



By: *Ferry Biedermann*

# Beyond normalisation: Europe's far-right consolidates and makes gains



Europe's far-right parties have made remarkable gains in a recent series of votes across the continent, although their rise is often overshadowed by narratives of centrist resilience.

National elections in Denmark and Slovenia, state elections in Germany, local elections in France and a referendum in Italy all point towards an uptick in the far-right vote.

The results imply that Europe is well beyond the once much-discussed stage of 'normalisation' of extremist policies. Far-right parties are now an integral and consolidated part of the political landscape and have shown both resilience and capacity for growth.

The fact that they made significant gains in all of these elections has largely been treated as secondary, mainly due to expectation management: They didn't win outright and centrists also did relatively well.

But they've made something of a comeback in both Denmark and Slovenia, where centre-left blocs had pushed them to the margins in recent years.

## Denmark and Slovenia's electoral shifts

In **Denmark's** highly touted case the main centre-left Social Democrat party has overtly adopted some of the anti-immigrant policies espoused by the far-right Danish People's Party. The latter, at some point, received more than 20 per cent of the vote in national elections but then faded significantly.

Now the DPP has tripled its share of the vote compared to four years ago. It and two smaller anti-immigrant far-right or populist-right parties are together back up to some 17 per cent.

This appears to put the lie to claims that the Social Democrats' tough migration policies have succeeded in defanging the far-right.

## Smaller far-right parties made bigger gains, and the ruling centre-left coalition lost 13 seats, leading to a hung parliament

In **Slovenia**, while there's some reluctance to describe former Prime Minister Janez Janša and his Slovenian Democratic Party as far-right, the label does fit in many ways, given his illiberal policies in his previous term and his open ties to Viktor Orbán and Donald Trump.

While his SDS only gained one seat in the recent elections, smaller far-right parties made bigger gains, and the ruling centre-left coalition lost 13 seats, leading to a hung parliament.

The focus has been on Janša not winning the Slovenian elections outright and the likelihood of the current centrist, pro-European prime minister, Robert Golob, being able to hang on. But as elsewhere, this ignores the resilience of the far-right and populist-right vote.

## France's electoral dynamics

Regional and local elections are not always a strong indication of national trends, often showing lower turnout numbers and focusing either on local issues or facilitating a relatively cost-free protest vote. Yet, both in France and in Germany, a lot can be gleaned from them this year.

France's local elections were particularly poignant, as they came just over a year ahead of the end of the Macron era. They were widely seen as a test of strength before the April 2027 presidential elections.

In the event, the worst fears of the mainstream were not realised, and the **Rassemblement National** (RN) of Marine Le Pen and Jordan Bardella did not make a breakthrough in any of the major cities beyond Perpignan, which it already controlled.

Candidates from the centre-left Parti

Socialiste and the centre-right Les Républicains did relatively well, with the socialists signally hanging on in Paris even without the support of the far-left.

But RN chairman and likely presidential candidate Bardella spoke of an unprecedented “breakthrough” for his party, and rightly so. The far-right party more than tripled the number of mayoral and council positions to more than 3000 and gained control over 60 municipalities, compared to the mid-teens in 2020.

### Each win and near-win makes the RN more acceptable as a real alternative to the mainstream parties

On the one hand, that shows the **steady progress** the RN is making under Bardella towards being accepted as a mainstream party by large swathes of the French electorate. This makes him a much more formidable challenger next year, when he will run if a conviction for embezzlement against Le Pen is upheld.

On the other hand, the local elections showed that in many places the anti-RN front is holding for now. This means that, as happened now three times previously, the combined mainstream vote could once again stop the RN candidate in the second round of the presidential elections.

But the gains in the local elections, together with the marked progression in the second-round share of the vote in the presidential elections – from 17.8 per cent in 2002 to 33.9 per cent in 2017 and 41.5 per cent in 2022 – tell a different story.

Not only is the RN holding on to its earlier gains, it is progressing well beyond them in almost every election. It also has gained allies on the right that broaden its electoral appeal, notably the Union des droites pour la République of Eric Ciotti, who won the race for mayor in Nice.

Each win and near-win makes the RN more

acceptable as a real alternative to the mainstream parties, and if the anti-RN vote holds in next year’s presidential elections, it’s likely to be by a whisker.

## Germany's far-right surge

In Germany, the far-right **AfD** was not expected to come out on top in either of the two regional elections that were held in March. This might explain why it has not figured large in the narrative.

But it made unprecedented gains in two West German states, Baden-Württemberg and Rhineland-Palatinate. In both, more or less doubling the share of the vote to around 19 per cent.

The AfD’s leader, Alice Weidel, crowed that she was expecting more gains in three more state elections scheduled for September and that, despite the current mainstream ‘firewall’, the other parties would be knocking at her door to find majorities.

### The much larger population of the West will mean a much larger AfD presence in the Bundestag if these results hold on the national level

This is not unthinkable, as the upcoming elections are in the East, where her party might well become so big that it could in fact for the first time gain power in a state parliament, with all the attendant implications of such a breakthrough.

The other major significance of the sharp rise in the AfD’s vote lies in the fact that these are two wealthy Western German states, whereas the far-right’s strength had previously been largely limited to the former East Germany.

The much larger population of the West will mean a much larger AfD presence in the Bundestag, the German parliament, if these results hold on the national level.

## Italy's judicial reform referendum

Lastly, the Italian referendum on judicial reform advocated by right-wing Prime Minister **Giorgia Meloni**. While in a slightly different category, the technical and too many incomprehensible natures of the proposed changes turned the plebiscite into a perceived test of popularity for Meloni.



*Brothers of Italy party is still riding high in the polls, outperforming its 2022 performance that propelled Giorgia Meloni to power*

The quite clear-cut rejection, 54 per cent no vs. 46 per cent yes, amid a relatively high turnout of 60 per cent is seen as a challenge to her brand of populist-right politics and her close relationship with Donald Trump.

As such, it could spell trouble for her coalition in next year's parliamentary elections.

Yet, her far-right Brothers of Italy party is still riding high in the polls, outperforming its 2022 performance that propelled Meloni to power.

Also, 46 per cent support for something that Meloni campaigned for personally and that was badly understood is not a bad starting point at all for a future electoral campaign.

It illustrates, at the very least in Italy too, the same consolidation and acceptance of the far-right that can be seen across Europe.