

# The Rise of the Authoritarian Populist Right: The Illiberal Defenders of Freedom?

---

PÉTER KREKÓ

In recent years, political forces promoting exclusionary, nationalist, and illiberal ideologies are undeniably on the rise—not only in authoritarian regimes, but across the democratic world as well. Symbols once believed to be buried in the past, such as the Nazi or Roman salute, have resurfaced in mainstream political movements. For instance, in 2018, members of the far-right group Generation Identity were filmed performing the Roman salute in Austria, reminiscent of historical fascist movements.<sup>1</sup> In 2024, members of the youth wing of Italian PM Giorgia Meloni’s governing party were caught on tape making Nazi salutes.<sup>2</sup> Similarly, far-right activists and politicians in the United States have been seen engaging in or defending such gestures, thus normalizing them in contemporary politics.<sup>3</sup> As recently as January 2025, prominent U.S. public figures—including Elon Musk and Steve Bannon—have used the salute, only to deny it afterward. But this game only adds to the gesture’s theatrical appeal, turning it into a secret expression of one’s “true” beliefs under supposed ideological oppression.

This flashy shift in symbolism has occurred alongside the growing prevalence of overtly racist and exclusionary rhetoric. In countries such as Hungary and Italy, mainstream politicians have adopted narratives that frame migrants as existential threats to national identity, often using

---

PÉTER KREKÓ is a Hungarian political psychologist and associate professor at Eötvös Loránd University in Budapest and an associate fellow at the Institute of Advanced Studies Köszeg. He serves as the director of Political Capital Institute, a think tank specializing in political analysis, and is a senior fellow at the Center for European Policy Analysis. Krekó’s research focuses on disinformation, political polarization, conspiracy theories, populism, and authoritarian influence. He was a Fulbright Visiting Professor at Indiana University in 2016–2017, a visiting professor at JHU SAIS Bologna Policy Institute, and a Reagan-Fascell Fellow at the National Endowment for Democracy. The study was supported by the National Research, Development, and Innovation Office (Grant No.: NKFI-K138429), National Research, Development, and Innovation Office: K1 (Grant No.: NKFI-K147292) and European Union’s Horizon 2020 research and innovation program, “MORES” project (Grant No.: 101132601).

---

Copyright © 2025 by the *Brown Journal of World Affairs*

openly racist language previously thought to be taboo. Prior to this decade, mainstream far-right parties typically used softer, more “politically correct” ethno-nationalist language, blaming certain cultural patterns and traditions (e.g., the treatment of women among Muslims) instead of making explicit references to the color of skin.<sup>4</sup> But many politicians no longer feel the need to mask their agenda behind subtle or restrained language. For example, in July 2022, Viktor Orbán, Prime Minister of Hungary, made his point clear when he declared, “We [Hungarians] are not a mixed race ... and we do not want to become a mixed race.”<sup>5</sup> Meanwhile, in the American media, figures like journalist Tucker Carlson have promoted the “Great Replacement” conspiracy theory—a set of unsubstantiated claims that the “globalists” are deliberately replacing white Americans with immigrants and people of color to erode traditional American values and deprive “old America” of political power. This theory, previously confined to the fringes of white supremacist circles, became a cornerstone of the politics of Hungary’s Viktor Orbán as an official explanation for the demographic trend in Europe. Conspiracy theories now flourish at the highest levels of political decision-making, shaping policies on immigration, public health, and election integrity, among others, in Europe and the United States.

8

This article argues that a key driver of the populist right’s success is its ability to position itself as the primary defender of individual freedoms. While traditionally associated with authoritarianism, the far right has ef-

---

**While traditionally associated with authoritarianism, the far right has effectively co-opted the language of liberty, portraying itself as the last bastion of free speech, bodily autonomy, and national sovereignty against an intrusive and oppressive liberal elite.**

---

fectively co-opted the language of liberty, portraying itself as the last bastion of free speech, bodily autonomy, and national sovereignty against an intrusive and oppressive liberal elite. This rhetorical strategy enables far-right movements to attract a broad-

er spectrum of voters, including those who may not fully align with authoritarian populist ideals but feel alienated by progressive politics.

