternative strategies to bolster progressive politics.

To understand the role played by mainstream elites (such as politicians and the media), we must take a critical approach to the construction of what is considered mainstream at any given time. To do so, two elements must be kept in mind: (1) both the mainstream and the extreme are contingent and fluid and, as such, are mutually constructed; (2) the mainstream is not essentially good or progressive and, therefore, cannot be uncritically assumed to act as a bulwark against the far right, as we discuss later.

These considerations are not abstract academic musings: they should be central to any progressive strategy that seeks to counter the resurgence of the far right. As we witness the resurgence of racism and other forms of exclusion in their crudest and most extreme form, the rise of authoritarianism; flagrant violations of international law in Palestine,

Iran, Lebanon and Ukraine; and the breakdown of the international order, a passive acceptance of the status quo is not an option.

Only through an uncompromising rejection of the current mainstream, hegemonic defeatism – the widespread view amongst mainstream actors that the rise of the far right is unstoppable – can the tide be turned. The rise of the far right and the resurgence of fascism are not inevitable, much like they were not in the 1930s, but countering the trend requires a radical re-evaluation of the state of play.

We explore this by, first, centring the role of the mainstream elite in the process of mainstreaming. We then turn our attention to the construction of a far-right common sense and the need to oppose it with a progressive version. This means avoiding common pitfalls: we must reject negative, reactionary constructions of "the people" and unashamedly embrace emancipatory, intersectional constructions instead. Similarly, we must accept that in times of polycrisis and fascist resurgence, polarisation is inevitable. Finally, we look to the role of moral panics in the resurgence of the far right and the need for a radically intersectional approach to counter them.

Note on methodology and terminology

This policy study builds on our research on the mainstreaming of far-right politics to date. As such, it draws on our study of elite discourse (corpus linguistics, critical discourse studies and discourse-theoretical analysis), but also on opinion poll analysis and media studies. It relies predominantly on the corpora we have built over the years as well as on our most current research.[1] In a field that is too often siloed, we take a holistic approach to research on the far right and explore its mainstreaming

through a mix of empirical data (including discursive elements, electoral results and opinion polls), history and theory.

Our focus on discursive formations as being key to the wider public understanding of politics means that this policy study seeks to unsettle unhelpful frameworks which have prevented us from imagining different futures. This means that readers may find the use of terms challenging.

Core to our policy study is mainstreaming, which we define as "the process by which parties/actors, discourses and/or attitudes move from marginal positions on the political spectrum or public sphere to more central ones, shifting what is deemed to be acceptable or legitimate in political, media and public circles and contexts".[2] This definition builds on and echoes the work taking place on normalisation, which encompasses "the incorporation of fringe ideologies into the mainstream – not only of politics but of popular culture and other fields as well – through recontextualisations and resemiotizations, usually moving from backstage to frontstage and across fields as well as genres".[3] While more work is being done on fleshing out whether distinguishing them is useful,[4] we argue that mainstreaming and normalisation work in symbiosis, whereby normalisation is the result of the mainstreaming of far-right discourse.

Our policy study also centres on the role of the mainstream elite, a term that has gained particular negative connotations because of conspiracy theories. However, we argue that, if delineated clearly, it is useful to understand the current state of play. In this policy study, by (symbolic) elites,[5] we mean those with privileged access to shaping public discourse, policy and politics (generally politicians, the media and – to a lesser extent – academics). This does not mean that the elite speak with one coordinated voice, defend one particular project

or all have the same power, but that they do have varying degrees of power to impact how our wider understanding of society is constructed. They, therefore, influence which alternatives and horizons are offered to us as *demos*.

Another key term in this policy study – hegemonic – finds its source in Antonio Gramsci's theory, which explains how a ruling class dominates not only through coercion but also through consent via control of popular and high culture and intellectual and civil society.[6] *Hegemonic* hereby connotes the dominant view of a ruling group, which is widely accepted as "common sense".[7] Crucially, hegemony is never absolute, even though it can seem as though there is no other way or possibility. Rather, it is a temporary formation subject to challenges and contestations, particularly during times of crisis.[8]

We also include our research on populist and polarisation hype to demonstrate how the mainstream use of these terms has obscured our ability to both understand and counter the resurgence of far-right politics. In this policy study, we challenge understandings of populism that link it primarily to the far right (even at times using it as the main descriptor) and instead build on literature which argues that it refers to the construction of a people versus an elite/establishment, something we believe has always been key to emancipatory struggles and progressive politics. In other words, populism – when understood in its more emancipatory manner as a way of building a diverse coalition of marginalised groups – is, therefore, a weapon for progressive forces rather than its enemy. Similarly, we challenge mainstream narratives around polarisation, which suggest that the two "poles" are equally problematic and the solution is to be found in a reasonable centre. These typical narratives again reinforce the status quo, rather than pushing progressive alternatives and demanding better.

1. NO MAINSTREAMING WITHOUT THE MAINSTREAM ELITE

It is commonly believed or argued that the reason behind the resurgence of far-right politics is to be found either in the savvy strategy of the far right itself or in the grievances of "the people". This explanation is then used to justify the rightward move of mainstream elites, including those positioned on the left. We argue that this is not only an inaccurate starting point but a counterproductive one. If we take the hegemonic construction of the mainstream and power imbalances seriously, then, rather than being the powerless or protective actors painted in much of the coverage on the rise of the far right, mainstream public elites have a key role to play in which ideas become mainstream or not. These "symbolic elites"[9] play a crucial role in shaping the agenda, even if they often claim to be following "the people". Indeed, the resurgence and mainstreaming of the far right has often been blamed on the "working class" or "left behind".[10] So the story goes, the mainstream elite has no choice but to move rightward if it is to respond to the demands of "the people" (often described, conveniently, as a "silent majority", something we return to when discussing moral panics). As we demonstrate here, this assessment is not only inaccurate but prevents us from exploring popular and progressive alternatives, with the far right portrayed as the only democratic alternative. Therefore, we argue that any progressive strategy must start with a recalibration that situates power with the powerful.

1.1 The irresistible rise of the far right or a convenient diversion away from the crisis of democracy?

In the mid-2010s, the far right created countless "shocks", "earthquakes" or "breakthroughs". The 2014 EU elections were particularly symbolic, with the "triumph" of the *Front National* (FN; now *Rassemblement National* [RN]) in France, the Danish People's Party (DF) in Denmark and UKIP in the UK. These victories set in motion the rise of Marine Le Pen, who had just become leader of what she now claimed was the "leading party in France", a decisive turn towards anti-immigration in Denmark and the wheels of the 2016 EU referendum in the UK.

Figure 1. Results of the European Parliament elections (as a percentage of the total votes cast)
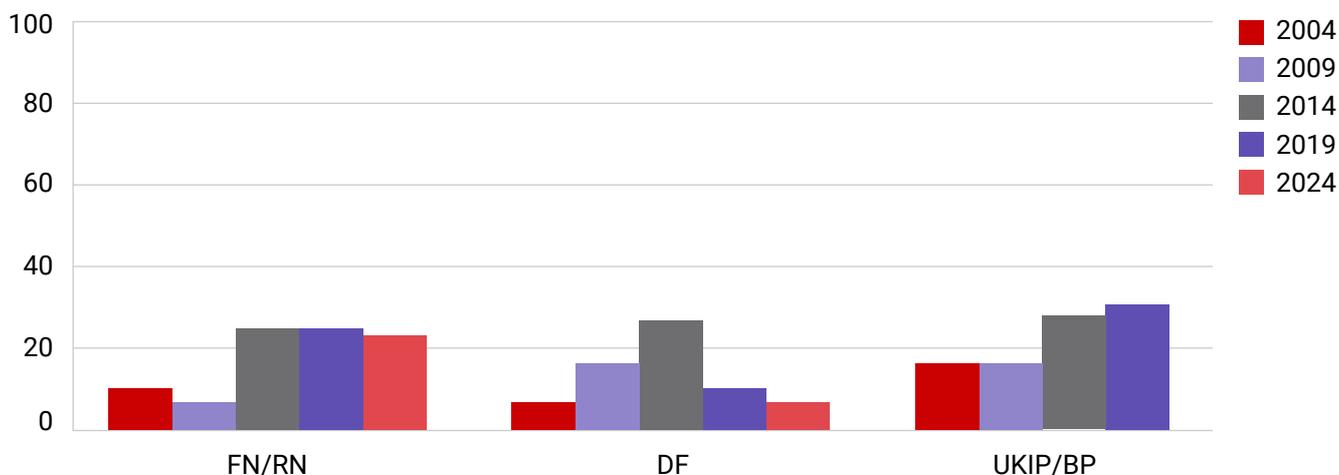
Source: European Parliament.

While the rise of these parties seemed unstoppable at first (Figure 1) – and was discussed as such across mainstream media and politics – the commentary ignored wider trends around voter turnout that nuanced or even negated the panic around the rise of the far right. When accounting for all of those who could have voted, it was clear that, while there was a rise, support for the far right – in the particularly fertile electoral setting of second-order elections – remained limited (Figure 2). While any rise in the far right's popularity is extremely concerning, accounting for turnout makes it clear that, even after they had become fully mainstreamed, through the victory of the Brexit vote and Marine Le Pen reaching the second round of the presidential election, the Brexit Party (BP; UKIP's successor) and RN only energised just over 10% of the whole electorate. We can hardly speak, therefore, about the "widespread popularity" of far-right parties.

Rather than focus attention on the purely electoral fortunes of the far right, we need to consider the wider picture, as demonstrated by the collapse of DF. While this could be seen as positive, it followed the embrace of drastic immigration policies from the centre left.[10] As a result, far-right *ideas* won, even if they were not implemented by far-right *actors*. This further demonstrates the key role of the mainstream in normalising far-right policy positions and the need to look beyond elections: an electoral defeat for the far right may not be an ideological victory. In fact, this is precisely what Marine Le Pen, then her father's campaign director, said after his defeat in 2007, as Nicolas Sarkozy syphoned his voters by mimicking his discourse.[12]

Figure 2. Results of the European Parliament elections (as a percentage of registered voters).
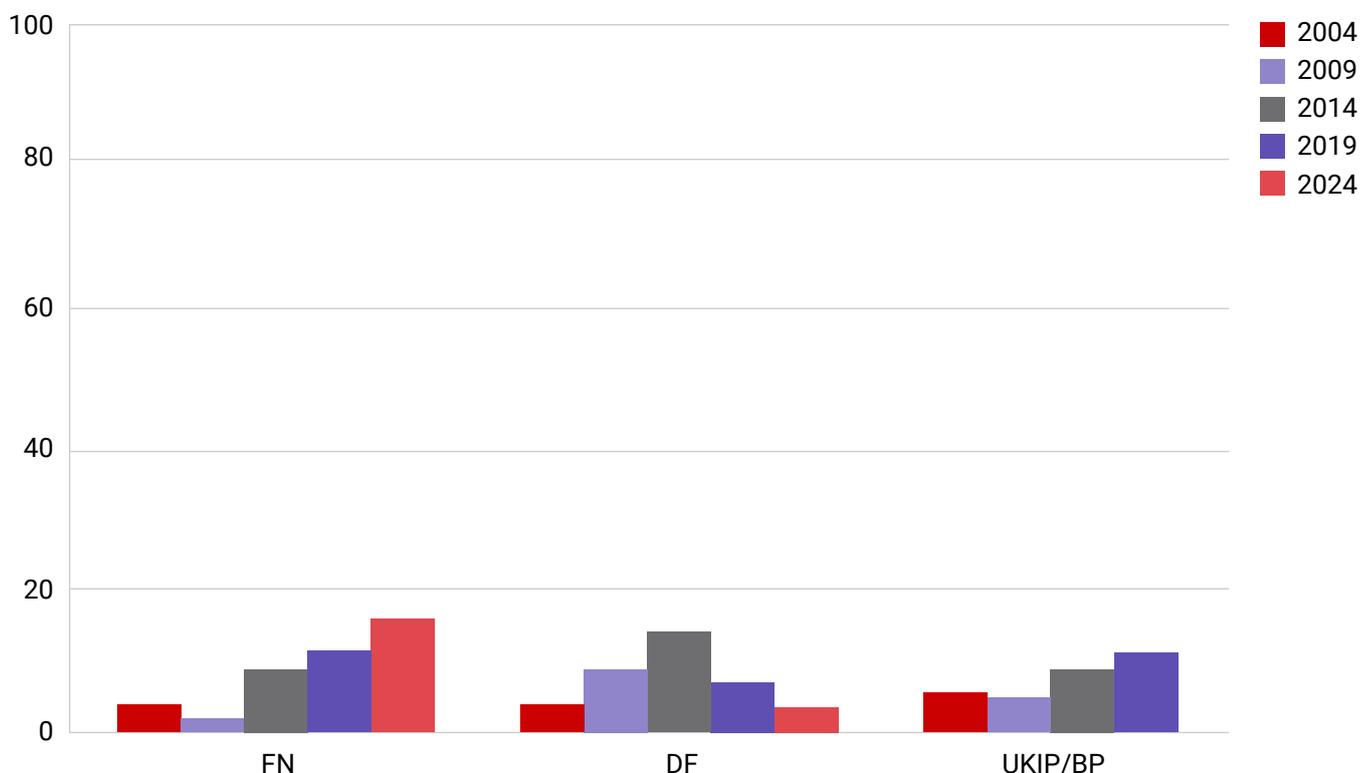
Source: European Parliament.

