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The Lady Macbeth Paradox

The Strategic Role of Female Leaders in Far-Right Populist Parties

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Female leaders in far-right populist parties appeal to a greater breadth and number of voters. The public's perception of women as mothers and nurturers allows far-right women to soften their party's image and push party rhetoric further into the political mainstream. However, western nations underestimate the role women leaders play in far-right parties because of gendered perceptions of male-dominance in the far-right. Far-right female leaders are a significant force that enables these parties to push their agendas in their own countries. Success domestically spills over internationally to undermine the stability of the European Union and global democracy.

Introduction

The emergence of far-right populist parties (FRPP) across Europe has dramatically changed the political landscape of the continent. These parties pose a threat to democracy and the stability of the European Union, which in turn undermines the relationship between the United States and Europe.¹ Although analysts have studied these parties to explain their success and propose means to counter them, the strategic role of female leadership remains relatively overlooked.

Female leaders of far-right populist parties choose to, as Lady MacBeth tells her husband, “Look like th’innocent flower, But be the serpent under’t.”² Female far-right populist leaders appear less threatening than their male counterparts because they emphasize their ‘feminine’ identity even though beneath the surface, they support the same dangerous nationalist policies as the men. The construction of this identity enables female leaders of FRPPs to attract a broader electorate by framing their messaging as “softer”—making divisive rhetoric appear mainstream. Due to their popular appeal, female leaders have advanced the far-right across Europe.

Dangerous Demographics: The Rise of European Far-Right Populist Parties

Western feminism has made some memorable theoretical mistakes; a major one is the frequent assumption that, if women held the decision-making power in society, they would be “kinder and gentler.”

—Naomi Wolf³

Far-right populist parties across Europe do not uniformly propose the same policies or employ the same tactics to win votes. The strategies of these parties are often crafted to appeal to voters in a given national context.⁴ Yet, these European parties do share certain features, namely an emphasis on nationalism, restricting immigration from non-European countries, and anti-elitism.

Far-right populist parties exacerbate political divides domestically, which threatens European democracies.⁵ The proliferation of far-right parties shifts the entire domestic political spectrum towards the far-right, which entrenches their nativist and xenophobic ideology further into the public discourse.⁶ Once these parties enter positions of power, they may roll back democratic institutions, such as freedom of press and the strength and independence of courts.⁷

Far-right populist parties enjoy greater success with a charismatic leader at the helm. These leaders are able to attract more media attention, giving them a bigger platform from which to promote their issues.⁸ Over the past 20 years, the role of the charismatic leader has primarily been filled by white men.⁹ The political base of these parties has also largely consisted of the same demographic. As a result, analyses of far-right populist parties in Europe have focused on their appeal to the disenfranchised male working class.¹⁰ They conclude that far-right populist male leaders tend to use machismo language and emphasize the need for women to reassume traditional gender roles, thus speaking specifically to ‘angry white men.’¹¹ Indeed, far-right parties experienced a “radical-right gender gap,” attracting far more male than female voters.¹²

The radical-right gender gap has narrowed, however, as far-right populist parties have chosen non-traditional leaders—in particular women. Women are now in leadership positions across several far-right parties in Europe.¹³

Far-right rhetoric continues to depict women leaders primarily as mothers and nurturers, so they are generally viewed as passive actors.¹⁴ Female politicians are also often thought of as more empathetic and trusting than their male counterparts.¹⁵ Most striking, the power of female leaders has often been solely attributed to male politicians.¹⁶ Framing female leaders as mere puppets for their parties reveals how gendered stereotypes strip female leaders of their individual power, which makes it difficult to recognize and counter their political appeal.¹⁷ The far-right takes advantage of the perception that women are soft, passive, nurturers in order to camouflage the real aim of female leaders—to advance the same hard-right policies as their male counterparts.

The prominent role of female leaders within historically male-dominated far-right parties belies the sexist attitudes common within their own parties.¹⁸ And when analysts follow suit and ignore the strategic strength of women leading far-right populist parties, they enable the continued growth of these parties and destabilization of national politics, the European Union, and transnational cooperation, including NATO.