For instance, during the COVID-19 pandemic, right-wing populist leaders such as Brazil’s Jair Bolsonaro, as well as the Netherlands’ Geert Wilders, framed public health measures taken by the government as an as-

sault on personal freedom rather than a necessary collective response.<sup>6</sup> By championing resistance to lockdowns and vaccine mandates, these leaders broadened their support base beyond traditional nationalist voters to include libertarians, conspiracy theorists, and disillusioned citizens skeptical of state intervention. Similarly, in the United States, Florida Governor Ron DeSantis has weaponized the concept of “freedom” to justify policies limiting LG-BTQ+ rights and educational curricula, framing them as efforts to protect free parental decisions and free speech rather than as acts of exclusion.<sup>7</sup>

### **IS THERE A POPULIST RIGHT ZEITGEIST IN THE WORLD?**

Without overgeneralizing, we can identify a global trend in the rise of nationalist-populist political forces. While these movements are not monolithic, they share common themes and rhetorical strategies. This trend has become especially pronounced after the 2024 super-election year when an extraordinarily high number of national-level elections took place.

Although the far right has yet to dominate the political mainstream in Europe, it continues to gain momentum. The European parliamentary elections last summer resulted in a surge of populist, Eurosceptic, and far-right parties. Currently, 26 percent of the mandates in the European Parliament belong to far-right, euroskeptic group. The most moderate among them is the Eurosceptic, conservative European Conservatives and Reformists.<sup>8</sup> Within their statutes, these parties claim to be “dedicated to individual liberty, national sovereignty, parliamentary democracy, private property, limited government, free trade and the devolution of power.”

Meanwhile, parties within this grouping, such as the post-fascist Brothers of Italy or the Polish Law and Justice, have implemented measures curbing individual freedoms, centralizing political power, and increasing political influence in the media. The Patriots for Europe—a political group positioned further to the right—have made statements proclaiming their belief in a European system “which defends real freedoms, basic human rights and human dignity, while fiercely resisting attempts to curtail or redefine these freedoms.”<sup>9</sup> Viktor Orbán’s Fidesz party, a leading voice within this grouping, passed a constitutional modification limiting the freedom of assembly by banning gay pride, legally defining gender strictly as male or female, and criminalizing drug consumption to a level unseen in the European Union thus far. The Europe of Sovereign Nations, the most extreme grouping in the European Parliament, includes members who promote openly anti-Semitic

racist discourse and policies. In their past political campaigns, they have advocated for shooting migrants at the border, banning homosexuality, and the sterilization of criminals. At the same time, they claim to defend the freedom of European citizens and the sovereignty of European nations from the tyrannical Brussels elites and institutions. Their aim is, in their own words, “to reclaim the power and independence of its member states, and to restore sovereignty and self-determination to European nations.”<sup>10</sup> Notably, with 192 MEPs in radical right groups, their influence now rivals, and in some cases even surpasses, that of the center-right European People’s Party. This marks a clear shift in the *Zeitgeist* of European politics.<sup>11</sup>

However, this shift is not limited to the European Parliament. As seen in Austria and Romania, national elections have brought far-right leaders to power. In Germany, Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) secured second place in the February 2025 elections. Across the EU, the far right continues to gain momentum, steadily drawing voters away from centrist parties. Upcoming elections, including the Czech Republic’s in the fall of 2025, are expected to further bolster far-right representation.

