



By: **Ferry Biedermann**

Europe's faltering centrist restoration



With a narrow right-wing **victory** in Poland's presidential election and the **collapse** of the far-right-dominated Dutch government, the political landscape in Europe appears to be changing once more, yet the underlying trend of a rightward drift remains undiminished.

On balance, the EU might come out slightly ahead in terms of unity on issues such as adherence to its asylum, migration, and freedom of movement rules, as well as its plans for increased defence spending.

The far-right Dutch leader Geert Wilders, who dominated the now-defunct coalition, had posed challenges on both fronts. He pre-emptively had the Dutch object to Eurobonds to finance EU defence spending and had drawn up a list of migration demands that would have violated European law.

Yet, Brussels will rue the continuation of the right-wing's influence in Poland, where reforms to shore up the country's rule of law credentials will remain obstructed by the newly elected president, Karol Nawrocki.

Also, Nawrocki, while continuing Poland's support for Ukraine, has signalled he opposes Kyiv joining NATO, which will complicate a united European front.

Poland's worrying development

Of the two countries, Poland's development is the more worrying and the more representative of the long-term trend in Europe and beyond.

Donald Tusk's narrow centrist **victory** over the right-wing PiS in 2023 was hailed in Europe as a return to normalcy, if not sanity, after years of anti-EU provocations and rule of law backsliding. Yet, it now looks as if it might be as transient as the ill-fated Biden interregnum in the US.

Tusk might not even survive a motion of confidence he has called for next week in response to Nawrocki's victory.

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Many commentaries point at local Polish political circumstances to explain the right's victory, including Tusk not making good on his election promises. This is at the very least contradictory, if not outright bizarre, since it's been the outgoing PiS president, Andrzej Duda, who did his best to block Tusk's agenda.

Polish concerns have obviously determined a Polish presidential election, but they cannot hide that there is a steady and possibly still-growing hard-right or far-right core that can find the necessary coalition of voters to gain a majority.

It's the same lesson that the re-election of Donald Trump taught us about the US, regardless of inflation, Joe Biden's late exit from the race, or the merits of Kamala Harris's **candidacy**.

The right-wing's unexpected upending of Poland's centrist restoration, as it was seen in much of Europe, brings home the changes in the global political balance and highlights its persistence as well as its defiance of established political rationales.

The new normal

Poland has unarguably gained from its membership of the EU, even if not the entire population has benefited equally. The same can be said of Romania.

There, despite the centre's ultimate survival, the same dynamics can be seen at play. The significant support for the ultra-nationalists, at over 40 per cent in the recent presidential **election**, flies in the face of what many would regard as Romanians' interests.

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The far- or hard-right share of the vote or its standing in opinion polls across Europe is holding or rising, from Poland to Germany to the UK. Centrist or left-of-centre politicians would do well to regard this as the new normal, rather than hope for the balance to flip back somehow.

In Germany, the right-left centrist coalition has lost in popularity even before it has had time to act, while the far-right AfD is up by almost the same margin as the coalition partners are down.

In the UK, Reform UK has doubled its share of the votes in opinion polls, compared to its result in elections last year. Around one third of the voters now say they'd opt for Nigel Farage's vehicle, well ahead of Labour, although elections are still far off.

The hard-right has shown that it can gain popularity, rather than lose it, in the countries where it is in power. In Italy, Giorgia Meloni's Brothers of Italy is extending its lead in the polls. And in Belgium, Bart de Wever has dramatically increased his popularity since coming to power earlier this year.

Even in the US, among all the Trump upheavals, Republicans are for now expected to maintain their majorities in the House and the Senate in next year's midterms.

Never mind that the US economy is starting to feel the consequences of the Trump trade wars and the Trump Always Chickens Out jibes. And never mind Elon Musk copping out of DOGE after leaving the federal government in tatters. Or the US no longer being regarded a reliable international partner.

A pious dream

The radical-right core has been growing for decades across the democratic world and cannot be wished away anymore by centrists and those left of centre. The whole of politics has consequently moved to the right; witness UK Labour's rightward move on migration and benefits and Germany's Friedrich Merz's embrace of some AfD ideas.

The rationales for such movements might differ from country to country, but the shared absence of consistent and logical ideologies or even circumstances often baffles those who look for explanations. Why vote against your own apparent economic interests, or why clamp down on migration, when numbers are already down?



Geert Wilders still has a good shot at retaining his PVV's status as the largest party in parliament

The answer could partly lie in a reconfiguration of Samuel Huntington's much maligned 'clash of civilizations', except that 'cultural' conflict is not now between civilisational blocs but within those blocs and within the countries that comprise them.

Identity and tribalism appear increasingly to have the upper hand, or at least motivate a sizeable share of the electorate. Only to focus on the failings of the elites in meeting the needs of the 'common folk' misses the point that this has become a political division in itself, however vague and amorphous those dividing lines are.

That billionaires, corporations, authoritarian regimes, populists, etc. might try to make use of and manipulate this newly legitimated tribalism is not surprising. These forces have

been around forever but would not have much purchase in less polarised societies.

To wish for less polarisation is, for now, alas, a pious dream. Emphasising it might even distract from an effective opposition to the far-right is a criticism of centrism that is, among others, voiced by Bernie Sanders, AOC and Jeremy Corbyn.

The upcoming Dutch **elections**, expected in the autumn now that Geert Wilders has brought down the government, offer another opportunity for a centrist restoration in Europe. Wilders probably made his move because he saw his poll numbers slip. But he still has a good shot at retaining his PVV's status as the largest party in parliament.

That might not be enough for him to realise his ambition of becoming prime minister, though. While the harsh-right bloc will probably hold, the revival of the Christian Democrats and their more centrist course over the past year could well deprive it of a majority.

It might be small consolation for those wishing that tribal politics and polarisation would just vanish, and it would certainly revive the debate of how best to beat the far-right.