Women at the Forefront: Threatening and Underestimated

Women leading far-right populist parties pose a threat at three levels: national, regional, and global. At the national level, female leaders shift the domestic political spectrum towards the right through the ‘mainstreaming effect,’ which normalizes the divisive rhetoric characteristic of far-right populist parties. At the regional level, these women help their parties increase their share of seats in the European parliament, after which they collaborate with other European far-right populist parties to undermine the stability of the EU. At the global level, far-right populist parties

propagate anti-Atlanticism and have, in the past, turned towards the Kremlin for support. The female leaders of these parties, because of their popular appeal, have helped far-right parties gain more regional and international influence, which has empowered them to further undermine global democracy.

Female far-right populist leaders are dangerous because they are underestimated. Typically, women are seen only as ‘figure-heads’ for these parties with little real power. This perception of female leaders acknowledges the impact they have on ‘softening’ far-right parties and attracting more voters but downplays their decision-making power. Underestimating these women allows them to go undetected as a significant threat to European stability.

- National level.** Female far-right populist leaders are a strategic choice. These women are able to shift the focus of national debates on important issues, such as immigration, to the question of whether they endanger women.¹⁹ In doing so, they alter the ‘acceptable’ domestic discourse on these issues. For instance, these women reframe the discourse on immigration by highlighting the threat immigrants supposedly pose to women.²⁰ By shaping the contours of policy debates, the women of the far right move their parties and ideas into the mainstream, allowing them to assume a more prominent role in politics.²¹ Indeed, the political spectrum within a country shifts to the right as one-time ‘fringe’ ideas are normalized.²² Female leaders of far-right populist parties thus threaten liberal democracy, because they help win elections—and once in power, they can begin their assault on democratic norms.
- Regional level.** Female far-right populist leaders threaten the stability of the European Union (EU). Increasingly, far-right leaders have banded together in their shared discontent with the EU, forming a regional alliance.²³ As these alliances gain traction, they undermine existing traditional coalitions in Europe. For example, FRPPs now win elections in the European Parliament (EP), giving them the chance to form coalitions with other regional far-right parties.²⁴ This collaboration creates a bigger platform from which they can attempt to undermine the strength of the European Union.²⁵ Therefore, women’s strategic role in leadership positions is also being leveraged within larger regional governing bodies. In these positions of power, women can sow frustration with the EU and encourage a right-ward shift of European politics.



- **Global level.** The success of far-right parties is threatening at the global level because they spread anti-Atlantic sentiment and have fostered closer ties with the Kremlin. The far-right gravitated to Russia and Vladimir Putin following the euro crisis and the annexation of Crimea. These parties view a strategic partnership with Russia as an important means of balancing against the United States and as a guarantor of European security independent from Washington.²⁶

Far-right populist parties further undermine the political consensus that binds NATO member states together. Shared values—namely a common commitment to fostering liberal democracy—have contributed to the continued success of the transatlantic alliance.²⁷ However, by eroding the commitment to democracy in Europe, the FRPPs make security cooperation through NATO more challenging.²⁸ These parties also undermine the United States’ position in Europe through the spread of anti-Atlanticism, opposing U.S. military interventions abroad and framing American hegemony as a threat to national sovereignty.²⁹

Even as the influence of female far-right populist leaders extends beyond their own borders, weakening the EU and NATO, these women are underestimated due to their gender, making them all the more dangerous. Thus, by putting women in positions of leadership, far-right populist parties are choosing leaders who offer a strategic advantage.

The Chosen Ones: The Logic of Female Leaders

Nevertheless, analyses of populist leaders have never explicitly questioned the importance of gender and how it eventually intervenes in the construction of leadership identity and style as perceived by party supporters, sympathizers and the mainstream media.