Currently, seven EU governments have far-right parties in their governing coalitions, including Slovakia, Hungary, Sweden, Latvia, Italy, and Finland. While the far right remains divided into three separate factions within the European Parliament, cooperation among them is increasing.<sup>12</sup> In the United States, the populist right has regained power in the executive branch, holds a majority in both the House and the Senate, and is backed by a conservative Supreme Court majority. Once regarded as an anti-establishment force, the U.S. populist right is now consolidating its position as “the establishment.”<sup>13</sup> This clear consolidation of power has disproven prior beliefs that the far right would lose voter confidence after gaining office. As many examples in the world indicate, including Hungary, Poland, and the United States, populist parties have evolved from oppositional movements into resilient governing forces capable of building and maintaining institutions. These parties should not be regarded as mere symptoms of institutional dysfunction but rather enduring movements able to institutionalize their rule—either by creating new political structures or taking over existing ones.<sup>14</sup>

Drawing on Cas Mudde’s pathological normalcy thesis, populist radical-right parties such as Viktor Orbán’s Fidesz are not atypical or extraordinary.<sup>15</sup> Instead, they represent an ostensibly pathological manifestation of mainstream political tendencies that normalize far-right

rhetoric and attitudes. Reservations about immigration, distrust towards the institutions of liberal democracy, and disapproval of supranational EU institutions are widespread even in the most developed European states. The radical right's emphasis on the importance of national and individual freedom—a commonly accepted value—fits into the pattern of “pathological normalcy” in these democratic systems. The radical right is not the antithesis of the mainstream but rather its exaggerated caricature. While mainstream political parties may passively uphold democratic freedoms and individual liberties, the far-right actively brands themselves as the true “champions” of these ideals.

Transatlantic far-right solidarity is also growing. Parties that share hostility toward international institutions and the European Union now are building support for one another. For example, the German AfD has received a significant boost from the U.S. populist right, not only through Elon Musk's social media platform X but also via Vice President J.D. Vance's advocacy to end AfD's political isolation. In a symbolic move, Vance refused to meet with German Chancellor Olaf Scholz during the Munich Security Forum, instead choosing to meet with AfD leader Alice Weidel.<sup>16</sup> The vast network of international institutions dedicated to refining and disseminating far-right ideology across the Atlantic demonstrates that its ideological influence is not only deeply entrenched, but also likely to endure and expand—driven by the goal of sparking a cultural revolution.

The emergence of this “Populist Internationale” reflects a broader anti-intellectual movement and a deep-rooted “center-periphery” conflict.<sup>17</sup> This perceived dichotomy—between capital vs. countryside, urban vs. rural, and elite vs. people—appears more significant than objective socio-economic status. At the same time, calls for freedom and liberty characterize far-right politics. When Vance spoke at the Munich Security Conference on 14 February 2025, he accused European governments of suppressing free speech and undermining democratic values, citing legal actions against individuals in the UK and Germany for expressing controversial opinions. Additionally, at an AI summit in Paris, Vance warned against excessive regulation of social media, framing his stance as a defense of free speech.<sup>18</sup>

Nationalist-populist forces are making inroads beyond the Euro-Atlantic world as well. In India, although Narendra Modi lost some support in the 2024 national elections, his party (the Hindu Nationalist Party) has continued to maintain its dominance. Surprisingly, far-right narratives are also emerging in less-expected places where there are practically no political

freedoms. In China, Xi Jinping's rhetoric is increasingly aligned with right-wing authoritarian themes. Despite Xi's official allegiance to the Chinese Communist Party's traditional line, his anti-woke, anti-LGBTQ+ discourse and emphasis on masculinity echo the ideological playbook of far-right strongmen.<sup>19</sup> While China cannot be classified as part of the far-right surge, Chinese politicians' adoption of similar rhetorical strategies indicates the increasing global appeal of nationalist-populist narratives.

In Russia, Vladimir Putin's unsurprising victory in an unfree and unfair election has solidified his status as an icon for the global far right. He is admired for his authoritarian, Christian-traditionalist politics and emphasis on masculinity. Yet, while repressing political freedoms within his country, Putin simultaneously and ironically presents himself as a defender of free speech. Addressing the BRICS Media Summit in Moscow on the 120th anniversary of the TASS state news agency, he stated, "Real freedom of speech, which reflects different opinions, enables the search for compromises and common approaches to solving the world's problems."<sup>20</sup> Despite these statements, the combination of draconian laws, state-controlled media, the banning of international news outlets, and severe crackdowns on independent journalism, including the harassment, imprisonment, and even assassination of journalists, indicates that Russia does not uphold the principle of free expression. Still, Putin's rhetoric illustrates how autocratic nationalist leaders appropriate the language of freedom to challenge the liberal international order.

