

Here comes Europe's 'foreigners out'

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PERSPECTIVE

The historic success of the radical right in the recent European Parliament election may have come as a shock, knocking two of the bloc's most important governments off balance.

But it shouldn't have been too much of a surprise for anyone paying attention to the outraged mood among many of the Continent's young people, who have not only embraced hard-line anti-immigration views but seem prouder than ever to broadcast them.

Consider this as evidence: A 14-second clip filmed on the German holiday island of Sylt and uploaded to the social media platform X about two weeks before the vote. In it, a group of expensively dressed German youths can be seen belting out the words "Ausländer Raus!" ("foreigners out!") over a euro-dance beat as they swirl glasses of rosé. The all-white group, whose preppy attire wouldn't be out of place in other European holiday hotspots like France's Biarritz or Sweden's Gotland, all know exactly when to chime in with the xenophobic lyrics laid over l'Amour Toujours, a turn-of-the-century track by DJ Gigi D'Agostino. At one point in the video, one of the partygoers is so taken with the song that he gives himself a Hitler mustache with two fingers while throwing up a floppy "Seig Heil" salute with his other hand.



Alternative for Germany (AfD) party co-leaders Alice Weidel (C) and Tino Chrupalla (front-R) react to results after the polls closed in the European Parliament elections, in Berlin, Germany, on June 9, 2024.
● ANNEGRET HILSE/REUTERS

The video's release prompted a furor in Germany, with one politician calling for the partygoers to be brought to justice for breaking the country's hate speech laws, but there was no stopping the forces on display in the video. When European voters headed to the polls on June 9, the far-right Alternative for Germany party (AfD) pulled off its best performance ever, beating Chancellor Olaf Scholz's Social Democratic Party and sending po-

litical shockwaves through Europe's most populous country. A similar feeling of whiplash is rippling across France, where President Emmanuel Macron has called a snap election after being trounced by the far-right National Rally party. And in Brussels, policymakers are bracing for a European Parliament in which one in four lawmakers belongs to the radical right.

As a reeling Continent tries to make sense of

what just hit it, the role of young voters like the Sylt partygoers is coming into focus as an important factor. In Germany, the share of young people who voted for the AfD jumped between the last European Parliament election in 2019 and this one (rising by 11 percent among voters aged between 24 and 30). In France, Marine Le Pen's National Rally party raked in some 30 percent of the youth vote nationally — a

10-point rise compared to 2019. Which begs the question: Why are so many of Europe's Gen-Z and younger Millennials — whose parents and grandparents espoused left-wing politics in the 1960s — embracing the antithesis of their elders' ideals? And whatever happened to the stigma or shame that once surrounded overtly racist and xenophobic attitudes like those on display in the Sylt video? The answer is a hodgepodge of factors ranging from Europe's

cost-of-living crisis to the isolation many youths suffered during the COVID lockdown years to a delayed backlash following the bloc's 2015 migration crisis when nearly two million migrants flowed into the bloc. But there are also more intangible factors, linked to the fact that many young people experience politics solely via social media platforms like X and TikTok where far-right content glorifying the "Great Replacement" theory and linking immigration to violence runs unchecked.

Why young voters swung right

Mathieu Gallard, research director at the Ipsos polling firm, says that left-wing parties — namely the far-left France Unbowed party — remain the dominant political force among youths aged between 18 and 24 in France. But he acknowledged that support for the National Rally had skyrocketed for the same age bracket over the past five years. "There is a section of young people who are hostile to immigration and who vote on these issues," he said.

The fact that the president of the National Rally is now Jordan Bardella, a smooth-talking 28-year-old at home on TikTok, helps to explain the rise in youth support. In one video posted to the platform a week before the European Parliament election, Bardella appeals primarily to young voters, urging them to mobilize their "parents," "friends, and loved ones" to turn out "in big numbers" to a pre-election rally. In another video posted before Bardella goes on stage for a political rally, he confides that he decided to wear jeans because he "couldn't be bothered to iron" his suit — an obvious "I'm just like you" moment that seems to resonate with the commenters. Bardella's youth and social media acumen aren't the only factors in his success, Gallard said. "His youth, his presence on social media, widen the electorate somewhat ... but it's not the main factor. The main factors are



A protester holds an anti-far right banner showing the faces of French presidents and the word 'Honte' or 'Shame' during a rally in Paris, France, on June 15, 2024. Anti-racism groups joined French unions and a brand-new left-wing coalition in protests in Paris and across France against the surging nationalist far right.
MICHEL EULER/AP