—Susi Meret³⁰

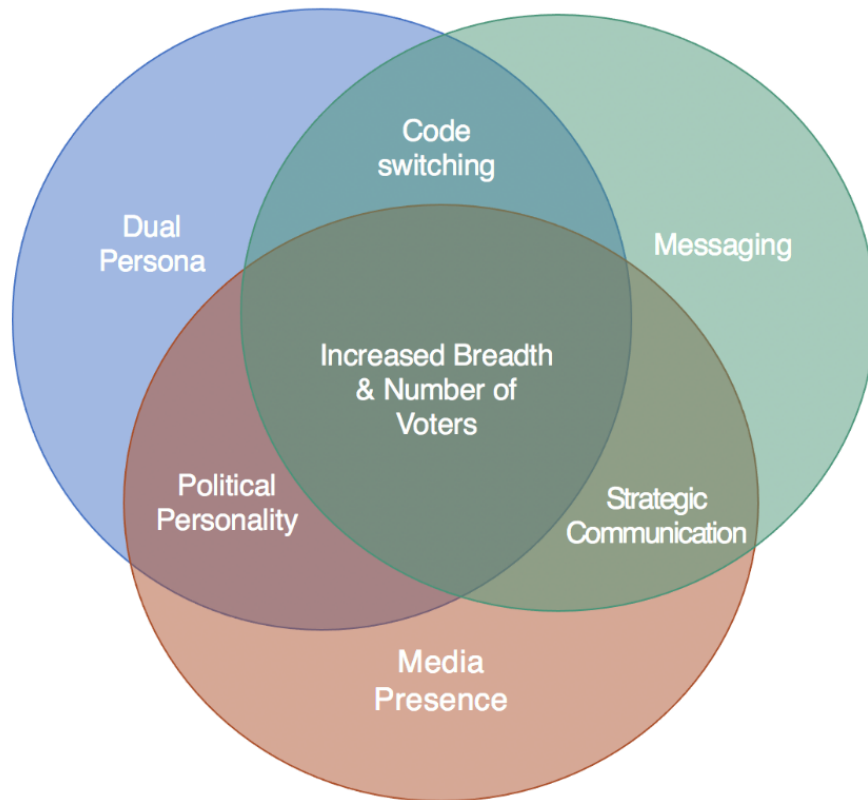
Female leaders of FRPPs attract a greater breadth and quantity of voters by employing more effective messaging techniques, garnering a larger media presence, and leveraging gendered perceptions of women to soften their party’s image (see Figure 1).

- **Appeal of the dual persona.** Female leaders of FRPPs take advantage of their feminine identities and lean into their softer image, while still maintaining the extremist policies and masculine leadership styles characteristic of far-right parties.³¹ In doing so, they are able to appeal to both male and female voters.

Female leaders employ their feminine identity strategically. They often embrace the label of “mother” of their party and describe themselves as protectors and empathetic leaders when useful.³² The emphasis on motherhood softens their image and enables them to effectively advocate for the protection of the nuclear family, a core tenant of far-right populist parties.³³ At the same time, female leaders employ masculine characteristics to counter the perception that women are weaker on ‘harder’ political issues.³⁴

Female far-right populist leaders effectively message and attract voters by adopting a dual persona. They carefully navigate between emphasizing their feminine identity and maintaining the masculine leadership style required to helm the far-right. That is, the manipulation of gendered stereotypes tempers their authoritarian characteristics.³⁵

Figure 1: Characteristics of FRPP Female Leaders



- **Ability to message.** Female leaders of far-right populist parties lean into their cultivated dual personas and choose to employ softer rhetoric when discussing polarizing issues. This tactic has a “mainstreaming” effect by making their politics seem less divisive.³⁶ Female leaders take advantage of gender stereotypes that women are weaker than men, reducing the threat of the party’s message. Therefore, even when female leaders engage in nationalist code-switching and employ the same rhetoric as male leaders, attitudes about women soften the message.

Female leaders shape the messaging employed by far-right populist parties regarding restricting immigration. The immigration debate became framed by the far-right as a women’s rights issue. FRPPs argue that immigrants perpetrate the majority of violent acts against women and therefore are dangerous. Female leaders propagate these messages effectively largely because their gender helps to legitimize the claims.³⁷ These women appear to relate to the concerns of ordinary women. Thus, they appeal to female voters by

invoking a sense of shared experience.³⁸ Therefore, the way women message attracts a greater number of female voters. The power of far-right female leaders in framing their parties' agendas allows them to unite and attract more voters under a nationalist banner.³⁹

- **Media presence.** Through the cultivation of a dual persona, female far-right populist leaders foster a political personality that garners more media attention by which they can engage in strategic communication to their electorate. Media attention plays a significant role in the appeal of far-right populist parties. The leaders of these parties personalize their politics via social media. Thus, the charisma of the leader increasingly defines the party's appeal to the electorate as opposed to the party's platform.⁴⁰ Far-right populist parties tend to be thought of as dominated by men, whereas parties on the left are expected to attract more female supporters.⁴¹ Therefore, female leaders of FRPPs often receive greater media attention because they go against their parties' reputation as being male dominated.

Voters learn about parties and candidates primarily from the media.⁴² Since women leading FRPPs receive more media attention, the news coverage exaggerates the representation of women within these parties, increasing their appeal with female voters.⁴³ Moreover, female politicians in the media are often portrayed as being softer due to their gender.⁴⁴ Therefore, female leaders of the far-right are ultimately perceived of as less radical than their male counterparts. These stereotypes enhance the appeal of FRPPs because female leaders soften the image of the party.⁴⁵ In doing so, they guide the party towards the political mainstream and attract more voters.