## THE POPULIST RIGHT'S REVOLT AGAINST THE ENEMIES OF FREEDOM

The global populist right frames itself as a revolutionary force against what it perceives as an "excess of liberalism." It paradoxically presents liberalism both as an ideology of oppression, restricting personal freedoms through enforced political correctness, gender norms, and climate policies, and as a fundamen-

**The global populist right frames itself as a revolutionary force against what it perceives as an "excess of liberalism."**

tal threat to individual liberty. This rhetoric constructs liberalism as a totalitarian force undermining traditional values and national sovereignty.

This logic is exemplified by two of Europe's strongest far-right parties, the Austrian Freedom Party and the Dutch Freedom Party, which both use the

word “freedom” in their names.

The far right’s discourse surrounding liberalism often targets four key areas. First, the politics of tolerance, inclusion, and non-discrimination. Populist right-wing actors frequently frame liberal democratic commitments to inclusion, diversity, and non-discrimination as forms of ideological coercion. This is often encapsulated in terms like “wokeness” and “political correctness,” which are portrayed as instruments used by cultural elites to silence dissent and homogenize the world. For example, in Hungary, Prime Minister Viktor Orbán has argued that progressive values impose an “ideological straitjacket” on traditional European societies.<sup>21</sup> Similarly, the French *Rassemblement National* under Marine Le Pen has condemned affirmative action and diversity policies as threats to the Republican principle of *laïcité* (secularism), framing them as favoritism toward minority groups at the expense of the native French population.<sup>22</sup>

Second, the far right has expressed its discontent with gender-related policies, including the “Gender Dictatorship” narrative. Right-wing populists conflate LGBTQ+ rights, gender identity politics, and discussions of masculinity into a singular threat under the concept of “gender ideology” or “gender dictatorship.” The Polish Law and Justice Party has been particularly vocal in portraying more inclusive gender policies as an existential threat to national and religious identity. Former president of Poland Andrzej Duda, for example, called LGBTQ+ rights an “imported ideology” that is more destructive and oppressive than communism.<sup>23</sup> In Hungary, the government has banned the dissemination of LGBTQ+-related content in schools, framing it as a defense against “Western liberal indoctrination.”<sup>24</sup>

A third area that the far-right has targeted is environmental regulations, or the “Green Dictatorship.” Environmental policies, particularly those associated with the EU Green Deal, are framed as oppressive measures that restrict economic freedom and impose undue hardship on ordinary citizens. Right-wing populists often associate green policies with urban elites disconnected from the struggles of rural and working-class communities. The Dutch farmers’ protests against nitrogen emission regulations in 2022 became a rallying point for European populists, who claimed environmental laws were being used to “expropriate” farmers in the name of climate change.<sup>25</sup> In Germany, the AfD has consistently opposed climate policies proposed by liberals, branding them as a “climate dictatorship” imposed by globalist elites.<sup>26</sup>

The fourth key area targeted by the far right was COVID-related poli-



cies, which many far-right governments coined as the “COVID Dictatorship.” The populist right has framed pandemic restrictions—lockdowns, vaccine mandates, and mask requirements—as manifestations of a broader authoritarian project. In Italy, Matteo Salvini’s League Party and Giorgia Meloni’s Brothers of Italy strongly opposed vaccine mandates, arguing that they violated individual freedoms and were part of a larger “globalist” agenda. Protests across Europe, such as the German “Querdenken,” a COVID-skeptic movement, aligned with right-wing populist parties to challenge what they saw as an “undemocratic” imposition of health measures.<sup>27</sup>

The populist right’s critique of liberalism is not merely ideological but also strategic; it mobilizes public grievances by framing liberal democratic policies as coercive. In a world with increasing restrictions, this allows populist leaders to position themselves as defenders of “true” freedom. In Europe,

---

**At the same time, the far-right is not a monolith, and it is important to note the slight nuances in rhetoric between different far-right regimes.**

---

this rhetoric has had tangible political consequences, influencing policies on migration, gender, climate, and public health, among others.

