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Democracy's end doesn't require a coup



Call it what you will, through the looking glass, Bizarro world or a parallel universe, but we're living in a strange and twisted caricature version of reality these days.

Up is down, truth is fake and reason is suspended. Lies rule supreme, confusion is rife and what was unacceptable becomes normalised, all aimed at undermining democratic processes and a rules-based international order.

The suspicion that there is a coordinated effort underway to tip the balance of power, internationally and within countries, towards the authoritarian, nationalistic, ultra-rich-aligned side of the political spectrum is hard to shake off.

But this cannot be achieved without active and passive support from a whole slew of middling yes-men, opportunists and people who shrug their shoulders and look the other way.

The toolbox of the campaign to dismantle the model that we've become familiar with in the West, loosely called liberal democracy, is vast and diverse. A central part of it is to destroy trust in institutions, processes and experts.

New level of perfidy

The latest example of this is the seemingly coordinated right-wing-nationalist whiplash reaction across Europe and even from the US, to the French fraud **verdict** against Marine Le Pen and her ban from politics for five years.

There are familiar fellow travellers such as Hungary's Viktor Orban, Geert Wilders of the Netherlands and Italy's Giorgia Meloni who saw fit to call into question the ruling of the French judiciary.

They have no problem attacking the well-established, widely respected legal apparatus of a fellow EU member state. We wouldn't expect anything less by now from the likes of Elon Musk and J. D. Vance, but within Europe this is a whole new level of perfidy.

Just to be clear about the facts of the case: Le Pen was convicted for massive fraud. French judges have meted out similar and even longer bans on politicians for lesser-seeming offences. Even the immediate nature of the ban, before her appeal has been heard, is not wholly unprecedented, let alone unreasoned.

Both centre-left and centre-right French politicians have faced bans

And other than what an arch-manipulator like Musk asserts, it is not the far-right that has borne the brunt of this. Both centre-left and centre-right French politicians have faced bans, among them most prominently, former Prime Ministers Alain Juppé and François Fillon.

Banning Le Pen is not in the interest of her opponents either. Should the ruling stand, the wave of right-wing indignation might well propel her replacement in the French presidential elections in two years' time into the Elysee Palace.

Yet, caving in and overturning or opposing a ban out of such centrist fears would also be placing politics above due process, only further undermining the system.

Far-right playbook

This is all part of the current far-right playbook: whip up the base, sow doubt among centrists, undermine the institutions. Simple enough, if plenty of fellow travellers and useful idiots go along and the establishment cowers behind its ramparts.

Partly, it has always been so, but for whatever combination of reasons, such politics have achieved breakthrough momentum. With Orban, Wilders and Meloni in charge in their respective countries, and Trump and Musk in the US, the low drone of misdirected discontent has acquired powerful megaphones.

Take Meloni, from a neo-fascist background,

who asserts to be a pro-Ukrainian European but at the same time fans the fires of distrust. In an [interview](#) with the Financial Times, she leaned into J. D. Vance's disproportionate assault on Europe's free-speech credentials.

"Europe has a bit lost itself" - Giorgia Meloni

"I have to say I agree," the FT reported her saying. "I've been saying this for years... Europe has a bit lost itself."

Not only does this come from an Italian leader who, as noted, has roots in the country's fascist past, which is not insignificant and should not be easily dismissed. It also comes from someone who has been criticised by the EU for eroding press freedom in her own country.

Gaslighting on a global scale

It's all part of gaslighting on a global scale that is at the very least actively aided and abetted but very possibly directed and instigated by well-known dictatorial regimes such as Russia.

What other word is there for the main American negotiator on the Middle East and Ukraine, real estate mogul Steve Witkoff, repeating Russia's talking points in his [interview](#) with Tucker Carlson?

Witkoff maintained that there's no danger that "Russians are going to march across Europe; that is preposterous by the way. We have something called NATO that we did not have in World War Two."

Mighty words from the representative of a president who has said he will not necessarily defend a fellow NATO member if attacked and who is undermining the alliance in all possible ways. The US might not be able to quit NATO for now, but it is quite busy rendering it meaningless.

Europe is already engaged in a shadow confrontation with Russia, be it in Ukraine or elsewhere

Witkoff's point on Russia not being a threat to Europe's core countries is repeated regularly in opinion pieces from both right- and left-wing writers. Either this is wilfully blind or calculated misdirection.

Europe is already engaged in a shadow confrontation with Russia, be it in Ukraine or elsewhere. Russia has for a long time been targeting Western democratic processes, opinion, infrastructure and influence, the latter not least in a series of almost proxy conflicts involving mercenaries in Africa.

The chances of a much larger, much more active conflagration in Europe are significant in the near future, as one European intelligence agency after the other reports.

In February, for example, the Danish Defence Intelligence Service [warned](#) that within the next five years, "Russia is likely to be more willing to use military force in a regional war against one or more European NATO countries if it perceives NATO as militarily weakened or politically divided."

Europe needs to balance its priorities

For whatever reasons, Vladimir Putin is likely to keep pushing at the edges of the European Union, trying to undo the spread of democracy and self-determination since the end of the Cold War.

No, Russia doesn't have to march into Paris in order to be engaged in a conflict with the EU, it will just have to attack, infiltrate or undermine a member state, for example in the Baltics. To pretend that this is not a clear and present danger truly is gaslighting in the service of an authoritarian regime.



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Appeasing Russia, as some suggest, by, for example, withdrawing NATO from countries in its vicinity, is by now both utterly impractical as well as counterproductive by encouraging Russian inroads into EU member states.

Amid such a threatening landscape, it beggars belief that even some German mainstream politicians are chasing a Trump-administration trial balloon of renewed energy cooperation with Russia.

Clearly, Europe needs to balance its priorities, with many people wondering why energy prices should rise, benefits be cut and development aid eviscerated in favour of defence spending and energy independence.

But a continent that will quickly lose its ability to regulate its own affairs or stand up for its interests internationally will, in the long run, only do worse by its population.

That, however, does not seem to be the concern of the countless ideologues and opportunists who help undermine the pillars, however flawed they might be, that help keep Europe safe. From NATO to the EU, to simply abiding by the law.