**Right-wing nationalists are on the rise in Europe — and there’s no progressive coalition to stop them**

## **How a diplomatic spat became a symbol of the struggle for Europe.**

Protesters from the "yellow vest" movement gather at the Arche de la Defense in Paris's financial district during the "Act XXI" demonstration (the 21st consecutive national protest on a Saturday) on April 6. Yellow vest protests were expected in several cities across France. (Ian Langsdon/EPA-EFE/REX/Shutterstock)

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This year marks the 30th anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall, symbolizing the collapse of Europe’s communist regimes and the end of the Cold War. For many, this moment represented the victory of freedom, the spread of liberal democracy and more peaceful international relations in much of the Western world. And what happened next seemed to bear that out: A good number of former communist countries later joined the European Union. Liberal values seemed to overcome dictatorships and autocracies.

Calling this the “end of history,” as Francis Fukuyama did, however, overlooked the long-term implications of such changes. These included nationalism, which has returned, forcefully and virulently, in an illiberal form to young democracies such as Hungary and Poland, and in a right-wing chauvinist and anti-immigrant guise to more politically established countries such as Britain and the United States.

An ongoing diplomatic spat between France and Italy reveals exactly how much the struggle between nationalism and democracy is still at play, 30 years after the supposed triumph of the latter. This bizarre controversy generated headlines when France recalled an ambassador from Rome, a shocking turn of events that last happened between the world wars, when fascist Italy had much more bellicose intentions. Although the context today is different, this clash points to the dangerous conditions emerging in a newly nationalist Europe.

France and Italy were among the founding members of the European Community in the early 1950s and currently play major roles in European and Mediterranean politics. Moreover, as “Latin” sisters, France and Italy have historically had plenty of cultural and economic exchanges. Both had relevant communist parties. After 1989, however, their major leftist forces moved toward more centrist politics, embracing some neoliberal ideas.

But the embrace of these ideas has meant that, since the late 1980s, Europe has slowly experienced the worst outcomes of neoliberal thinking, with a loss of job security and cuts in the usually generous welfare states that had been central to the relationship between citizens and their countries. This has been affecting France and Italy, whose far-right parties have been on the rise since the mid-1980s and are attracting some of the working class previously inclined toward the left.

European societies are now more fragmented, and some traditional (especially left-wing) parties are in decline. Identity politics has been exacerbating the contradictions of globalization as well as Europeanization. The overall political system has moved rightward. This has also meant the decay of anti-fascism as a main value in national institutions as well as at the E.U. level.

These tensions came to the surface this past month with a meeting between Luigi Di Maio, Italy’s vice premier and the leader of the demagogic 5 Star Movement, and members of France’s “yellow vest” movement. These French activists are against the E.U., globalization and, of course, French President Emmanuel Macron.

The meeting signaled a possible transnational alliance of anti-system and anti-establishment forces, as Di Maio looks for allies in the European Parliament. Di Maio, in a breach of diplomatic etiquette, tweeted a picture of the meeting, writing: “The wind of change has crossed the Alps.” He wrote an unapologetic letter to the major French newspaper Le Monde, restating the two countries’ friendship, but also criticizing France’s ultraliberal turn and praising the “post-ideological” features of the yellow vests. He also offered advice on how to turn a spontaneous citizen movement into a more structured political group, drawing sharp criticism from the French government for meddling in the nation’s affairs.

Di Maio later distanced himself from those same yellow vest militants who were calling for paramilitary forces and a sort of civil war in France. After the promise of a visit in the near future from Sergio Mattarella, the moderate politician who is Italy’s president, the French ambassador returned to Italy.

And yet, this spat reflects a dangerous international development that shows the growing impulse to develop a transnational anti-system and anti-E.U. coalition, eager to ally with grass-roots protesters, Viktor Orban of Hungary and Vladimir Putin of Russia. Their aim is to create political networks that influence the next European Parliament, with the hope of dismantling the union or transferring powers from Brussels to capital cities.

These anti-establishment networks are taking advantage of divisions across the European Union: elites vs. the public, Europhiles vs. Euroskeptics and far-right nationalism vs. liberalism, but also some ambiguous positions of the center right toward issues such as identity and immigration.

For example, Guy Verhofstadt, the leader of the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe party in the European Parliament, openly challenged the “political degeneration of Italy” and called Italy’s prime minister “a puppet.” Italian Interior Minister Matteo Salvini shot back that “citizens will send these people home” in the E.U. election in May. French far-right leader Marine Le Pen defended her allies in the Italian government in an effort to consolidate a Franco-Italian nationalist and far-right web existing since the interwar years. She accused Macron of using diplomacy for electoral and political reasons in an effort to be the major opponent of politicians such as Orban and Salvini.

Macron’s efforts notwithstanding, nationalist and Euroskeptic forces will increase their share of votes in the coming election, and there is no coherent progressive bloc to oppose them. In some ways, this is a “return of history,” rather than its end.

These fractures are also, in some ways, a result of the post-Cold War environment and the failures of neoliberal thinking that have dominated in the three decades since the fall of the Berlin Wall.

Given this, the clash between forces that would like a closed nationalist system and those seeking to defend open democracies is an asymmetric one, with end-of-history progressive elites culturally unprepared to deal with the resurgent right-wing anti-liberal nationalism and authoritarianism.

<https://www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/2019/04/07/right-wing-nationalists-are-rise-europe-theres-no-progressive-coalition-stop-them/>