In sum, there are three main reasons for why women in power appeal to female voters: 1) they help legitimize the party, 2) they message to women more effectively, and 3) they focus on issues salient to women. Gendered perceptions of female leaders soften the image of far-right populist parties, which tend to make them appear more "mainstream," attracting female voters who might hesitate to vote for fringe parties.⁴⁶ Similarly, highlighting women at the forefront of these parties helps legitimize them in countries that embrace gender equality and women's rights.⁴⁷ These women are portrayed as advocates for disenfranchised women, who feel politicians de-emphasize or ignore family policies.⁴⁸ Female leaders who appeal to these concerns are able to garner more support among the female electorate.⁴⁹

Far-right populist parties are increasingly recognizing the value of appealing to more women and narrowing the radical-right gender gap.⁵⁰ Given the ability of female leaders to appeal to female voters, they are promoted to the forefront of these movements. Female leaders also increase support for their parties from more mainstream male voters by countering the perception that their party is radical.⁵¹

A Case-by-Case Basis: Female Leaders Under Scrutiny

Charismatic and calculating, female far-right populist leaders play an important role in shaping the political discourse within their countries. Beata Szydlo, Marine Le Pen, and Giorgia Meloni all

played or continue to play a strategic role within their far-right parties and exemplify the threats female far-right populist leaders pose nationally, regionally, and globally.

Beata Szydlo: The Danger of a Woman in Power

“I was angry with these remarks, I was already fed up with it, because it is not easy – when you really rule – to convince others that it is not theater, that I make decisions.”
—Beata Szydlo⁵²

From 2015 to 2017 Beata Szydlo represented the Law and Justice (PiS) party as the prime minister of Poland. Following the 2015 parliamentary elections, PiS gained control over both the executive branch and parliament, allowing the party to consolidate power and undermine elements of Polish democracy. Beata Szydlo played a crucial role in enabling the party to make these dramatic political gains.

»» Sources of Szydlo’s success

Beata Szydlo successfully appealed to the Polish electorate due to the interplay of her persona as a traditional Polish woman, her effective messaging to disenfranchised voters, and her significant media presence.

- **Appeal of persona.** On the campaign trail, Szydlo emerged from Polish political obscurity to lead PiS to victory. Szydlo’s campaign emphasized her identity as a religious, working-class mother and daughter of a miner to increase her appeal to the disillusioned Polish electorate.⁵³ Her gender also made her appear to be an anti-establishment figure within the PiS party.⁵⁴ However, Szydlo simultaneously fit into the Polish conservative ideal of a woman as a mother and a Catholic.⁵⁵ Beata Szydlo harnessed this persona to succeed in Polish politics.⁵⁶ She navigated the Polish political sphere adeptly; she attracted more voters due to her reassuring persona as a traditional woman—even as her political stances remained in line with the radical far-right party platform.
- **Ability to message.** Szydlo carved a unique role for herself within the party such that her messaging appealed to everyday Polish workers.⁵⁷ The most important issue that Szydlo impacted during her campaign was social welfare for families, which effectively mobilized voters, especially women. Many policies that were framed as beneficial for women, however, did not evaluate women as independent from the family. Thus, the measures PiS and Beata Szydlo advocated for did not benefit all women in Poland because they were rooted in traditional family and religious values.⁵⁸
- **Media presence.** In the Polish social context, Beata Szydlo was cast first and foremost a mother and protector. Although she did not emphasize her womanhood in the media, she was often labeled the ‘mother of Poland.’ These narratives downplayed Szydlo’s political power. In the deeply gendered Polish context, Beata Szydlo was often speculated by the media to be no-more than a puppet to Jaroslaw Kaczynski, the former prime minister of PiS.⁵⁹ At the same time, Szydlo was given a visible media platform, which raised her public

profile and made her more popular with the Polish electorate. Even after her resignation from the prime minister's office, Polish people were calling for the return of "our Beata." Thus, her coverage by the Polish media gave her a conduit to effectively communicate Law and Justice's message to voters.