Another aspect that is frequently missing or minimised in commentary is that far-right gains often emerge from mainstream failures rather than far-right successes. Broader trends pointing to widespread disaffection and discontentment towards mainstream politics had already been ignored in France in 2002, when Jean-Marie Le Pen reached the second round of the presidential election.[13] Across the spectrum, politicians and media outlets urged people to vote for right-wing Jacques Chirac "For the Republic's Sake" (*Libération*, 4 May 2002); "for France, for the Republic, for Democracy" (*L'Express,* 25 April 2002); or for "the Republic being re-elected" (*Le Monde*, 2 May 2002). All but one of the candidates defeated in the first round called on their voters to vote for the deeply unpopular incumbent embroiled in various corruption scandals.[14] French voters turned up in droves, first on the streets to demonstrate against Le Pen and then for the second round, many with gloves or pegs on their noses, to vote for Chirac. He received more than 82% of the vote, two weeks after receiving the lowest registered vote in the first round for a future president.[15]

Yet, as demonstrated by Table 1, it was not Le Pen's performance in and of itself that sent him to the second round. Despite a context and media coverage conducive to his ideas,[16] the vote for the FN candidate had been stagnating since 1988. Although it increased by 2.5% between 1988 and 2002, when turnout was taken into account, it rose only by 0.19%, or fewer than 500,000 votes in a growing electorate. This is certainly not negligible but far from the announced "tidal wave".

Table 1. Presidential elections results (first round only).

	1988	**1995**	**2002**
Votes	4,376,742	4,571,138	4,804,713
Vote share (%)	14.38	15	16.86
Registered vote (%)	11.47	11.42	11.66
Rank	4	4	2
Abstention (%)	18.62	21.62	28.4

Source: Constitutional Council.
Mondon, A. (2025)

Instead, it was the growing unpopularity of the major governing parties that paved the way for the so-called "earthquake": the major centrist (Union for French Democracy [UDF]), centre-right (Rally for the Republic [RPR]) and centre-left (*Parti Socialiste* [PS]) parties together received fewer votes than the abstention rate. What should have been at the core of the analysis is that no candidate other than Chirac could persuade more than 11.66% of registered voters to endorse them. The story was not a surge in support for the far right but widespread disillusionment towards the mainstream parties.

The events of 2016 provided another missed opportunity to understand the rise of the far right as part of a wider crisis of democracy. Instead, the Brexit vote and the victory of Donald Trump sedimented another myth: the revolt of the "working class" or "left behind". This is despite data making it clear that, far from originating from the left behind, both votes came predominantly from the wealthier sections of the population, particularly once turnout is taken into account. [17]

This is something we have witnessed in many different contexts, with the rise of the far right being dubiously accredited to the "working class" in France,[18] Spain[19] and Hungary.[20] Often, there has also been a misconception not only of what the working-class vote is, but its historic trajectory. Indeed, research has shown that since the Second World War in countries like France or the UK, up to a third of the working class has voted for the right, broadly speaking.[21] This means it is not a new phenomenon, nor is it surprising considering the diversity of the working class. The 2014 EU elections are again particularly illustrative here. After its "triumph", the FN developed its narrative around estimates which suggested that a third of working-class voters had voted for them. This was misleading considering that working-class voters are far more likely to abstain than others. Indeed, when accounting for abstention, while Le Pen did get around a third of those who voted, estimates are closer to a tenth if we include all working-class voters, the majority of whom abstained. Of course, we cannot be sure of what those who do not vote would do if they did, but the point is they did not vote and this should be respected as a democratic option.[22] Crucially, it should not have led to the left giving up on the working class.

From a purely electoral point of view, the focus on the far right that became predominant in the 2010s made little sense, as their level of support remained marginal, both at the ballot box and in opinion polls. Those truly "left behind" – the working class in all its evolving diversity – had either switched off altogether or made up part of the vast majorities who continued to oppose the far right, while suffering through the politics of austerity.[23] This is confirmed by recent polling from the UK, which makes it clear that, when offered an alternative, young working-class people can become energised as a core constituency of progressive parties, something we have also witnessed with the left in France.[24] The construction of the far-right "left behind" was thus done in a top-down manner, whether consciously or not, and was key to the process of mainstreaming.

Therefore, our key contention in this policy study, which underpins all our recommendations, is the following:

> The mainstreaming of far-right politics is predominantly a top-down process that is rooted in the actions (and discourse) of symbolic elites rather than in a bottom-up process originating from "the people" (something discussed at more length throughout this policy study). This is not to say that citizens have no agency but that their political activity is shaped and constrained in important ways by elites.

In other words, without the active participation of the mainstream elite, there could have been no successful mainstreaming of far-right politics. This can be taken as personal criticism and brushed aside, as has too often been the case, or it can be taken as a positive opportunity to take the threat of far-right politics seriously and start countering it decisively.

1.2 Fake news: The process of mediation and the symbiotic relationship between the media and politics

The format and focus of this policy study does not allow us to go into great depth on the role of the

media in the mainstreaming of far-right politics. However, we want to highlight some key elements that are intricately linked with the role of political actors and parties.

Social media has often been blamed for the resurgence of far-right politics. There is no doubt that it has allowed the construction of communities and the spread of viral misinformation, particularly in the age of reactionary tech.[25] In particular, the often "vague [regulatory] policies and the algorithmic clustering of social media content and groups" can facilitate a disproportionate amplification of far-right ideas, which contributes to a further blurring of the boundaries between the extreme and the mainstream.[26] Yet a significant caveat is necessary here: social media should not be used to distract or deflect from the role that the traditional/legacy media has played in the mainstreaming of the far right. This was made clear at Donald Trump's 2025 inauguration, where both reactionary tech barons and the owners of large traditional media corporations bent the knee, or through the loss-making investments in the traditional media made by reactionary billionaires across Europe.

As we have already made clear, we cannot understand the resurgence and mainstreaming of far-right politics simply through the actions of politicians and parties. Core to the top-down nature of mainstreaming is the active role of symbolic elites in the mediation of information and political discourse. Mediation can be understood as "the fundamentally, but unevenly, dialectical process in which institutionalized media of communication […] are involved in the general circulation of symbols in social life".[27] This does not mean that symbolic elites tell us what to think, but they can have a significant impact on what we think *about*, something which is commonly known as agenda-setting.[28] Our research[29] has shown that mainstreaming in the media takes place through several frames:

1. exceptionalisation, which creates the impression of a tight border between the far right and the mainstream and, thus, exempts the latter from any responsibility;

2. amplification, which gives space to far-right actors on high-profile media platforms, often under the pretence of free speech or debate; and

3. deflection, where symbolic elites move attention away from their own power to shape public discourse, shirking their responsibility to counter the far right.

While our policy study is focused on what progressive political actors can do to counter the resurgence and mainstreaming of far-right politics, this must be done as part of a wider strategy, which involves the media as an essential democratic actor, whose role is to help citizens not only understand the world around them but prioritise which issues are most salient. This is something progressive actors must take into account at a time when ownership of the media is increasingly concentrated and shifting the agenda onto our turf is therefore more difficult.

1.3 Bulwark, firewall or enabler? The role of the mainstream elite in the resurgence of the far right

Challenging the role of mainstream elites in the process of mainstreaming is difficult because, for most of the postwar period, they positioned themselves as the guarantors of a new world order, which had defeated and discarded fascism for good. This could be witnessed in the various forms of *cordons sanitaires* put in place to prevent the resurgence of far-right parties. Whether under the name of *Brandmauer* (firewall) in Germany or *Front Républicain* (Republican front) in France, mainstream parties from the left to the right would ally against threats from the far right, stating their opposition and refusal to collaborate with them publicly in no uncertain terms.[30] However, beyond the lack of formal collaboration and self-aggrandising statements, a careful analysis of *cordon sanitaire* strategies demonstrates that systemic forms of oppression remained active and that mainstreaming occurred nonetheless.

Drawing on case studies from France, Germany and the UK, research has shown "how claims of formal

non-collaboration can mask shared discourses and policies between the mainstream and far right, undermining the premise that the mainstream and cordon sanitaire necessarily protect against exclusionary politics".[31] Even as formal collaboration has remained beyond the pale in many contexts, we have witnessed strategies of absorption or appeasement, whereby mainstream parties try to counter the rise of the far right by adopting its discourse. This has led to an increased focus on issues central to far-right politics, such as immigration and law and order. While we demonstrate in the following sections that, contrary to what some politicians claim – either out of ignorance or, more cynically, for short-term political gain – these are not popular grievances. Suffice it to say here that strategies of absorption, accommodation and appeasement have failed across Europe. Research in recent years has convincingly shown that mainstream elites (and politicians in particular) who appease or mimic the far right only help it grow stronger, even when this strategy seems to work in the short term.[32] Returning to the post-2002 "earthquake" in France, the victory of Nicolas Sarkozy in 2007 was a pyrrhic one. While Sarkozy did manage to reclaim many of the FN's voters, this was at the cost of mainstreaming much of their discourse and ideas without addressing underlying concerns. It was telling that on the night of Jean-Marie Le Pen's seemingly convincing defeat, Marine Le Pen, his campaign director, declared that this marked "the victory of their ideas".

The German example shows that these shifts are not inevitable. For years, Angela Merkel took an approach to immigration that clashed with the *Alternative für Deutschland* (AfD), particularly in the wake of the "refugee crisis" in 2016 when she opened the borders to more than a million people fleeing persecution. In a discursive context that was already deeply skewed against immigration,[33] Merkel managed to weather the storm and regained popularity once the crisis abated. Her approach contrasts with that of her successor, Friedrich Merz, who has decided instead to move to the right and fight the AfD on its turf, fuelling his loss of popularity and, more importantly, mainstreaming the far right.[34] As far-right discourse has been mainstreamed and the centre has moved right, the AfD has become increasingly emboldened,

as demonstrated by the extremism of its proposed manifesto for the 2026 Saxony-Anhalt state election, for which polls suggest the AfD is going to become the biggest party by a wide margin.[35]

A similar pattern was witnessed in Hungary in the 2022 parliamentary election. What seemed like a desperate attempt at defeating Viktor Orbán's increasingly authoritarian grip on politics and civil society saw an unholy alliance made between parties from the Greens and the Socialists to former extreme-right Jobbik to counter "democratic backsliding".[36] Unsurprisingly, this anything-but-Orbán ticket did not convince voters, particularly in such a tightly controlled environment, and the coalition was soundly defeated, preventing a real, clear alternative to Orbán from arising. This has not only cemented Orbán's grip on power but also naturalised his politics more widely, as demonstrated by the rise of Péter Magyar. While more moderate in some respects, particularly in his positions with respect to European institutions and the rule of law, he nonetheless espouses several similar reactionary stances, for example on migration, and yet appears best placed to dethrone Orbán in 2026. That being said, this does not diminish the very real challenges opposition parties face when competing against parties and leaders who have shaped the system in their favour over decades, often preserving some type of a democratic label (illiberal democracy), while eroding its substance. Most recently, the various attempts by the EU or member states to placate Donald Trump's increasingly authoritarian leadership have demonstrated that giving ground only leads to more demands from reactionary leaders.

