



By: **Ferry Biedermann**

Europe's populist wave is set to continue



Europe is still living through a populist moment, just like many other places around the globe. Evidence from a series of elections and polls suggests that for every apparent centrist accomplishment, several more signs point to a continuing populist and polarising wave.

Upcoming elections in Czechia will almost certainly see populist former Prime Minister Andrej Babiš **triumph** and possibly return to power. In Italy, hopes of a revival of the centre-left were dashed this week when Giorgia Meloni's right-wing populist Brothers of Italy **retained** the governorship of the bellwether Marche region.

In Germany, the ruling left-right coalition is struggling in the polls, **losing** ground in regional elections. Its centrist components have now, for the first time, been trailing the far-right populist AfD in the polls for several weeks.

In the Netherlands, facing elections later this month, the far-right populist leader Geert Wilders remains at the head of what will still almost certainly be the largest party in parliament.

Across the North Sea, Nigel Farage and his Reform UK dominate the polls, and in France, Marine Le Pen's RN has an ongoing lead, while Emmanuel Macron's centrist bloc appears to be in a death spiral.

The pro-European victory in Moldova is an outlier from a country facing an entirely different set of challenges. Evidence of Russian **interference** in the campaign and indications that it fell on fertile ground should also temper any triumphalism.

Not all of these movements are the same. Babiš's brand might be described as populism-light but several factors could push him to the extremes, both on the left and the right, if he wins. His prospective coalition partners are even more anti-EU, anti-NATO, opposed to weapons aid for Ukraine and, of course, anti-migrant.

Italy's Meloni has defied expectations of a much more anti-Brussels line and diminished support for Ukraine. But there too, if she goes strengthened into a second term, which might come as early as next year, it is uncertain whether her relative moderation will continue.

If the start of Donald Trump's second term is anything to go by, right-wing populists feel much less restrained and more vindictive the second time they gain power. We might find out soon whether that also holds for Babiš in Czechia.

Consistent support for hardline populists

The reasons behind this enduring populist wave, both in the US and Europe, appear very similar. In both cases, mainly economic unease, over inflation, cost of living and, in the Czech instance, retirement benefits seem to fuel the second coming of these populist strongmen, or semi-strongmen.

But that would be over-simplifying things. Centre-right and centre-left parties offer very different recipes for the economy. This is still true, even though the centre-left has in recent decades possibly bought too much into the prevailing capitalist narratives and the centre-right has too often tried to copy the populists.

One of the characteristics of the populist wave is the polarisation that it promotes, while its practitioners at the same time play the victim

There must be other reasons that there currently is consistent support of about one-third of the electorate and up in many Western countries for hardline, mostly far-right, populists.

Most of these parties, like Geert Wilders' PVV in the Netherlands, talk a great game about supporting the common folk and backing workers, but when push comes to shove, they

follow almost universally hard-capitalist socio-economic paths.

One of the characteristics of the populist wave is the polarisation that it promotes, while its practitioners at the same time play the victim.

The current right-wing populism thrives on promoting hatred, both towards vulnerable minorities and elites, and then crying wolf when called out on it.

Living through a populist moment

None of the explanations that are being proposed for this phenomenon – from technological change and social media to rising inequality, to an alienated political class, and more – seem wholly adequate. Neither are the by now omnipresent influence campaigns, whether foreign or domestic.

To some it seems that we are just living through a populist moment, like there have been others in history. This, at least, appears to be the view that the American author and activist Ta-Nehisi Coates **expressed** in a conversation with commentator Ezra Klein in The New York Times. It focused on the latter's comments after the assassination of right-wing agitator Charlie Kirk.

The real meat and bones of populist appeal can be found in a truly divisive us-against-them type of rhetoric

“We’re up against some really, really powerful forces of history and powerful narratives,” Coates said. Even though he seemed to be referring mostly to inequality and anti-black racism in the US, the same could be said for the wider right-wing populist upsurge across Western democracies.

While socio-economic topics, such as inflation, housing or pensions, provide the cover for many populists, the real meat and bones of

their appeal can be found in a truly divisive us-against-them type of rhetoric.

This is mostly aimed at migrants but can also be turned against other minority groups, along racial or sectarian lines, or against gender issues.

Signs that the populist wave has crested—or not

In Europe, the latter can particularly, but not exclusively, be **seen** in the former East Bloc, with Slovakia under ostensibly left-wing populist Robert Fico last week following Viktor Orban's Hungary in turning back the rights of same-sex couples and transgender people.



Geert Wilders continues to tap into the growing intolerance in the Netherlands

This could simply be the pendulum swinging back in Eastern Europe after a rapid post-Soviet lurch towards a more liberal European mainstream. This would be in line with Coates' view of historic forces and the long, multi-generational fight to overcome prejudice.

But many of the same issues can be found in longer-established Western European democracies. For example, in Italy, where Meloni is also targeting a range of LGBTQ+ rights. In many cases, the politicians in question seem to have found their deeply conservative roots only when it became politically expedient.

In the Netherlands, Geert Wilders used to be a

firm defender of gay rights against what he characterised as Muslim intolerance. In recent years, though, he has made a string of disparaging remarks about topics such as LGBTQ+ “indoctrination” in schools and has opposed more gay and transgender rights.

Wilders continues to tap into the growing intolerance in the Netherlands, a country that still markets itself as a tolerant haven. Like Babiš, he has an increasing number of rivals on the far-right. Together, they command over one-third of the electorate.

Still, like his Czech counterpart, he might not be able to form a coalition after the elections. If that happens both in Czechia and the Netherlands, some might see it as a sign that the populist wave has crested. In fact, it is gathering strength both under and above the surface.