Beata Szydlo was chosen as prime minister of PiS to help the party gain control of parliament, which it did, winning 235 of 460 seats.⁶⁰ The success of Beata's bid for prime minister rested on her ability to appeal to the less fringe Polish electorate. Her role as a woman and an unknown politician made her, and her ideology, seem more trustworthy and mainstream than her male counterparts in PiS. Therefore, she attracted more centrist voters, whose support had not previously been guaranteed.⁶¹ Szydlo also managed to re-attract voters that were put off by a "male-dominated political culture" that detracted from the issues plaguing the country.⁶² Szydlo also attracted more female voters to PiS. PiS never suffered from a large radical right gender gap, but the year Beata Szydlo was elected to parliament there was a higher percentage of women than men that voted for the party.⁶³ She moved the party to the political mainstream, molding it into a more modern party, while increasing support for herself.⁶⁴

»» Consequences of Szydlo's success

Poland experienced major democratic backsliding following Beata Szydlo's election. Acting as both a political pawn and an independent force in politics, Szydlo's two-year stint as prime minister had repercussions for Poland and the European Union.

- **National.** Beata Szydlo was specifically chosen to be a mouthpiece for Jaroslaw Kaczynski, by which he hoped to make the party appear mainstream in order to appeal to more voters. PiS had already won the presidency with Andrzej Duda, but with Szydlo's victory PiS was able to form a majority government.⁶⁵ PiS subsequently consolidated power, restricting the president and prime minister's decision-making capabilities and empowering Jaroslaw Kaczynski, the real leader of the party.⁶⁶ Kaczynski led Poland from behind the scenes and concentrated power into his own hands, while Szydlo and Duda formed the so-called surrogate government.⁶⁷ These actions enabled PiS to violate the constitution, "including the refusal to publish the judgements of the Constitutional Tribunal and measures reducing the independence of courts in Poland and the political neutrality of the mass media and administration."⁶⁸ Szydlo helped tighten the far-right's hold on Poland to such an extent that the country transitioned towards illiberalism.
- **Regional.** The success of PiS in Polish politics had widespread implications for the stability of the European Union. Once Beata Szydlo came to power, she advocated for harsher policies that restricted immigration into Poland. In direct opposition to the EU's stance on admitting refugees, Szydlo implemented a "closed-door" policy ostensibly to protect Poland's national security.⁶⁹ The nationalism and Euroscepticism whipped up by PiS prompted Poland to turn inward and undermine the stability of the EU by challenging its founding principles.⁷⁰ Since 2019, Beata Szydlo has also served as a member of the European Parliament, where she continues to oppose the European Union and fight against measures to punish PiS for violations of the rule of law in Poland.⁷¹

- **Global.** Since 2015, PiS has found kinship with Orbán’s authoritarian regime in Hungary.⁷² Orbán’s near dictatorship in Hungary poses several problems for the European Union, including how to implement repercussions for his undemocratic reforms.⁷³ Orbán’s close ties to Vladimir Putin also pose a threat to regional and global stability.

Closer ties between Hungary and Poland undermines the EU’s stance in central Europe and weakens the union’s ability to prevent democratic backsliding within its member states.⁷⁴ When the far-right took control in Poland it signified that support for democracy and liberalism were weaker than anticipated.⁷⁵ Thus, the consequences of Beata Szydło’s ability to lead PiS to victory in 2015 reverberated beyond Poland’s borders.

Beata Szydło’s role as prime minister demonstrates that even when women are chosen to lead far-right populist parties as mere figureheads, they still have strategic value and significant influence in domestic politics. Without Szydło, PiS may have never had the opportunity to consolidate power and erode democratic norms in Poland. Thus, women—from Beata Szydło to female leaders who actually lead far-right parties—should not be underestimated.

Marine Le Pen: 21st Century Joan of Arc?

“I am a woman, and as such I experience the ever-increasing restrictions on our liberty in our country through the development of Islamic fundamentalism”

—Marine Le Pen⁷⁶

In 2011, Marine Le Pen assumed the position of leader of the far-right populist party National Rally in France.⁷⁷ Her success brought the National Rally to the forefront of French politics, and she exemplifies the effectiveness of female leadership in these parties.

»» Sources of Le Pen’s success

Marine Le Pen has effectively led National Rally (RN) by ‘softening’ her image as a politician, making her party appear more mainstream. And as the face of women on the far right, she attracts significant media attention, which she uses to advocate for RN’s platform.