This brings us to a wider, more uncomfortable myth about the resurgence of far-right politics: the belief that a clear border exists between the far right and mainstream. The narrative built in the aftermath of the Second World War portrayed the Allies, and liberalism in particular, as having triumphed over "Evil".[37] This created the impression that liberalism and liberal institutions stood naturally in opposition to far-right politics and would therefore act as a bulwark should these ever resurge. This ignored the much messier history of *really existing liberalism,*[38]

the ambivalence of much of the liberal elite towards fascism in the 1920s and 30s and the role liberalism, in its colonial iteration, had played in normalising forms of exclusion and even extermination. While the process of reconstruction and the aftermath of the Holocaust make the establishing of this myth understandable, it has left us poorly prepared to handle the resurgence of far-right politics.

The failure to convincingly deal with the past and with systemic forms of oppression, such as racism, has facilitated the return of more sophisticated forms of far-right politics. These have often been couched in liberal ideals such as free speech,[39] secularism (*laïcité*),[40] women's or LGBTQIA+ rights,[41] or the value of different cultures. [42] As the far right hijacked these hegemonic concepts for their own exclusionary purposes, there has been a tendency to believe that the mainstream liberal elite, political systems and institutions consolidated after the Second World War would protect us from its rise. Even as we are now in a situation where the far right is in power in some places, "there is still no appetite to face the possibility that really existing liberalism has been a more or less active enabler rather than a bulwark". [43]

In contrast, we have witnessed that uncompromising opposition to the far right and demands for radical change can lead not only to increased popularity, but perhaps most importantly, to change what seems politically possible. This could be witnessed in the resurgence of left-wing populist movements in the early 2010s, and *SYRIZA* and *Podemos* in particular.[44] While these proved short-lived and only offered limited change in a difficult context,[45] they showed, nonetheless, a clear appetite for politics that aimed to challenge the status quo. In Spain, the longer-term success of Pedro Sanchez's government and its strong positioning on some key issues from feminism to anti-racism and Palestine demonstrate the desire from significant parts of the electorate for radically progressive politics.

The same could be said about the resurgence of the left in France. The strong performance of *LFI* in the 2022 presidential election not only gave way to a new coalition, the *Nouveau Front populaire*, able to defeat the far right in 2024, but heralded a shift towards more radical inclusionary politics through the concept of *créolisation*: the "integration of languages, values, and imaginaries in a way that fosters fluid identities open to diversity".[46] This move was a real gamble in France, considering the grip of reactionary conceptions of the Republic and *laïcité*.[47] This was successful in bringing communities out of abstention, many of whom had been abandoned by mainstream parties in favour of chasing the far-right vote. This success is now threatened by the divisive leadership of Jean-Luc Mélenchon and the exaggerated response to it, which has led to *LFI* being classified as "extreme left". Similarly, the UK has witnessed the unexpected resurgence of the Greens under the radical leadership of Zack Polanski, who has taken bold positions on key left-wing issues, while pushing uncompromisingly against the agenda of the far right. The UK shows starkly how trying to capture a small far-right vote can backfire – Labour's recent approach has created substantial self-inflicted problems rather than electoral gains, as demonstrated by the by-election in Gorton and Denton, which saw the Greens triumph.

Even when these more radical projects were not successful in the long term, they shifted attention away from far-right politics and towards more positive and progressive alternatives. Creating this space and sustaining it is essential if we are to defeat far-right politics rather than see these parties rise or their ideas become increasingly mainstream. It is here that those with privileged access to shaping public discourse have a particular responsibility.

Understanding the process of mainstreaming beyond the actions of the far right and predominantly as a top-down process driven by the mainstream elite is essential if we are to counter it and offer viable alternatives to its politics of exclusion.

In practice:

- the left must, therefore, take responsibility and lead on progressive issues rather than blame a reactionary construction of "the people";

- politicians' privileged access to shaping public discourse means that they are best placed to shift attention away from far-right issues and onto matters that would benefit the left, as well as social justice; and

- this requires an uncompromising rejection of far-right politics, both in formal settings, such as coalitions, and in discourse.

Ignoring this would lead to the perpetuation of current strategies, which have only led to its further legitimisation and strength, something we discuss at more length in the following sections.

2. RECLAIMING COMMON SENSE AGAINST THE FAR RIGHT'S ELITISM

The previous section challenged the widespread assumption that to combat the far right the mainstream must fight it on its own turf and absorb its reactionary ideas. Building on these arguments, we now turn our attention to a feature of political discourse that risks becoming part of a shared identity of the far right and the mainstream: common sense.

2.1 It's not "just common sense"

Politicians from all sides often claim that their politics is "common sense".[48] This gives the impression that their ideas and policies are not ideological or political, but rather that they emerged from and align with a deeper, more grounded human nature. This, in turn, suggests that they are aligned with the demands of "the people" (or the "common" man). "Common sense" is, ostensibly, easily accessible, taken-for-granted knowledge shared by all "rational" human beings and is often depicted as a way of bypassing "expertise".

After all, we all rely on our "common sense" daily to make and/or justify simple and seemingly rational choices. Indeed, "referring to common sense implies that a specific community is being addressed that allegedly shares the same norms, values, and judgement".[49] But what we take for granted as "common sense", in politics in particular, is in fact historically and socially contingent. In other words, it is constantly being reshaped in line with social and political norms. Despite its veneer of self-evident and accessible "plain wisdom", common sense is incoherent, contradictory and often skewed towards conservative, or even reactionary, thinking.[50] This is because it contains a blend of assertions and assumptions that find their strength in constructed traditions and norms: what (we think) we have always known deep down. Think, for instance, of "common sense" constructions of the "family". For a

long time, it was "common sense" that a family could only be composed of two members of the opposite sex with (usually two) children.[51] Eventually, such strongly sedimented "common sense" assumptions gave way to new ones where single and LGBTQIA+ parents could be included, alongside couples without children. What is common sense for some may not be for others, making it clear that any use of the term in political discourse is couched in ideology. Common sense is an active battleground of political conflict, formed, disputed and transformed through what people (including politicians) say and do. The appeal of common sense narratives also dovetails with the apparent charm of nostalgia, that is, "harking back to the good old days"[52] during times of crisis. This is the idea that when we feel powerless, fed up and disillusioned, we end up telling ourselves a comforting story, that we can go back to the way things used to be and somehow feel hopeful about the future again.[53]

This means that in our current context, "common sense" is a particularly valuable ideological resource for the far right. The incoherence, contradictions and conservative nature embedded in common sense, as well as its appeals to nostalgia, have helped to normalise the existence and entrenchment of hierarchies and privileges as natural.

2.2 Far-right common sense

The past decades have witnessed an increase in far-right politicians claiming to be torchbearers for "common sense".[54] This often takes the form of a "politics of fear", which posits "the other" as naturally "dangerous and a threat to 'us' and 'our nation'".[55] This hijacking of common sense is part of carefully crafted transnational strategies developed by far-right intellectuals since the 1970s.[56] Such strategies meant, for example, abandoning the biologically based racism of the past and embracing

"metapolitics": the struggle in civil society regarding dominant attitudes, beliefs or worldviews. This borrowed from the Italian Communist philosopher Antonio Gramsci's theory of cultural hegemony, which focused on winning the hearts and minds of the masses and key elites. A key part of this "Gramscism of the Right"[57] entailed making "racist rhetoric appear to be an extension of common-sense knowledge shared by many".[58] Common sense thus becomes a self-referential euphemism, which allows the normalisation and institutionalisation of racism in the public sphere.[59] This solidifies reactionary narratives surrounding race, gender, the "traditional family" and culture as rational and incontrovertible "fact", while also aligning such issues with a circumscribed iteration of "the people".[60]

The use of common sense in far-right meta-political activity can be witnessed through their use of social media, as exemplified by a large quantitative and qualitative study of 4,241 tweets in four countries (the UK, Italy, USA and France) from 2008 to 2022. This study searched for the use of specific keywords and hashtags such as "common sense", "#commonsense", "sensible" and "#sensible". This included 506 tweets from the UK, 610 tweets from France, 1,928 tweets from Italy and 238 tweets from the USA. Figure 3 illustrates the distribution of tweets containing "common sense" discourse across party families in all four countries.[61] Far-right parties (referred to as "nationalist and radical right parties" in the Comparative Manifesto Project) have been dominant in publishing "common sense" narratives since 2018. Often, this takes the shape of a strictly racialised and securitised notion of the nation-state and, in particular, "Great Replacement" narratives.

Figure 3. Number of "common-sense" tweets published on Twitter 2008-2022.
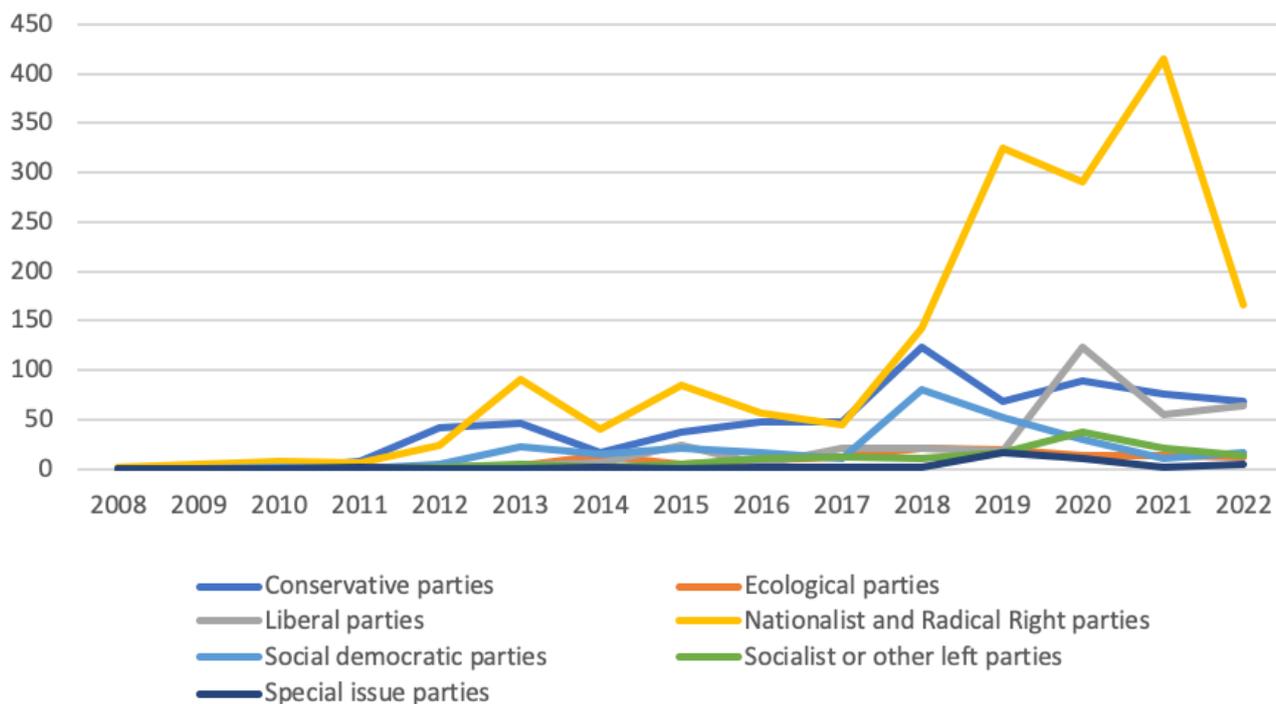
Source: Newth et al (2023)

The Italian case proves particularly interesting here, not least due to providing the most examples of common-sense discourse. In late 2017, when it became apparent that Italy was facing snap elections the following year, Matteo Salvini, leader of the far-right Lega party pledged a "common sense revolution".[62] This trope would become a central plank of his political campaign and has remained a key part of his positioning. Claiming to say out loud what "everyone was really thinking", Salvini's use of common sense was often combined with claims to "put Italians first", portraying nationalist, racist, homophobic and transphobic policies as "normal" and "popular". This strategy was a carbon copy of Jean-Marie Le Pen's in the late 20th century.

