[**European miasma**](https://www.dawn.com/news/1712381/european-miasma)

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ON the night of the Swedish election on Sept 11, a 26-year-old politician from the Sweden Democrats hailed its triumph in becoming the nation’s second-biggest parliamentary party by raising one arm and proclaiming “Helg … seger”. It means ‘weekend victory’, but to many local ears it sounded a lot like ‘Hell seger’, the Swedish version of ‘Sieg Heil’. The resonance probably wasn’t unintentional, given the party’s Nazi antecedents.

The Sweden Democrats won’t form the next government in Stockholm, and probably won’t even formally be a part of it, but their support will be instrumental in keeping the next right-wing coalition in power, given its slim parliamentary majority.

A rather different scenario is unfolding in Italy, where Giorgia Meloni is expected to become prime minister in due course, possibly close to the centenary of Benito Mussolini’s accession to power on Oct 31, 1922.

She’ll be her country’s first female PM, which is a trifle ironic given her party is called Brothers of Italy. It sprang up earlier this century as a more or less direct descendant of the neo-fascist Movimento Sociale Italiano that emerged in 1946, a year after Mussolini’s execution by Italian partisans. In the event, it’s hardly surprising that the globally embraced partisan ballad Bella Ciao became a bone of contention during this year’s election campaign, with the ‘anti-woke’ forces seeking to cancel it.

Nothing good can come from Europe’s flirtation with fascism.

But the neo-fascist backlash to European neoliberalism isn’t new, of course. The Freedom Party in Austria got there first this century, only to be followed by Geert Wilders in the Netherlands, the Danish People’s Party, Norway’s Progress Party, the True Finns, and the French National Rally. That excludes the former East European nations that drifted to the right amid the collapse of the Soviet Union and subsequently embraced the authoritarian aspects of their ‘communist’ past, rejecting its progressive impulses.

Viktor Orbán’s Hungary may be the most obvious instance of this phenomenon, with its misogyny, homophobia and affinity with Putin setting an example for other retrograde forces across the continent. But Poland and the Czech Republic haven’t been far behind.

The resurgence of the far right in Europe cannot be attributed to the intrinsic appeal of neo-fascist forces. It’s a consequence of the multiple failures of what was once known as the left. Since at least the 1980s, the so-called progressives have bought into the neoliberal economic myths of the Reagan-Thatcher era, and colluded in ripping the heart out of the welfare states that emerged from the wreckage of World War II, partly as a means of diminishing the appeal of the Soviet alternative.

The latter itself couldn’t have seemed too appealing in the late 1940s, given its devotion to twisting poll results and eventually instituting one-party states across much of Eastern Europe. But let’s not forget that the US was equally active in Europe by then, and any Western European states that dared to opt for the wrong side in the incipient Cold War were under threat of being excluded from the Marshall Plan. That blackmail wasn’t expected to suffice, though, and so among the earliest covert operations of the CIA was a dedicated effort to ensure that communists and their allies, vastly popular because of their key role in the resistance to fascism, would not win the Italian republic’s first elections in 1948.

For many decades thenceforth, Italy vacillated between so-called Christian Democrats and ‘socialists’ prone to neoliberal capitalism, with both sides corrupt and beholden to both the market and mafia, until Silvio Berlusconi emerged as a populist right-wing alternative in the 1990s, establishing a trend that has wreaked havoc.

Where Italy’s postwar instability is almost legendary, Sweden was long seen as a bastion of social democracy, with its model of a mixed economy much admired in nations not keen on either naked market rule or a command economy. That included the Soviet Union in its dying years. Thereafter, however, the supposed Swedish left gradually became barely distinguishable from its neoliberal ‘centre’, making more room for alternatives to an increasingly unsatisfactory status quo wherein the welfare state effectively self-immolated.

It wasn’t just a drift to neoliberalism (including the privatisation of health, education and other welfare services that had long been deemed a state responsibility) which still infects many of Europe’s ‘progressive’ political forces, that diminished the appeal of the left, but also its uncomfortable embrace of the nationalist right’s anti-immigrant agenda. The segment of the electorate that approves of this variant of nationalism sees little reason to back recent converts to the cause rather than long-standing racists.

Europe may not be headed where the economic collapse and political bankruptcy of the 1920s and 1930s took it, but what the immediate future holds is still unpleasant to contemplate.

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