While these narratives

often distort liberalism’s intended impact, they resonate with voters who feel alienated by rapid social and political changes.

At the same time, the far-right is not a monolith, and it is important to note the slight nuances in rhetoric between different far-right parties and regimes. For instance, Hungary’s government is a vocal opponent of “woke-ness,” LGBTQ+ rights, and environmental activism, but it has remained relatively mainstream regarding COVID-19 policies. While calls for liberty and freedom against oppressive liberals and globalists seem to be a universal narrative on the global far right, the exact topics and policy issues have varied. As a result of the appropriation of the message of “freedom,” voter groups that previously tended to vote liberal are increasingly gravitating towards populist right parties. In the 2017 French presidential election, Marine Le Pen of the National Rally Party (RN) received significant support from younger voters, particularly those aged 18 to 35. This demographic shift underscores the party’s appeal beyond its traditional base. A similar demographic shift can be seen in the rise of the Sweden Democrats (*Sverigedemokraterna*) and the Portugal Chega. The narrative of “freedom” remains a powerful and adaptable tool, capable of attracting broad support



across diverse audiences.

### **THE CASE OF HUNGARY: IS IT A POPULIST MODEL?**

Post-communist Hungary was an early adopter of the Populist Zeitgeist—a shift whereby populist ideas and rhetoric have become increasingly normalized and adopted by non-populist, mainstream parties.<sup>28</sup> The rise of the party can be attributed to multiple factors, including widespread disillusionment with democratic ideals and Western models, coupled with political opportunism.

From the beginning of his political career, Orbán has consistently portrayed himself as a defender of individual and national freedoms against what he perceives as an increasingly oppressive liberal establishment—particularly represented by the European Union. This narrative is evident in several of his speeches and actions, which have emphasized Hungary's struggle for independence and positioned his government as the last bastion of freedom against globalist forces seeking to erode national identity and self-determination.

A recurring theme in Orbán's rhetoric is the representation of the EU as an oppressive force that undermines national sovereignty. In his 2022 speech at CPAC Texas, he declared, "We are the David against the woke Goliath," characterizing Hungary as a small but proud nation resisting Western ideological dominance.<sup>29</sup> Similarly, during the National Holiday Speech on 15 March 2024, he accused the EU of attempting to "overthrow" his government and install a "puppet regime," drawing historical parallels between Brussels and past foreign oppressors such as the Habsburgs and the Soviets.<sup>30</sup>

In an October 2024 speech at the European Parliament, Orbán directly challenged EU leadership, stating that "Brussels wants to tell us who we are, how to live, and who we must accept in our country. But Hungarians are free people; we bow to no one."<sup>31</sup> This rhetoric is part of his broader effort to frame European Parliamentary elections as a fight between "sovereigntist forces" like his Fidesz party and the "federalist elites" who he claims seek to strip member states of their autonomy and individuals of their political liberties.

Orbán also frequently frames Western liberalism as a form of ideological repression, portraying Hungary as a haven for those who reject the "politically correct" norms of modern liberal democracies. In his 2025 State

of the Nation Address, he stated, “What we see today in the West is no longer democracy but a repressive power machine that silences dissent. The liberal world order claims to be about freedom, but in reality, it is an ideological prison.”<sup>32</sup> He characterizes Hungary as a “freedom-loving nation” that resists foreign attempts to dictate its domestic policies, a narrative that has solidified his domestic support.