A more precise example is Salvini's framing of his flagship "security decree" as a form of "common sense" politics. This decree was posited as a way of "solving" the so-called "migrant crisis". It contained provisions that abolished humanitarian protection status for migrants, reduced barriers to stripping migrants of Italian citizenship, lengthened the naturalisation process, stopped asylum seekers [63] from accessing reception centres and introduced a fast-track expulsion system for "dangerous" asylum seekers. Salvini responded to criticisms of this decree by stating, "I want to save our country from the devastating project of invasion […] Where is the 'racism'? Where is the 'intolerance?' Where is the 'fascism'? To me it seems only common sense". Peddling the "Great Replacement" narrative, Salvini argued that "they are filling us with illegal immigrants who say they are escaping from war, but they are bringing war to our country. Asking for order is not fascism, but common sense". Furthermore, he argued that "according to recent polls, two out of three Italians support this. Are they all dangerous 'racists, populists, fascists, extremists'? No, it's just common sense".[64] This links to what we discuss in the following section regarding the specious use of polling data and the fact that paying attention to how questions are framed is essential in tackling "common sense" assertions of "following the people". A key element of Salvini's "common sense" strategy was downplaying the threat of fascism and arguing that calling for law and order or stronger borders is not fascistic: it's "common sense". While

Salvini's popularity has dwindled since 2019, Giorgia Meloni has capitalised on his success.[65] Meloni has since depicted a vote for her Brothers of Italy party as the "common sense choice", while also framing far-right narratives as "common sense" or "centre-right" conservatism.

Reform UK is a another illuminating example for two interlinked and mutually reinforcing reasons. Nigel Farage has also explicitly framed his politics as "common sense", with his 2024 manifesto stating "The British people now have a common sense choice in Reform UK".[66] Furthermore, such framings have been increasingly normalised by mainstream political actors in the UK, such as the Labour Party and the Conservative Party. This means that the purportedly "common sense" politics of the far right have become part of the UK's shared political discourse. A key example of this shared discourse can be seen in the two utterances below, the first from Reform UK's 2023 policy document and the second from Keir Starmer's X account:

> *A responsible government has a duty to protect our borders […] this is basic common sense.*[67]
>
> *We're restoring common sense and control to our borders.*[68]

"Common sense borders" has now become a main feature on the Labour Party website.[69] "Secure Borders" is listed as one of the key "foundations" for the Labour government, as the government pledges to "deliver a fair immigration system, one that serves our national interest and restores **common sense** and control to our borders". The use of "common sense" here aligns with what Ruth Wodak calls an appeal "to mobilize citizens into believing in simple solutions and 'regaining control', […] via exclusionary

rhetoric".[70] Whether in the UK or wider Europe, this has extended to centring language skills as a core element of citizenship, which was once strongly connected with the anti-migrant politics of the far right:[71] "if you want to live in the UK, you should speak English. That's common sense".[72] Here Starmer echoes Reform's demands to bring stricter tests and higher standards of English for settlement, as part of its "common sense" policies.

Common sense, therefore, can become a mutually constitutive identity of both the far right and the mainstream. This highlights the potential of common-sense discourse to erode democracy when, rather than acting as a site of political struggle and the construction of a progressive, unifying community, this narrative becomes a key point of convergence for the far right and the mainstream.

Reactionary framings of common sense are not "natural", "popular" or "normal". Instead, they are elite-driven and ideologically loaded strategies of division and normalisation.

Not only must progressive actors refuse to validate these framings, but they must also construct a positive alternative.

Reclaiming common sense requires:

- **rejecting and directly challenging far-right framings of common sense as what they are: elite-driven and ideologically loaded;**

- **promoting an alternative and progressive narrative of common sense: one that is based on radical intersectionality, where communities are not pitted against each other but instead included in a community of equals based on inalienable rights; and**

- **addressing the day-to-day concerns of citizens, such as the cost of living, health, financial situation, pensions, unemployment (see Section 4) via this alternative common sense.**

A failure to radically reframe and reclaim common sense allows the far right to dictate the meaning of this key political term. This risks an even further mainstreaming of the exclusionary and anti-democratic agenda of the far right.

There must be an alternative

3. POPULIST AND POLARISATION HYPE AND THE ROLE OF ANTI-POPULISM IN MAINSTREAMING

In public and political discourse, misnomers are frequently used to diagnose Europe's reactionary turn. In particular, we have seen the proliferation of terms such as "hard right"[73] or "illiberalism",[74] which have often done more to muddy the waters than clarify the nature of the threat. Here, we would like to focus on two "hypes" we consider particularly problematic: "populism" and "polarisation". Our use of hype denotes the exaggerated significance of a phenomenon, a simplistic account of its "rise" and an ignorance of the far more pressing threat: the substantive *ideology* of far-right actors.[75] Below, we explain the key features of these two hypes,

along with their associated risks regarding far-right mainstreaming, and put forward more promising alternatives to stymie the resurgence of far-right politics.

3.1 Populist and polarisation hype

A spectre is haunting Europe: the spectre of populism. This sentence is not just a tired cliché repeated ad nauseam in politics, the media (Figure 4) and even academia (Figure 5), it is also a dangerous one.

Figure 4. Number of articles containing populis* in the title/front matter in UK newspapers.
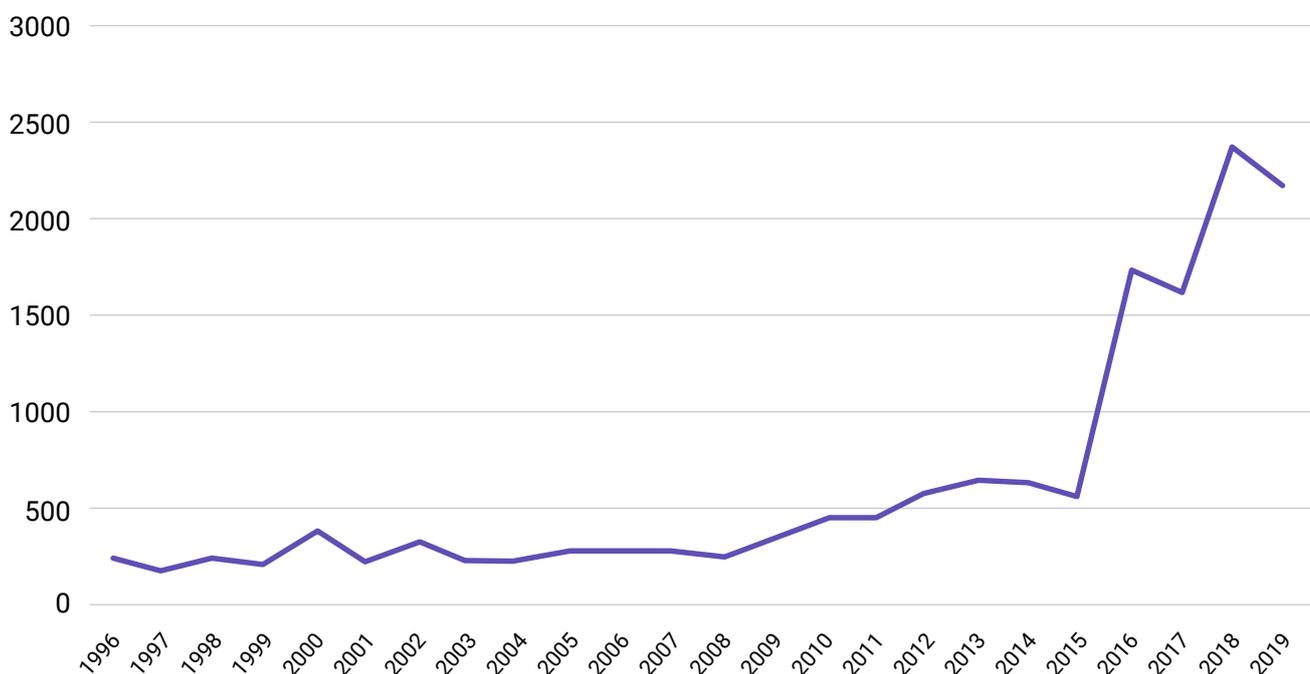
Source: Nexis.[76]

Figure 5. Number of articles containing populis* in the title/front matter in academic publications.
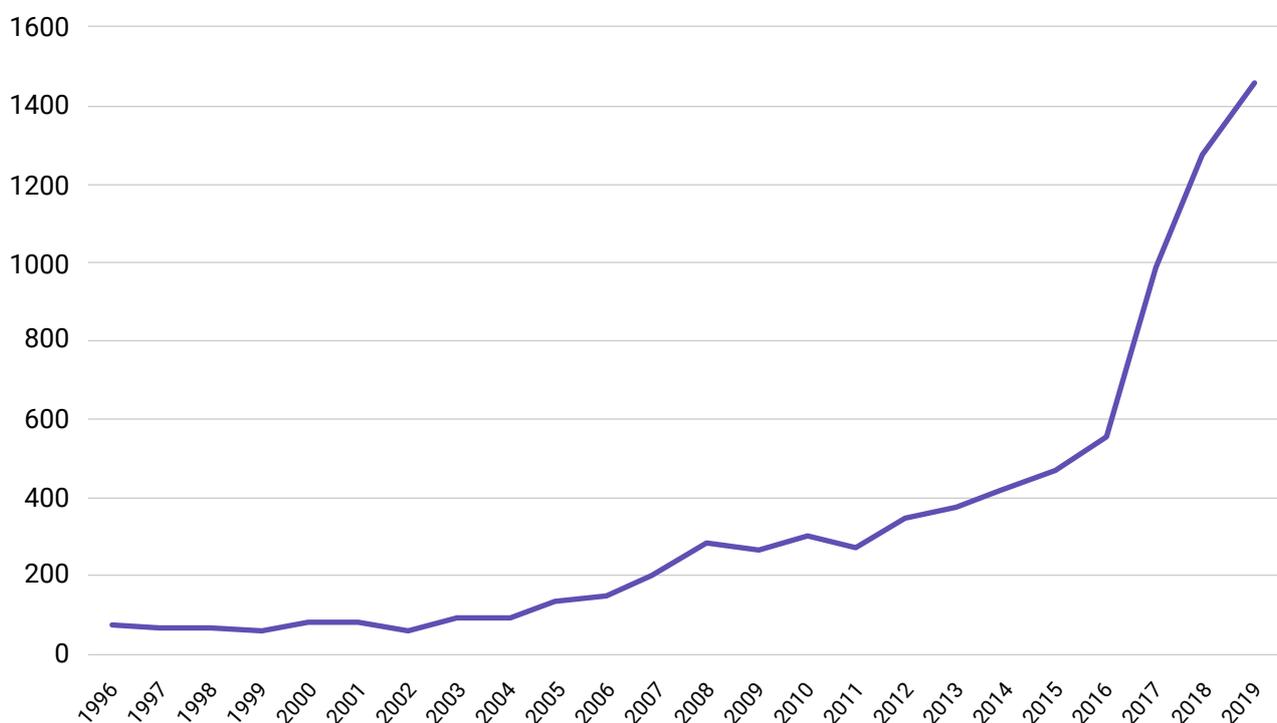
Firstly, it is worth stressing that the common use of the term goes against all serious academic definitions.[78] Research on the concept has reached something of a consensus: populism centres "the people" and pits them against an "elite".[79] It also stresses that this populist element, if present, comes second to politics and ideology, whether it is used to define right-wing or left-wing actors.[80] Therefore, it is vital to keep in mind that there is really no such thing as a "populist" policy or party, only far-right, conservative or social democratic policies or parties, which can be presented in a populist *form*.[81] We define populism, then, as a discourse that constructs a "people" and positions them against an "elite" or "establishment".[82] Populism can, therefore, be progressive or reactionary, depending upon how "the people" and "establishment" are constructed. Whilst the populist left often constructs a diverse "people" composed of marginalised groups against a discriminatory status quo, the far right uses

populist discourse to construct a homogenous "people", which excludes racialised communities.[83]