- **Appeal of persona.** For a leader to be viewed as charismatic, their electorate needs to be able to identify with elements of their identity.⁷⁸ Le Pen often employs aspects of her feminine identity to soften the image of the National Rally. She appeals to a wider breadth of voters by emphasizing her identity as a single mother, enabling her to gain sympathy with those who typically do not vote for the far-right.⁷⁹ Le Pen’s persona softens the image of the National Rally, making it appear more progressive than its actual policies.⁸⁰ However, Le Pen also presents herself as tough on issues such as immigration, appealing to both male and female voters.⁸¹ The dichotomy of Le Pen’s persona—as both single mother and fearless defender of the West—enables her to be simultaneously identified as powerful, competent, and sympathetic.⁸²

- **Ability to message.** Marine Le Pen uses her gender as a means of effectively messaging to the broader French electorate. She frames issues regarding unrestricted immigration in a way that claims to champion women's rights, attracting more female voters.⁸³ Le Pen pretends to defend France's liberal values and democracy, but employs this rhetoric to attack immigrants from predominantly Muslim countries.⁸⁴ She uses language borrowed from feminism to fight against multiculturalism and preserve traditional family roles.⁸⁵ The fact of her gender also works to legitimize her rationale for harsher immigration policies to female voters.⁸⁶
- **Media presence.** Le Pen's identity as a woman garners her more media attention, which she deploys to her party's advantage. When she came to power Marine Le Pen was the only female leader of a major political party in office in France, which gave her enormous media visibility.⁸⁷ Le Pen joined a small number of female leaders worldwide, which made her the international face of far-right women.⁸⁸ Due to her high media profile, Le Pen has an enormous platform for spreading her party's messages to voters. Her individual popularity also makes it more acceptable to vote for her because she appears less divisive.⁸⁹

The radical-right gender gap in French far-right populist parties diminished significantly following Marine Le Pen's rise to power.⁹⁰ Le Pen's leadership quickly demonstrated her capacity to attract more female voters to the far-right. When she assumed the mantle of the party, she received the same amount of electoral support from men and women.⁹¹ During the 2012 elections Marine Le Pen performed better than her father in overall votes, as she managed to attract a larger portion of male voters as well.⁹² Since her takeover in 2011, she built up the National Rally to become one of the largest parties in France. Le Pen also proved her success by bringing her party into the second round of the 2017 French presidential elections, receiving 33.9 percent of the vote.⁹³

»» Consequences of Le Pen's success

Marine Le Pen's effective leadership of National Rally has made her a global ambassador for the far-right. As an established political figure, she poses a threat nationally, regionally, and globally.

- **National.** At the national level, Marine Le Pen pushed the French political spectrum further to the right and heightened nationalist sentiment. Since the 2017 presidential elections, National Rally's policies have gained traction within France. Le Pen's carefully crafted gendered rhetoric on immigration issues moved the National Rally into the political mainstream.⁹⁴ Other parties consequently adopted a more right-leaning stance on immigration in order to appeal to Le Pen's electorate.⁹⁵ In the lead-up to the 2022 presidential elections in France, the far-right continues to attract voters. Several emerging parties and candidates employ similar rhetoric to Le Pen. Prior to her success, these newcomers may have been considered too fringe to succeed.⁹⁶ Although Marine Le Pen has yet to hold the highest office in France, her effectiveness in messaging has shifted the direction of entire policy debates to the right.
- **Regional.** Marine Le Pen's international reputation and her push for increased regional ties with other far-right parties in Europe undermines the European Union. In the past, Le

Pen pursued a more hardline anti-EU stance, often advocating for a so-called ‘Frexit.’⁹⁷ However, the emergence of more far-right parties across Europe that share a similar disillusionment with the EU establishment has altered her strategy. Le Pen hopes to change the European Union from within by allying with other far-right actors. As FRPPs in Europe increasingly succeed in the polls or already hold office, Le Pen has formed alliances with members of these parties and other anti-EU lawmakers.⁹⁸ Her significant platform draws the attention of other far-right populist leaders and advances nationalism, eroding support for the EU. Le Pen also uses her platform as an MEP to strengthen cross-national far-right alliances in order to mold the European Union in the far-right’s image. In doing so, Le Pen sows divisions from within the EU and increases her appeal to the European far-right.⁹⁹