Even if these ideas are not revolutionary, their impact has extended beyond Orbán’s constituency. His rhetoric serves as a model for many nationalist-authoritarian movements worldwide,<sup>33</sup> positioning Hungary as a successful “laboratory” of illiberalism.<sup>34</sup>

## CHALLENGING THE RISE OF THE FAR RIGHT

As I argue above, an important driver behind the rise of the populist right is that illiberal and authoritarian forces have paradoxically succeeded in presenting themselves as the defenders of freedom and liberties against what they claim to be an increasingly oppressive global establishment. However, their position and rhetoric are false and hypocritical—for example, Orbán, while professing support for press freedom, has implemented numerous measures to silence critical media. In addition, self-proclaimed “free speech absolutists” in the United States have actively pushed for banning certain theories from universities, such as Critical Race Theory in the state of Florida. Populist authoritarians in power have systematically undermined democratic institutions. Yet, their agenda still resonates with a broad segment of the electorate, and mainstream parties seem to be unsuccessful in pushing back on these claims. Furthermore, the emergence of an illiberal left in the Anglo-Saxon World and beyond—especially in universities, cultural institutions, and certain intellectual circles—helped the nativist-populist right to paint itself as the ultimate defender of individual freedoms. Allowing the far right to co-opt the language of freedom has precipitated its rising popularity. To effectively challenge this trend, political forces in the democratic mainstream must change their strategy. Below, I recommend five broader principles to guide this shift:

### 1. **Recognizing the far right as a permanent political force:**

The far right is no longer a marginal movement, but an entrenched part of contemporary democratic systems. Calls to ban, silence, or exclude far-right actors with substantial political support from democratic debate are counterproductive, as these actors often thrive

on their stigmatized identity.<sup>35</sup> As long as democratic institutions remain intact and political change is possible, the far right can—and likely will—be part of both government and opposition.

**2. Respecting democratic outcomes to avoid fueling the populist “freedom revolt”:**

In a liberal democracy, the legitimacy of the system rests on the integrity of free and fair elections, including the acceptance of their outcomes, even when they produce unfavorable or uncomfortable results. Intervening to exclude candidates from the democratic process—especially through legal or administrative means—may seem like a safeguard against extremism, but, in fact, it often functions as a *nuclear option*: a dramatic and potentially irreversible move that threatens to destroy the very system it aims to protect.

The recent cases of France and Romania are illustrative of this phenomenon. In Romania, the 2024 decision to annul the presidential election results—under the pretext of legal irregularities—has undermined public trust in institutions. At the same time, it has amplified extremist narratives about elite manipulation and stolen sovereignty. Similarly, in France, attempts to prevent Marine Le Pen from running in the elections due to accusations of embezzling EU funds risk backfiring since they reinforce the populist claim that the political elite rig the system to silence dissenting voices.

Such interventions can validate the core grievance of anti-establishment movements: that “freedom” and “the will of the people” are tolerated only when they align with mainstream liberal preferences. This paradox fuels the populist revolt and erodes democratic norms from within. If liberal democracies start treating democracy itself as a conditional privilege rather than a universal right, they risk becoming what they claim to oppose.

**3. Reclaiming individual freedom as a mainstream value:** The authoritarian populist right has successfully positioned itself as the champion of personal freedoms, largely because many voters perceive liberals and the center-left as increasingly paternalistic. To counter this perception, a renewed commitment to classical liberal values like individual liberties, pluralism, and open discourse is necessary. Defenders of liberal democracy must not cede the language of freedom to those who weaponize it to justify illiberal policies.

#### **4. Exposing the hypocrisy of far-right “liberal authoritarianism”:**

Freedom is the cornerstone of all democratic and semi-democratic systems, and the political force that represents it most convincingly holds a powerful advantage. Conversely, movements or parties perceived as oppressive or restrictive tend to lose in free elections over time. Even if they remain in power, they do so through undemocratic means, including electoral manipulation and violence.

Illiberal, populist right-wing parties, despite their authoritarian tendencies, have developed a kind of immunity to criticism about their totalitarian roots. The hard-learned lessons of the 20th century appear to have been forgotten in much of the West: voters no longer automatically reject parties labeled as “fascist” or “Nazi,” a reality evidenced by recent elections in Italy, Germany, and the United States. Moreover, the far right has learned to turn such attacks to their advantage, often putting mainstream politicians on the defensive and paralyzing them by co-opting the language of free speech. For example, Marine Le Pen has most prominently quoted Voltaire recently regarding free speech in French politics. Furthermore, her party, the Rassemblement National (RN), traces its roots to the collaborationist, pro-German Vichy regime and was founded by individuals with ties to Nazi sympathizers and anti-Semites. Le Pen was widely seen as a front-runner in the upcoming French election until her candidacy was suspended by the courts—a development that may still result in her deputy becoming the next president of France.