Along with populist hype, the term "polarisation" is often reached for by symbolic elites to diagnose the reactionary moment (Figures 6 and 7). This centres the rise of "extremes" on the right and left as the key threat to democracy. The solution, within this narrative, is to de-polarise by encouraging "extreme" actors to moderate their demands and return to more consensual and "sensible" politics.[84] However, much like the populist hype, this misses the mark in terms of understanding our current reactionary moment. We understand polarisation as a process of political identity formation, where people come together to form opinion-based groups, which "become meaningful through a differentiation with perceived outgroups whose values or beliefs are seen as incompatible".[85] Just like populism, therefore, polarisation is an ambivalent process, which

depends on *how* these groups are formed and how they polarise. Polarisation can either lead to "more inclusive and democratic societies and thereby, to democratic expansion, or to more exclusive societies and thus to democratic erosion".[86]

Figure 6. Academic articles containing "polarization" in the abstract or title.
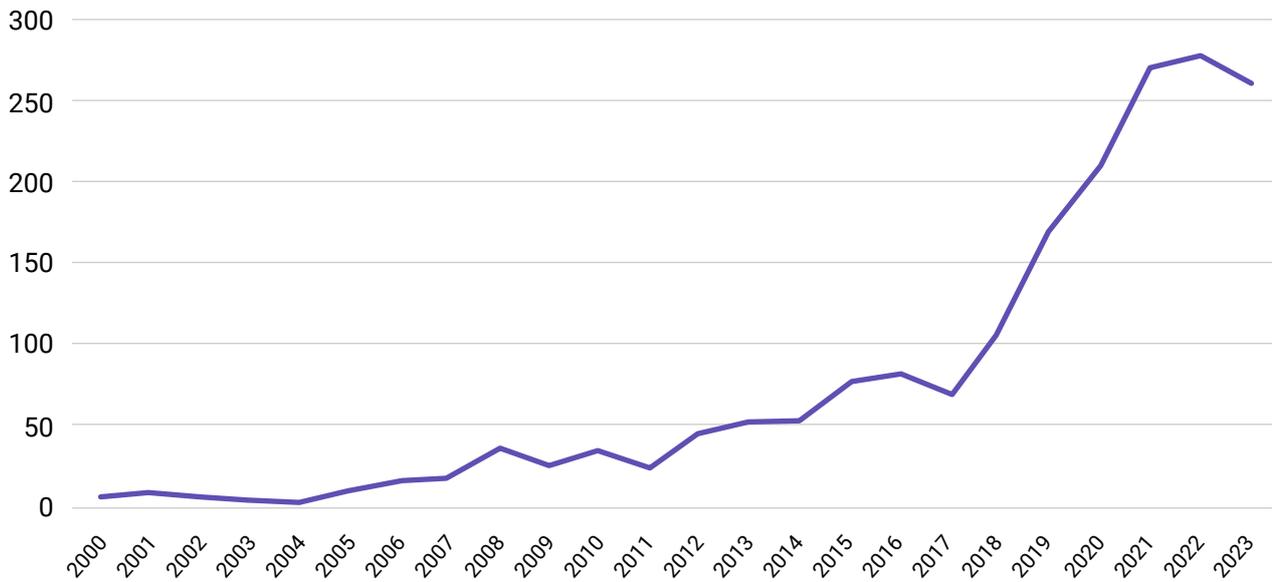
Source: Web of Science.[87]

Figure 7. Articles in the New York Times containing "polarization".
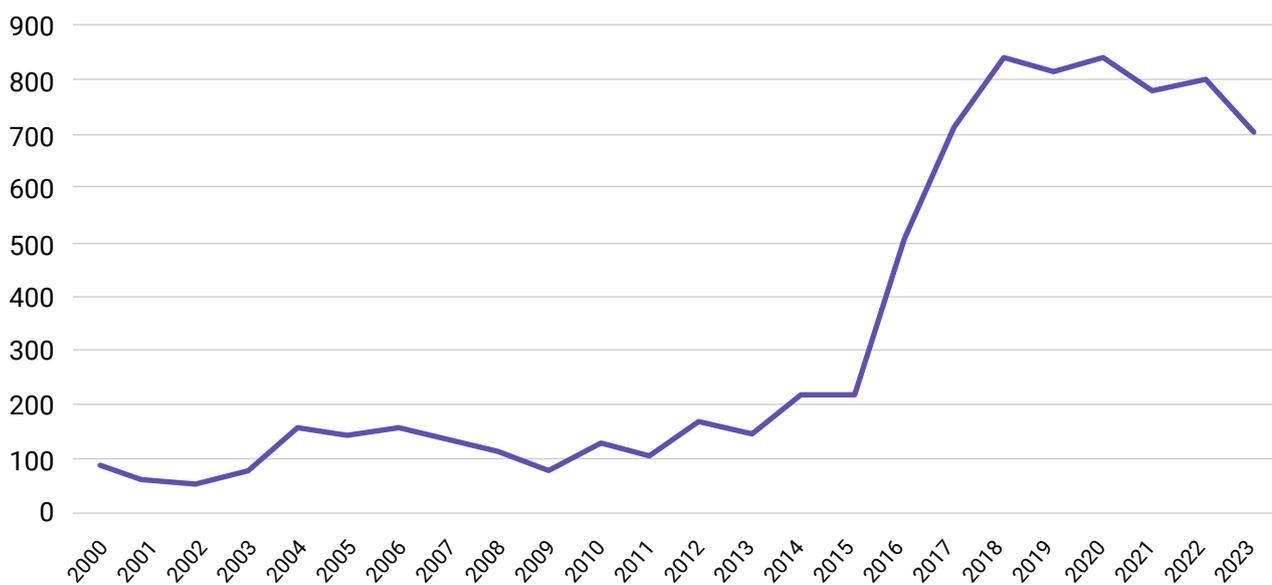
Source: Nexis.[88]

The issues with the populist and polarisation hypes are fourfold:

- they euphemise far-right ideology;

- they exaggerate the popularity of the far right and confer upon it unwarranted democratic legitimacy;

- they blame "the people", as opposed to symbolic elites; and

- they conflate left- and right-wing alternatives to the status quo, through anti-populist discourse.

3.1.1 Euphemising the far right

Firstly, the populist hype euphemises the far right. It should not come as a surprise that many far-right actors, from Jean-Marie and Marine Le Pen in France to Italy's Matteo Salvini and the *AfD* in Germany, have embraced the term "populism".[89] This should already be a clear signal that "populist" may not be the insult many think it is.

This process of euphemisation can be witnessed in *The Guardian's* six-month series on "the new populism" in 2019, despite the newspaper being generally seen as opposed to far-right politics. While the series built on advice from prominent academics, many of the articles used "populism" in a euphemistic manner rather than based on the very definitions the series claimed to work from. It has become increasingly clear, as many studies have shown, that this widespread issue extends to academic circles, which then feed back into public discourse via the media.[90]

One of the main issues with euphemisation is that such terms often facilitate the construction of the far right's self-image. Far-right politicians know that "populism", which directly echoes "popular" and "the people", is better than labels such as far right, reactionary, fascist or racist, which are not only more accurate, but also more stigmatising.[91] It is no surprise that they often react strongly to these more

stigmatising terms and even threaten legal action against those who use them.[92]

Calling the far right "populist" hides the danger their politics poses to minoritised communities, as well as democracy more widely, through authoritarianism. Instead, the term transposes these threats onto a question of democratic legitimacy, as if the far right somehow represents "the people", even though they only receives the support of a minority (which is nonetheless concerning). To counter their rise, progressive forces must focus on opposing their core *ideological* commitments around exclusion and authoritarianism, rather than the far right's use of populist rhetoric.

This can also be witnessed in the fixation on polarisation, which has led many political elites astray, as they become credulous to the claims of "moderation" from the reconstructed far right. Put simply, the appearance of moving towards the centre provides the far right legitimacy in the eyes of aspiring "depolarisers". The much-touted "moderation" of Giorgia Meloni offers a case in point here. Although fears of a (post-)fascist party governing Italy were initially widespread upon Meloni's election, the prime minister quickly gained favour with European elites by positioning herself as a reliable supporter of Ukraine in their resistance to Russian aggression,[93] and collaborating on migration and climate with the president of the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen.[94] All this took place, however, in the context of Meloni's *Fratelli d'Italia* indulging the racist "great replacement" conspiracy theory: evoking fears of white demographic replacement to justify more restricted and securitised migration policy.[95] The polarisation hype embraces the apparently "sensible" centre. As a result, depolarisers often fall for the contemporary far right's moderate presentation, even though their policy platforms remain extreme.

3.2 Legitimising the far right

As already mentioned, through the semantic link between "populism", "popularity" and "the people", the far right is constructed as tapping

into "legitimate", "democratic" grievances. This association with the "popular" is often linked to an assumption that the rise of "populism" finds its source in the "(white) working class", "left behind" or the "losers of globalisation".[96] This is something the *FN* capitalised on early in its attempt at normalisation, and we have since seen similar narratives being used to explain the rise of the AfD, the Brexit vote or even the election of Donald Trump.

As already discussed, this perspective generally ignores scholarly analysis, which shows that support for far-right politics in many contexts does predominantly come from the "left behind".[97] This is not surprising considering the inherent elitism of far-right actors and politics, who seek to merely replace liberal elites with their own and extend the privilege of their supporters on the basis of race or gender. While much has been made of the so-called social, "welfare chauvinist" turn of some far-right parties, the reality of their economic programme remains predominantly aligned with the right (see taxation, for example). Of course, this does not mean that sections of the "working class" do not vote for the far right, but this is hardly new, as shown in the Section 1.

Yet for the far right, being able to claim to speak on behalf of the people is particularly useful at a time of widespread distrust in mainstream politics, as it allows them to inaccurately position themselves as the alternative to the status quo. Rather than giving credence to the false anti-establishment pretences of the far right, those in positions of power must, instead, tackle the very real malaise at the heart of contemporary democratic life. There is an urgent need to develop more robust accountability structures for political elites, tackle inequality and open space for greater democratic participation. Anything short of this allows the far right to continue masquerading as "anti-establishment" and "pro-democracy", neither of which it is.