#### **5. Naming today’s threats:**

Instead of endlessly pointing fingers at the specters of the past, democratic politicians must focus on the concrete and imminent threats posed by the illiberal right—for example, they must make clear and highlight the adverse policy effects championed by the far-right through campaigns.” These include attacks on freedom of movement through harsh border policies, threats to religious freedom via discriminatory laws, and restrictions on democratic rights through intimidation and abuse of state power—all of which we have already witnessed in Poland, Hungary, and even the United States.

To reverse the appropriation of “freedom” by authoritarian populists, liberal democratic actors must not only reclaim this concept rhetorically but also demonstrate how their policies expand, rather than restrict, personal

liberties. This means clearly distinguishing between genuine freedom and the selective, exclusionary “freedoms” advanced by the far right. Mainstream parties should communicate how liberal democratic institutions safeguard individual rights—including for minorities and dissenters—while also emphasizing the tangible threats posed by the far right’s illiberal policies.

Naming today’s threats requires more than allusions to historical parallels. It demands highlighting present-day consequences: the silencing of journalists, the criminalization of peaceful protest, the erosion of judicial independence, and the rollback of women’s and LGBTQ+ rights. Campaigns should focus on the everyday impact of these authoritarian shifts and their impact on what people can read, say, teach, and believe. Liberal actors must build compelling narratives around freedom that are grounded in fairness, pluralism, and institutional protections, while refusing to concede moral high ground to those who use “freedom” as a mask for repression.

The populist right has skillfully rebranded itself as the defender of liberty while enacting policies that erode it. To confront this paradox, democratic forces must reclaim the discourse of freedom, expose the hypocrisy of illiberal populism, and anchor their political messaging in both principled and pragmatic defenses of democratic rights. Only by naming the real threats and offering a hopeful, inclusive vision of freedom can the tide of authoritarian populism be stemmed. 

## NOTES

1. Cas Mudde, *The Far Right Today* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2019).
2. Laura Gozzi, "Italy PM Rejects Fascist Nostalgia after Youth Wing Scandal," *BBC News*, July 3, 2024, <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cv2g62qz36lo>.
3. Jason Stanley, *How Fascism Works: The Politics of Us and Them* (New York: Random House, 2020).
4. Ruth Wodak, *The Politics of Fear: The Shameless Normalization of Far-Right Discourse* (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, 2021).
5. Viktor Orbán, "Speech by Prime Minister Viktor Orbán at the 31st Bálványos Summer Free University and Student Camp," *About Hungary*, <https://abouthungary.hu/speeches-and-remarks/speech-by-prime-minister-viktor-orban-at-the-31-st-balvanyos-summer-free-university-and-student-camp>.
6. Florian Bieber, *Authoritarianism and Resistance in the Age of COVID-19* (London: Routledge, 2022).
7. Charles Doherty, "The Politics of Freedom: How Conservatives Have Redefined Individual Rights," *Journal of Political Ideologies* 28, no. 2 (2023): 189–206.
8. Own calculations based on the website of the European Parliament.
9. "The Main Opposition Party in the European Union," *Patriots.eu*, <https://patriots.eu/manifesto/>.
10. ESN Group, "What We Stand For," <https://esn-group.eu/what-we-stand-for>.
11. European Parliament, *Election Results: Composition of the New European Parliament*, (2024).
12. Cas Mudde, "The Far Right's European Surge: Patterns and Pitfalls," *Journal of Democracy* 35, no. 4 (2024): 121–134.
13. Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt, *Tyranny of the Minority* (New York: Crown Publishing, 2023).
14. Zsolt Enyedi, "Understanding the Rise of the Populist Establishment," *LSE EUROPP Blog*, July 4, 2018, <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/europpblog/2018/07/04/understanding-the-rise-of-the-populist-establishment/>.
15. Cas Mudde, "The Populist Radical Right: A Pathological Normalcy," *West European Politics* 33, no. 6 (2010): 1167–86.
16. "J.D. Vance and the AfD: A New Transatlantic Far-Right Axis?" *Der Spiegel*, 2025.
17. Anne Applebaum, *Twilight of Democracy: The Seductive Lure of Authoritarianism* (New York: Anchor Books, 2020).
18. "Vance's European Tour: An Unprecedented Far-Right Alliance," *Politico Europe*, 2025.
19. "China's Authoritarian Right-Wing Turn: Xi Jinping's Surprising Embrace of Reactionary Rhetoric," *Economist*, 2024.
20. "Putin on Free Speech: Remarks from the BRICS Media Summit," *TASS News Agency*, 2025.
21. Viktor Orbán, *Prime Minister Viktor Orbán's Speech at a Conference Held in Memory of Helmut Kohl*, (Budapest: Cabinet Office of the Prime Minister, June 16, 2018), <https://www.kormany.hu/en/the-prime-minister/the-prime-minister-s-speeches/prime-minister-viktor-orban-s-speech-at-a-conference-held-in-memory-of-helmut-kohl>.
22. Charles Sapin, "Marine Le Pen: 'Je veux nationaliser les autoroutes et privatiser l'audiovisuel public,'" *Le Figaro*, September 10, 2021, <https://www.lefigaro.fr/elections/presidentielles/marine-le-pen-je-veux-nationaliser-les-autoroutes-et-privatiser-l-audiovisuel-public-20210908>.
23. Andrzej Duda, *Campaign Speech in Brzeg, Poland*, June 14, 2020.
24. *Law on the Protection of Children Against Pedophilia*, (Budapest: Government of Hungary, 2021).
25. Thierry Baudet, Speech at Dutch Farmers' Protest, July 2022.

26. Alternative for Germany (AfD), *Party Program* (Berlin: AfD, 2023).
27. William Nattrass, “Querdenken and the European Anti-Lockdown Movement,” *Politico Europe*, November 5, 2021.
28. Cas Mudd, “The Far Right’s European Surge: Patterns and Pitfalls,” *Journal of Democracy* 35, no. 4 (2024): 121–134.
29. Viktor Orbán, “Speech by Prime Minister Viktor Orbán at the Opening of CPAC Texas” *Hungarian Government Official Website*, August 4, 2022, <https://abouthungary.hu/speeches-and-remarks/speech-by-prime-minister-viktor-orban>.
30. “Hungary’s Orbán Claims the EU Seeks to Topple His Government as His Hostility Toward It Grows,” *Associated Press*, October 23, 2024, <https://apnews.com/article/d9d73c58566a6a3fbafaa77f4d702bec>.
31. Viktor Orbán, “Address by Prime Minister Viktor Orbán at a Plenary Session of the European Parliament,” *About Hungary*, October 9, 2024, <https://abouthungary.hu/speeches-and-remarks/address-by-prime-minister-viktor-orban-at-a-plenary-session-of-the-european-parliament>.
32. Viktor Orbán, “Speech by Prime Minister Viktor Orbán at the Opening of CPAC Texas,” *Hungarian Government Official Website*, August 4, 2022, <https://abouthungary.hu/speeches-and-remarks/speech-by-prime-minister-viktor-orban>, <https://miniszterelnok.hu/en/prime-minister-viktor-orban>.
33. Political Capital, *HUNfluence: Russian and Chinese Influence in Hungary—Trends, Perspectives, and Public Perceptions* (Budapest: Political Capital, 2023), [https://politicalcapital.hu/pc-admin\\_HUN](https://politicalcapital.hu/pc-admin_HUN).
34. Péter Krekó and Zsolt Enyedi, “Explaining Eastern Europe: Orbán’s laboratory of illiberalism,” *Journal of Democracy* 29, no. 3 (2018): 39–51.
35. Vidhya Ramalingam, *The Sweden Democrats: Anti-Immigration Politics under the Stigma of Racism* (Oxford: Centre on Migration, Policy and Society (COMPAS), University of Oxford, 2012).