3.3 Blaming the people and absolving the responsibility of mainstream elites

In both politics and the media, symbolic elites often claim to simply be responding to public opinion pressures, arguing it is their duty in a democracy to serve "the people". And if it happens that "the people" are reactionary, they have no choice but to pursue reactionary trajectories. This can be seen, in particular, in the way immigration is described as a key issue for the electorate and has become central to elections. This quasi-hegemonic focus has also allowed the far right to claim "ideological victories", as Le Pen did after Macron's immigration law was passed in 2024.[98] Therefore, even when the far right does not win at the polls, they can win by making their ideas common sense: think of the demise of DF in Denmark and yet how its politics are now implemented by a so-called left-wing coalition.[99]

Yet, while it is tempting to say that politicians have no choice in the matter, a different reading exists regarding what "the people" want. If we take power and the mediation of information and political knowledge seriously, it becomes clear that voters or "the people" do not create their political ideas and beliefs on their own. Instead, all of us are shaped by those helping us make sense of the world, whether they are family, friends, colleagues, religious institutions or – of course – the media and politicians.[100]

The impact of this mediation process can be exemplified through a simple experiment using Eurobarometer data.[101] The argument is "simple" because we cannot realistically expect journalists in the current media landscape, for example, to have a sophisticated knowledge of quantitative analysis or the time to 'crunch the data'. The aim is to engage with data at the level commonly used in our public discourse to show that even at this level, core issues of accuracy and consistency are ignored, while certain narratives are preferred over others, which would not necessitate any more expert knowledge to cover or uncover.[102]

In the survey, respondents are asked about what they consider as the main pressing political issues. They are given over a dozen prompts from the cost of living to crime, education, pensions or the environment, as well as the possibility to provide a spontaneous answer. It will not come as a surprise that, when respondents are asked what they think are "the two most important issues facing [their country] at the moment", immigration ranks quite highly (see Figure 8). What is striking is that the results follow key political events: "immigration" rises as an issue in 2015/16 as the "refugee crisis", various terrorist attacks (often portrayed as a "foreign" threat) and the EU referendum in the UK unfold. All generated not only an incredible amount of coverage focused on immigration, but coverage that was mostly negative.[103] Unsurprisingly, what is discussed in both the media and political discourse as important to society ends up influencing how people think. As per agenda-setting theory: the media and/or politicians may not tell us what to think, but they are best placed to impact what we think about and, therefore, how certain issues become more salient in public discourse.[104]

Figure 8. Respondents choosing "immigration" when asked "What do you think are the two most important issues facing (OUR COUNTRY) at the moment?". S = spring, A = autumn.
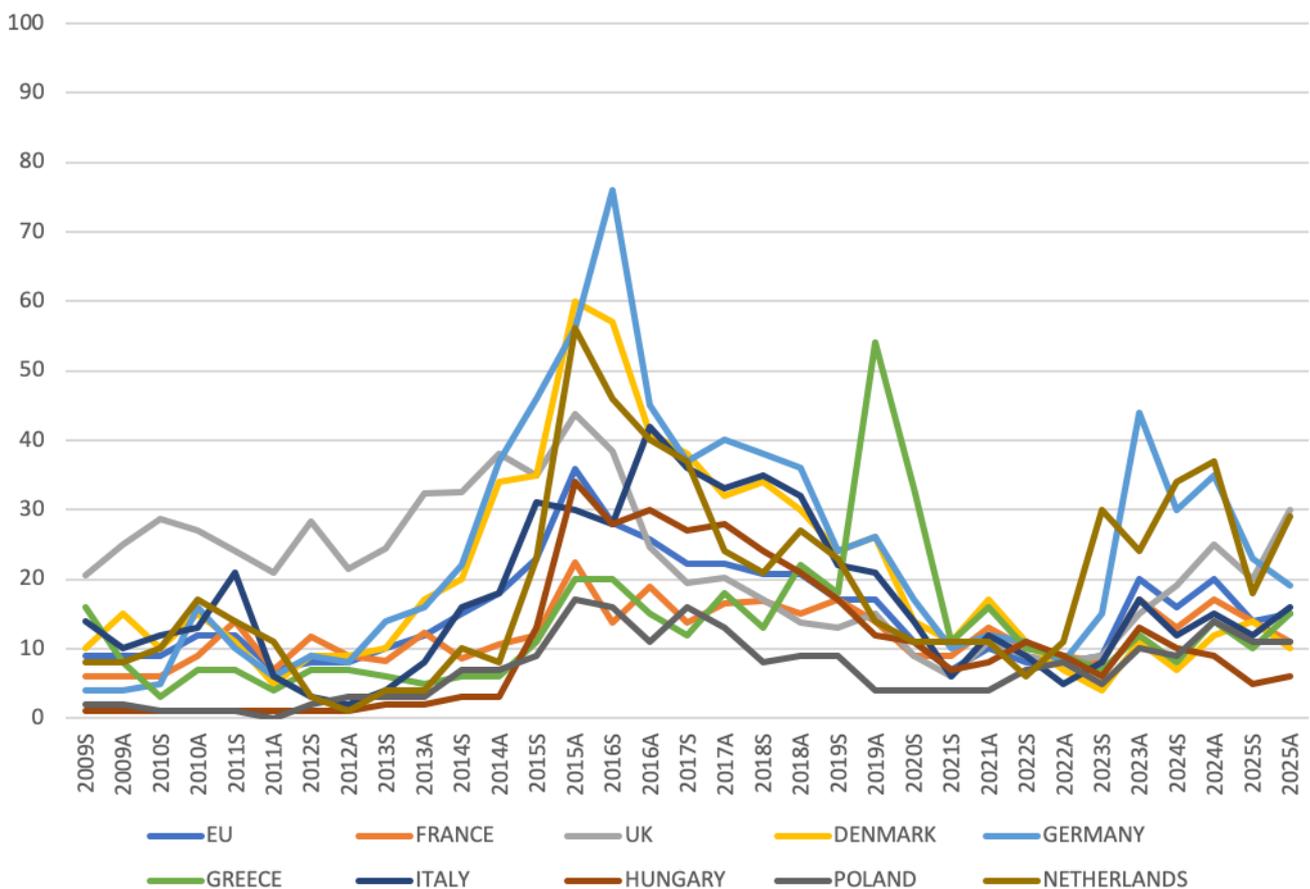
Source: Eurobarometer.
Mondon (2025).

While other large surveys ask this question, with fairly consistent results, what makes the Eurobarometer particularly useful is that it asks a follow-up question: "And personally, what are the two most important issues you are facing at the moment?" (Figure 9). One would expect the answers to be similar, considering the respondents are the same and the question almost identical. And yet, when prompted to think about their day-to-day concerns, respondents tend to relegate immigration to one of the lowest issues on their radar. Instead, issues far more amenable to the left top the agenda (cost of living, health, financial situation, pensions, unemployment etc.).

Figure 9. Respondents choosing "immigration" when asked "And personally, what are the two most important issues you are facing at the moment?". S = spring, A = autumn.
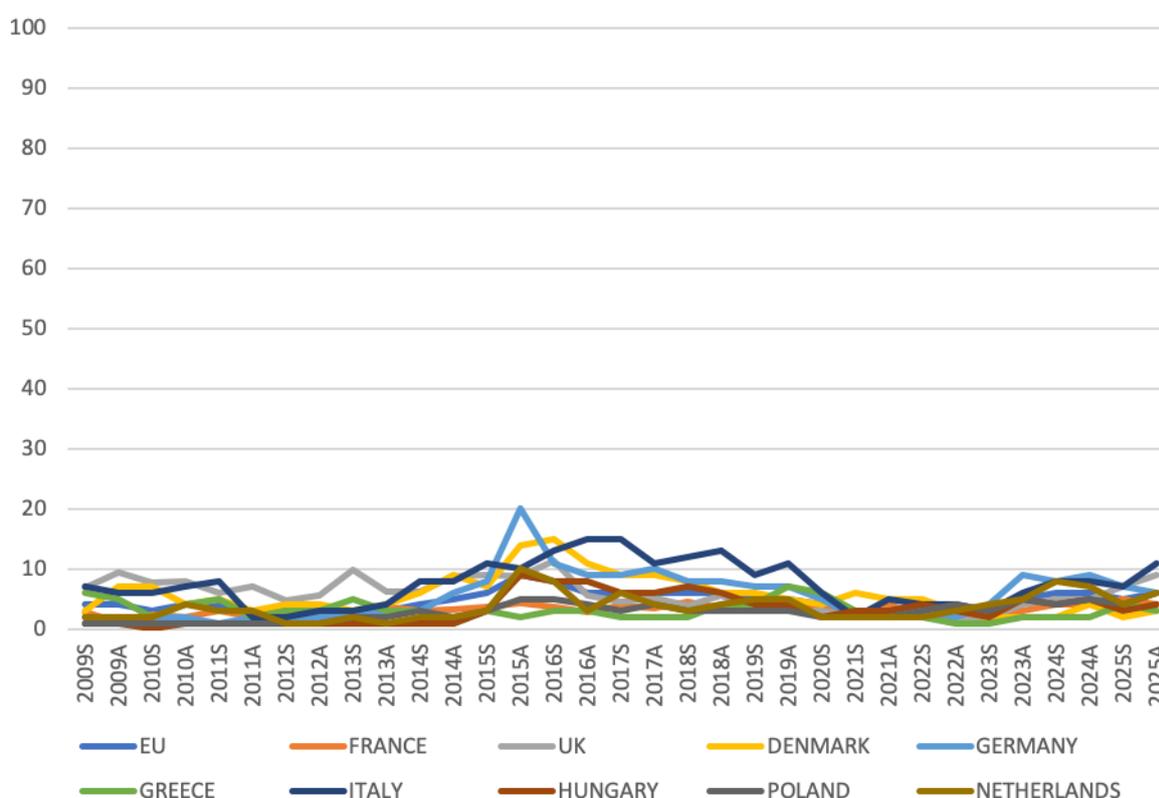
Source: Eurobarometer.
Mondon (2025).

This tells us that "immigration" is therefore not so much a "popular grievance" as one manufactured by the mainstream – whether consciously or not – and far-right elite, something that more recent and nuanced surveys have corroborated.[105] This also supports research undertaken by Vincent Tiberj in France, which has shown that the right-wing shift in the population is far from clear, something also noticeable in other contexts.[106]

This subverts "common sense" narratives around the necessity for progressive parties to fight the far right on its turf. Instead, it demonstrates not only that there remains a widespread appetite for left-

wing politics and reform, but also that progressive parties have a role to play in making these demands visible.

3.4 Creating false equivalences between the left and the far right

Populist hype often gives rise to anti-populism: a discourse that presents "populist" forces as irresponsible and dangerous in contrast to responsible and moderate elites who stand against "populism".[107] This allows such elites to avoid responsibility by claiming that "we are bad, but they are worse". Anti-populism often draws false equivalences between moderate left-wing demands and those of the far right. As a result, demands for redistribution, justice or equality are subsumed under the "populist" threat alongside racism and exclusion. This could be seen in attempts to discredit left-of-centre parties and paint them as a threat to democracy, similar to – or even worse than – the far right. For example, social democrats, such as the progressive Spanish government, have been portrayed as equally as threatening as the far right by liberals and conservatives.[108]

By directing their antagonism towards so-called "populism" instead of the far right, symbolic elites can discredit calls for political and economic reform from the left. This is particularly acute in times of polycrisis, where climate breakdown, growing wealth inequality and increasing authoritarianism have occurred simultaneously and rendered democratic institutions increasingly fragile. The radical reforms required to tackle these problems are often precluded by anti-populist discourse. In this environment, politics is at a standstill: There Is No Alternative.

Distrust and antipathy towards "the people" is also thinly concealed behind the pejorative use of the term "populism". In fact, anti-populism often delegitimises "the people" as a political subject. By casting "the people" aside, anti-populism marginalises the very collective subject that is sovereign in democratic systems, in favour of

technocratic modes of governance, which privilege expertise at the expense of popular sovereignty.[109]

This was typified by the austerity programme the Spanish *Partido Popular* government implemented in the 2010s, despite widespread popular opposition.[110] Here, opposition to austerity was demonised as a "populist" simple answer to a complex fiscal problem as a way of marginalising dissent. Therefore, anti-populist discourse risks further entrenching dissatisfaction with liberal democracy and pushing "the people" into the arms of the far right.

Concurrently, the polarisation hype constructs false equivalences between right and left. In a bad analogy, polarisation implies a linear spectrum, going from right to left, whereby either extreme is necessarily harmful for democracy, and meeting in the middle is always good. In the run up to the 2024 French legislative elections, Macron sought to present his coalition as the moderate and sensible centre, in contrast to the two "extremes" of the centre-left *Nouveau Front populaire* and far-right *RN*.[111] By clinging onto polarisation hype, then, liberal symbolic elites delegitimise movements for progressive social change, which may act as a much-needed antidote to the rise of the far right.

3.5 More populism, more polarisation

"Populism" and "polarisation", for many symbolic elites, are often painted as core to our reactionary moment. As we have shown above, this framing is misleading. It shifts attention away from the underlying drivers of discontent that are more fertile ground for progressive politics: economic precarity; housing insecurity; and backlash against minority rights and equality more broadly. This is crucial, as the construction of these terms in mainstream public discourse has not only obscured our understanding of the resurgence of far-right politics, but it has prevented social democratic parties from building on their tradition in the struggle for progressive politics. The challenge for progressives, then, is not to shy away from populism and polarisation, but to engage them, and, where appropriate, to embrace them.

Starting with the former, it is important to note that some of Europe's greatest emancipatory struggles have been populist in nature through their building of a coalition of "the people" against an unjust status quo. A case in point here would be *Solidarność* in Poland at the tail end of the Cold War. What started as a trade union dispute in the Gdańsk shipyard quickly became a point of unity for millions of Poles, who joined together against an authoritarian establishment.[112] In times of oppression, marginalisation and exploitation, stitching together a coalition of downtrodden groups becomes the decisive task of any liberation movement. As far-right governments take power across the Union, a progressive movement of trade unions, LGBTQIA+ groups, migrants, feminist organisations, disabled people and so forth is sorely needed to resist the reactionary turn.[113] A progressive strategy against far-right mainstreaming, then, must be more populist, not less.

The same is true of polarisation. Progressive movements have always accepted polarisation against the conservative elite of the time, whether it be through calls for women's suffrage, workers' rights, the abolition of the death penalty, same sex marriage or civil rights for racialised communities. What now appear to be "common sense" "inalienable" human rights were hard-won through deeply contentious struggles. As the far right becomes increasingly normalised and accesses power, there is no choice but for movements for social justice to accept that polarisation is unavoidable. There can be no middle ground between fascism and anti-fascism or racism and anti-racism, much like there can be no compromise with genocidal projects.

Countering the populist and polarisation hypes is a central component in resisting far-right mainstreaming. Progressives must do the following:

- Refrain from using inaccurate or unclear terms such as populism, which can legitimise the far right. When it applies, we should not shy away from using stronger, more stigmatising terms, such as "racist", "extreme right" and even "fascist".

- Reject anti-populist discourse. Anti-populism makes progressives seem elitist and out of touch and will only encourage voters to run into the embrace of the far right.

- Shift attention away from the far-right's pet issues onto the issues that face their communities as a whole: the left cannot compete with the far right on their own turf. This means adopting an uncompromising anti-far-right approach, which does not leave any community behind.

- Be more populist and accept polarisation. Being serious about improving society for the better demands building a coalition of downtrodden peoples against an unjust status quo.

4. MORAL PANICS AND THE LEGITIMISATION OF FAR-RIGHT POLITICS

Finally, a commitment to a progressive alternative to the current reactionary resurgence requires understanding the central role played by moral panics. It is through this mechanism in particular that reactionary forces (including in the mainstream) weaponise crises to demonise scapegoats or "folk devils". These generally voiceless, powerless and heterogeneous/diverse groups are reduced to a single identity trait and presented as symbolic of a wider, existential threat to the imposed societal order.[114] The source of a "deviant" act – whether real or fantasised – committed by an individual or limited group, can then be applied to the whole community, which becomes homogenised as one singular, unified threat. Just as the threat of "witches" was used to marginalise poor and older women, panics around terrorism have led to the marginalisation of Muslims and those perceived as such. Moral panics can emerge from a real event, whether it be a terrorist attack or an instance of sexual violence committed by a trans person. However, through a process of othering or racialisation,[115] the criminal intent is no longer the action of an individual, but explained by one particular element of their identity (Muslimness or transness) at the exclusion of all other factors. While other communities, particularly those in privileged positions, would not be tarred by the actions of one individual sharing one trait (i.e., so-called "lone wolf" terrorism committed by far-right white men), these already marginalised communities are ripe for the picking. As such, moral panics often echo traditional antisemitic tropes, in which Jewish people are homogenised as a singular threat and blamed for all societal ills.

Crucially, moral panics divert attention away from the structural nature of the polycrisis.[116] By blaming communities who have little visibility and power, instead of holding the powerful to account, the elements core to contemporary crises remain untouched, obscured or downplayed. By falling for these moral panics and allowing the public debate

to move onto unfavourable terrain once more, the left – the only political tendency with a programme for democratic renewal – makes itself irrelevant.

Again, the role of mainstream actors, including certain centre-left parties, cannot be underestimated. Indeed, moral panics are predominantly top-down constructions. To quote at length from an influential study by Stuart Hall et al.:

> **"**
>
> *When the official reaction to a person, groups of persons or series of events is out of all proportion to the actual threat offered, when 'experts', in the form of police chiefs, the judiciary, politicians and editors perceive the threat in all but identical terms, and appear to talk 'with one voice' of rates, diagnoses, prognoses and solutions, when the media representations universally stress sudden and dramatic increases (in numbers involved or events) and 'novelty', above and beyond that at which a sober, realistic appraisal could sustain, then we believe it is appropriate to speak of the beginnings of a moral panic.*[117]
>
> **"**

While moral panics are waged in the name of the conveniently "silent" majority, they do not require consent from "the people", but simply the invocation of it. As highlighted earlier, the construction of "the people's" support is key to mainstreaming reactionary politics. As such, moral panics provide

an important framework through which to examine systems of power by recognising the relative powerlessness of the target group in relation to mainstream elite actors manufacturing the panic.[118] This allows for a holistic examination of the mainstreaming of far-right politics, where concerns around "gender ideology" or "wokeism", for example, stand in for wider anxieties and deflect away from systemic forms of oppression, such as patriarchy and structural racism. In turn, these can divert the left's attention from its progressive defence of marginalised communities towards manufactured crises. Consequently, the left is duped into lending their legitimacy to a "more than usual" exercise of control, as exemplified in Figure 10.[119]

Figure 10. The moral panic cycle.
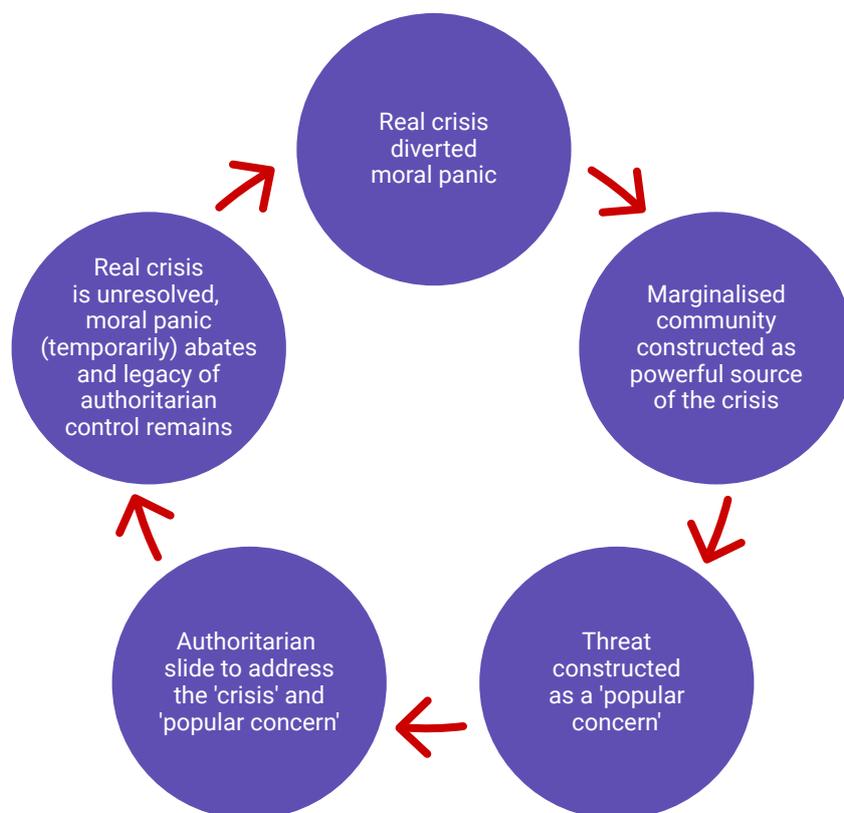
4.1 Transphobic panics as a case in point

While the resurgence of reactionary politics has involved multiple moral panics,[120] we have decided here to focus on transphobic panics, as these demonstrate clearly how moral panics work and how complicit the left can be in its own marginalisation. At a time when violence against women and girls – which has never been adequately addressed – is of particular concern, considering the resurgence of misogynist movements, placing the focus on one of the most marginalised communities in society is a misdirection. Yet, as observed by ILGA-Europe's[121] Advocacy Director Katrin Hugendubel, transphobic moral panics have been an "easy entry point" for the far right to sow fear due to a general lack of knowledge about trans people and their rights.[122]

Illustrating the cycle we highlight above, transphobic panics have been constructed in many areas,

including participation in sports, access to gender-affirming care (especially for trans youth),[123] public spaces – including toilets – and education in schools. Hostility towards trans people, as well as those who support them, including doctors and medical professionals, is constructed as "popular" and thus a "legitimate concern". Trans people and their allies are portrayed as threatening, powerful and extreme, through terms such as "trans activist" or "the trans lobby" and the generalisation of criminal acts conducted by individual members of the community.[124] This allows those propagating the panics to deny their transphobia, arguing that they are simply raising "legitimate concerns" to protect women and children, as discussed below. This then leads to an unravelling of the rights secured for trans people and, by extension, the weakening of those held by various other communities (as demonstrated by the wider anti-LGBTQIA+ backlash). At this stage, the moral panic can abate but the threat continues to linger and can be reactivated if needed.

Much like the moral panics on asylum seekers and refugees today,[125] and that around gay men and AIDS in the 1980s,[126] transphobic panics are orchestrated through reciprocal relationships between politicians, "experts", the media and the state. Each reinforces the discourse and actions of the other. This can be witnessed through the reporting on trans issues, which has skyrocketed in the UK since 2010.[127] In her analysis of media coverage of English-language news, Jessica Kant noted that there were "well over fifty-five thousand individual, unique articles about transgender people".[128]

Much like articles on immigration or Islam at times of moral panics, the overwhelming majority of news articles on trans issues are now negative. For example, beyond focusing on the crimes of individuals while tarring the whole community, they portray trans identities as a new phenomenon through pseudo-scientific terms such as "rapid onset gender dysphoria" and citing supposedly dramatic and unnatural percentage increases to youth gender identity clinic referrals.[129] (Figures that, when probed, are revealed to be the product of tiny numbers of referrals increasing to slightly less tiny numbers – an exponential or 5,000% increase is

often used to describe the change from 32 referrals of those assigned female sex at birth in 2009-10 to 1,265 in 2016-17.[130] These figures also demonstrate that most trans adolescents are not referred for care, as they represent a very small proportion of total trans youth based on estimates from 2021 UK census data.[131])

This media discourse is bolstered by state apparatus through transphobic judgements and legislation, as exemplified by the UK Labour government's move to ban puberty blockers for trans youth and proposals to ban trans people from gendered spaces following the high-profile *For Women Scotland case,* which ruled that under UK equality legislation "sex" refers to "biological sex". While the UK is an exemplar case, these trends are in motion elsewhere in Europe, as for example in the Swedish National Board of Health and Welfare's 2022 decision to block trans minors' access to puberty blockers and hormone therapy. These state interventions have emboldened transphobic actors and caused material harm to trans and gender non-conforming people, who face heightened rates of abuse and exclusion from public life. Unsurprisingly, several European far-right parties have demonised trans people as part of their divide and rule strategy.[132] More troublingly, however, is the way in which some social democratic politicians, such as some prominent members of Sweden's Social Democrats,[133] have bought into transphobic moral panics.

4.2 Moral panics and political convergences

The importance of moral panics in the current reactionary moment comes from the bridges they can create between actors across the political spectrum. While much discussion of contemporary anti-trans politics has centred around so-called "trans-exclusionary radical feminists" ("TERFs") or "gender critical" feminists, anti-trans politics have, in practice, been coalitional, bringing together some feminists with conservatives, liberals and centrists – and the far right. An outsized role has been played by liberal figures with access to large media platforms, including many journalists associated

with outlets such as *The New York Times* or *The Guardian* – both of which have printed high numbers of negative stories about trans people, their rights and healthcare.[134] The same pattern can be seen with regard to so-called "illegal immigration" and the "refugee crisis".

Yet, while the connections are often disavowed by mainstream actors, there is considerable far-right activity in this area. Infamously, in 2023, a group of neo-Nazis joined a rally organised by the British anti-trans activist Kelly-Jay Keen-Minshull (also known as Posie Parker) in Melbourne.[135] But far-right mobilisations against trans rights go back further. In particular, key players have been the Spanish organisation *HazteOír* and its international counterpart CitizenGO, which have strong connections to the far-right party Vox.[136] HazteOír/CitizenGO's "freedom bus" toured Spain in 2017 (and later the USA, Latin America and Kenya), emblazoned with slogans such as *"Los niños tienen pene. Las niñas tienen vulva. Que no te engañen"*. ("Boys have a penis. Girls have a vulva. Don't let them trick you.") A key aim of HazteOír/CitizenGO was to provoke people into protesting or vandalising the bus, images and videos of which were then circulated on social media to promote the narrative that dangerous feminist, queer and trans "extremists" were attempting to shut down free speech.[137]

Though particularly powerful in the UK, transphobic moral panics exist across Europe, as the case of *HazteOír*/CitizenGO suggests. Typically, transphobic rhetoric has spread as part of a broader moral panic centring on so-called "gender ideology", a nebulous term variously taken to include gender mainstreaming, reproductive rights, sex education and LGBTQIA+ rights, among other things.[138] "Gender ideology" is seen as a shadowy force that has "captured" public and political institutions without the consent of "the people". The fight against "gender ideology" began in the 1990s with a series of United Nations conferences on women, the environment and population, to which Vatican City sent delegates.[139] In the wake of the 1995 Beijing conference, the term "sex" was replaced with "gender" in official documents, reflecting a turn towards addressing discriminatory cultural norms.[140] The Vatican, emphasising the importance of what it saw as inherent biological differences between men and women, viewed this as a threat.

Outside of the Vatican, the European public's first engagement with the term "gender ideology" came during the 2012-2013 protests against same-sex marriage legislation in France.[141] Organised by a group called the *Manif pour tous* (Demonstration for all), protests ranging between 300,000 and 500,000 strong hit the streets.[142] A more contemporary example comes from the 2024 European elections, where a *Fidesz* poster campaign depicted opposition leaders dressed as waiters, with Ursula von der Leyen in the background, holding platters of migration, war and gender.[143] Notably, gender is the only word in English, feeding into the idea that "gender ideology" is "ideological colonisation". Orbán has referred to "gender ideology" as a "progressive virus", equating it with "communism and Marxism".[145] In 2018, his government forced two universities to stop their gender studies master's degrees by removing their accreditation, justifying this by noting that the programmes are "ideological, violate Christian values, [and] waste public money".[146]

Transphobic moral panics can therefore be generated from a variety of ideological starting points. Indeed, and despite the blatant anti-feminism of most "anti-gender" campaigns, the last few years have witnessed considerable convergence between the conservative and seemingly more liberal versions of transphobic panics. Despite their different origins, liberal and conservative anti-trans politics now converge on the use of the term "gender ideology" (sometimes "transgender ideology") and conspiracy theories of "institutional capture" by this "ideology".

Another key area of convergence is these campaigns' focus on narratives of safety and threat. Despite a lack of reliable evidence for either claim,[147] the twin figures of the trans rapist and the child exposed to a "social contagion" have been mobilised to construct a picture of heightened danger and threat, particularly to women and children. This strategy

has been especially successful due to its ability to appeal to different and even traditionally opposed political constituencies, including feminists and conservatives.[148] While transphobic moral panics have been the focus of this section, moral panics more generally, are a popular far-right strategy: Islamophobic and anti-migrant moral panics have also traded heavily in narratives of threat (especially sexual threat) to women and children,[149] a strategy also core to antisemitic panics.

The mobilisation of "common sense" narratives also plays a central role.[150] Trans people's existence is often seen as a violation of common sense, as it disrupts the assumption that one's identity follows naturally and inevitably from one's sex as recorded at birth and that sex itself is binary and immutable.[151] As mainstream actors may see their ideas as simply common sense, moral panics around a supposedly threatened common sense allow them to align themselves with the far right under the guise of political neutrality.

4.3 Moral panics and public opinion

Crucially, these issues are not widely shared grievances originating from "the people" but have only become salient through the construction of moral panics in a top-down manner.

For example, recent polling suggests that levels of scepticism in the UK towards trans rights are high. According to a YouGov poll tracker,[152] a plurality of those surveyed (49%) in 2025 said that trans women should not be allowed to use women's changing rooms and only 35% said they should. Yet it must be kept in mind that this has happened in the context of the rapid expansion of negative media reporting and interventions by political leaders described previously. In 2018, close to the outset of this moral panic in the UK, those surveyed were more likely to say that trans women should be allowed to use women's changing rooms (42%) than that they should not (33%).[153] Since 2018, there has been a downturn in support for trans rights across the board. The needle of public opinion has shifted

in the wake of a sustained onslaught of negative media stories. While polling on this issue across Europe is sparse and uneven, declining support for trans people's protection against discrimination was similarly observed from 2016 to 2023 in Germany (80% to 68%) and Spain (87% to 76%).[154]

Research simultaneously demonstrates, however, that a majority of people do not find these issues very important. A 2023 report by King's College London found that only 1% of voters said issues of trans rights would determine their vote in the next UK general election.[155] This chimes with other polling, which consistently shows that this is not a salient issue for many, falling well behind what are viewed as more pressing matters, such as healthcare, the economy and the cost of living.[156]

Taken together, these two facts demonstrate that public hostility towards the rights of trans people (or other minoritised groups) cannot be simply understood as an outpouring of the "legitimate concerns" of "the people". The evidence, rather, suggests the public may not pay much attention to the issue the moral panic is about – but, when they do pay attention, are influenced by the predominant media and political framing. In keeping with our broader argument, this shows that moral panics are generated top-down by political and media elites, only dragging the public with them once years of political energy have been expended.

This also raises questions about what media strategies progressives should use. Media outlets may stoke moral panics by using misleading or false statistics, particularly in headlines, to evoke a picture of dramatic and frightening increases in certain events (be it referrals to gender clinics, muggings or crimes committed by asylum seekers).

There is evidence that attempting to fact-check or "debunk" such stories is often ineffective or worse, as it repeats the misinformation in the process and draws more attention to its message. Research suggests that, instead of correcting misinformation, it is better to bypass it entirely by providing alternative narratives and positive stories

(e.g., about the benefits to trans youth of being able to access timely gender care).[157] At the same time, progressives must keep drawing attention to the moral panic itself, the authoritarian tendencies to which it lends support and the impact on those affected.

Like mainstreaming, moral panics – which often centre on the existence of marginalised groups – must be understood as being constructed top down by elites and far-right actors with the aid of the media, rather than as a genuine outpouring of the concerns of "the people".

Rather than attempting to ameliorate the "concern" behind moral panics, or drawing more attention to framings about (for example) trans or migrant criminality, work must be done to actively counter them. Progressive actors must hold unwavering support for marginalised communities through radically intersectional politics.

Instead of fuelling the panic, progressives should:

- supply an alternative narrative (including positive stories about the groups on which the moral panic centres);

- expose and resist the authoritarian tendencies to which moral panics can lead;

- denounce the use of moral panics by politicians to evade accountability; and

- beyond this, support pressure for radical media reform – as seen in protests by staff against transphobic coverage by The Guardian and New York Times.

5. PROGRESSIVE STRATEGIES TO COUNTER THE MAINSTREAMING OF FAR-RIGHT POLITICS

The resurgence of the far right is the challenge of our times. Our response to it will determine whether the many crises we face push us towards a fairer world or towards authoritarianism. In this policy study, we have argued that, to counter the far right, we must counter processes of mainstreaming. Crucially, we must accept that they do not originate in the far right itself or in the demands of "the people" but are predominantly facilitated by the mainstream elite. We argue, therefore, that it is them who have the most ability to counter the tide and that social democrats are particularly well placed to offer a different way forward.

Our study can be summarised as such:

> **The mainstreaming of far-right politics is predominantly a top-down process that is rooted in the actions (and discourse) of symbolic elites rather than in a bottom-up process originating from "the people". This means that those in positions of power who can shape public discourse are best placed to counter or enable the far right: the choice is theirs.**

Our recommendations revolve around seven points, which are crucial to countering far-right politics and opening up progressive alternatives:

1. **Progressive forces must take responsibility and lead on progressive issues, rather than place the blame on a reactionary construction of "the people"**

Politicians' privileged access to shaping public discourse means that they are best placed to shift attention away from far-right issues and onto matters that would benefit the left, as well as social justice.

This requires an uncompromising rejection of far-right politics, both in formal settings, such as coalitions and during elections, and in wider public discourse.

This also requires radical (social) media reform, as these are key to the process of mediation: there can be no democracy without a healthy media eco-system and here, again, progressive forces should use the powers available to them to shift the balance.[160]

2. **The left cannot allow the far right to dictate what is common sense**

Progressive forces must not only reject the far-right's understanding, but promote a convincing alternative based on radical intersectionality, where communities are not pitted against each other, but instead, are included in a community of equals based on inalienable rights.

3. **Terminological precision is a precondition for any successful strategy**

Progressive actors must prevent the far right from hiding behind euphemising labels, such as "populist", which they themselves advocate for. Euphemisation is one of the key paths to normalisation. Instead, when they apply, they must turn to more precise, but also more

stigmatising, terms such as "racist" and "far/extreme right" or even "fascist".

1. Embrace populism and accept polarisation

There is no progressive alternative without constructing and energising a people. There can be no progressive alternative without acknowledging the increasingly elitist nature of our democracies and the damage this has caused. Populism, when understood in its more emancipatory manner as a way of building a diverse coalition of marginalised groups, is, therefore, a weapon for progressive forces rather than its enemy.

Similarly, as the far right becomes increasingly normalised and accesses power, progressive actors need to accept that polarisation is unavoidable. This means that we must be bold in constructing a future that involves everyone and, therefore, uncompromisingly reject the reactionary politics of the far right in all its guises.

5. Public opinion is constructed and predominantly shaped in a top-down manner

Politicians are agenda setters, not people followers, and arguing otherwise is not simply counterfactual but a dereliction of duty. Opinion polls cannot lead politics, as politics plays a key role in shaping polls.

Politicians and the wider mainstream elite cannot displace the responsibility for their actions and choices onto "the people" by using opinion polls as justification, without accounting for their role in shaping the agenda and public discourse.

6. Don't panic

Moral panics have not only been core to the resurgence of far-right politics; they have also helped splinter progressive forces by pitting our communities against each other. In a media environment prone to them, progressive forces must remain cool and composed and, again, uncompromising in their opposition to far-right politics and division.

7. Radical intersectionality

Progressive resistance against the far right must be uncompromising and, as such, must be radically intersectional. Some communities cannot be sacrificed to appease the far right and all must be protected. An injury to one is an injury to all.

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ALEX ROMAN

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ALEX YATES

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ABOUT THE FOUNDATION FOR EUROPEAN PROGRESSIVE STUDIES (FEPS)

FEPS is the European progressive political foundation and the think tank of the progressive political family at EU level. Our mission is to develop innovative research, policy advice, training and debates to inspire and inform progressive politics and policies across Europe.

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ABOUT ETERON

Eteron, the Institute for Research and Social Change, is a non-profit organisation based in Athens, Greece, that produces knowledge, contributes towards citizen empowerment and promotes partnerships. The institute strives to strengthen arguments, ideas, people and organisations, in order to reach a society, in which the actual needs of the people will be at the center of the public debate.

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There must be an alternative

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This policy study addressing the pressing need to develop progressive alternatives to counter the resurgence and mainstreaming of far-right politics. Contrary to common assumptions, it argues that this rise does not find it source in the popularity of the far right itself or in the demands of the people but rather must be located in a top-down process where mainstream elite hold most power. As such, progressive forces have a key role to play to set the agenda, shift it away from reactionary panics and onto grounds more fertile to democracy and justice for all. An uncompromising stance against the far right and its politics is not only morally and politically justified, it makes electoral sense.

The study addresses four key areas. First, it draws attention to the core role played by mainstream elites in 'mainstreaming' far-right ideas. Second, it turns towards the claim of many far-right actors that their ideas are simply 'common sense', arguing that instead of ceding this territory to the far right, mainstream actors must articulate a progressive vision of common sense. Third, it warns against the hype around 'populism' and 'polarisation', showing that rather than fearing these two things, progressive actors should instead embrace them. Finally, it argues for the central role played by moral panics in our current reactionary moment. Moral panics do not emanate organically from 'the people' but rather are elite-driven, and progressive actors must expose the authoritarian tendencies to which they lead.

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