- **Global.** Marine Le Pen has played a significant role in the internationalization of the far-right. Her use of gendered rhetoric when discussing immigration, otherwise known as the “racialisation of sexism”, gained traction beyond France and shaped the immigration debate in Europe and abroad.¹⁰⁰ Part of Le Pen’s success has been attributed to campaign funding from the Kremlin. Le Pen became more complementary and less critical of Putin’s regime as a result.¹⁰¹ The relationship between Le Pen and Putin poses a threat to European stability and the United States’ position on the continent. Russian influence in French politics implies that their continued interference in the European sphere may go unchecked if far-right populist parties increase their foothold.¹⁰²

Marine Le Pen is the face of the female far-right in Europe. Her success on the national stage has led to regional and international recognition, which has helped her shape the far-right’s agenda. Whether she will have a continued impact on French and European politics remains to be seen, but she has already paved the way for other far-right women across the continent to follow in her footsteps.

Giorgia Meloni: Italy’s Rising Right Star

“I am Giorgia, I am a woman, I am a mother, I am Italian, I am a Christian, and you can’t take that away from me.”

—Giorgia Meloni¹⁰³

Giorgia Meloni is the leader of the far-right populist party, the Brothers of Italy. Since co-founding the Brothers of Italy party in 2012, Meloni and her party have consistently increased their standings in the polls due to her leadership style.

»» Sources of Meloni’s success

Giorgia Meloni’s ability to rise through the ranks of Italian politics can be attributed to her charismatic appeal and emphasis on her gender when promoting her party’s positions, both of which have led to a larger popular media following.

- **Appeal of persona.** Giorgia Meloni has become one of the most popular politicians in Italy. Her charisma, consistent commitment to the far-right, and acceptance into the Italian political mainstream contributes to her appeal with voters. First, her social media depicts her life as a woman and a mother, making her appear more maternal.¹⁰⁴ Second, she stuck to harder rhetoric than her counterparts during the pandemic, which added to her popularity.¹⁰⁵ Third, the Italian people perceive Meloni as more reliable candidate than her main opponent Matteo Salvini, the leader of the far-right Lega party.¹⁰⁶ In her public appearances she remains passionate and staunchly tough on issues, such as immigration, but does not project anger.¹⁰⁷ Thus, even though Meloni's rhetoric is much harsher than Salvini's, she appears more even tempered and deliberate to the public. Finally, Meloni presents herself as a woman who rose through the ranks of a largely male-dominated sphere despite gender barriers, which further appeals to ordinary women and garners respect from men within and outside her party.¹⁰⁸
- **Ability to message.** The Brothers of Italy's recent success stems from the effectiveness of Giorgia Meloni's messaging to the far-right electorate. Meloni adopted a similar strategy to Marine Le Pen by re-affirming her commitment to hard-right policies, while making the party appear mainstream. Meloni continuously highlights her identity as a mother, woman, and Christian in order to demonstrate her relatability to ordinary Italian women.¹⁰⁹ She also distances herself from the party's fascist history to encourage acceptance by the public.¹¹⁰ However, she speaks out against immigration in less 'subtle' ways than Le Pen. Meloni claims she favors immigrants that are easier to integrate and that are of a Christian background.¹¹¹ She also chooses to lean into nationalist rhetoric in order to bolster support for her cause.¹¹²
- **Media presence.** Giorgia Meloni's coverage in the Italian media launched her into Italian popular culture. Meloni is renowned for her controversial stances, yet her identity as a female politician softens her image and provides cover for her extremism.¹¹³ Indeed, she has been depicted by the media as far more traditional than her male counterparts in the party.¹¹⁴ Thus, Giorgia Meloni's acceptance into Italian popular culture can be attributed in part to her depictions in the media, which counters the harshness of her rhetoric and policies.¹¹⁵

Under Meloni's leadership, Brothers of Italy have reached 21 percent support in the polls, making it as popular as the League, the dominant far-right party at the time.¹¹⁶ Meloni increased her party's overall electoral support by taking a decisive anti-establishment stance, which led to a surge in support for her party.¹¹⁷ In addition to increasing the overall size of her party's vote share, Meloni also appealed to more women because "she [seemed] to be the only one making the battle for women," according to her female constituents.¹¹⁸ In the 2018 national elections, the Brothers of Italy party won an equal share of male and female votes.¹¹⁹ Meloni's ability to increase the Brothers of Italy's breadth and number of votes can be attributed to both her hardline stance on issues, such as immigration, and her success in 'softening' the party's image.

»» Consequences of Meloni's success

Giorgia Meloni's integration into Italian politics and increased visibility in the Europe should lead us to consider the implications if she comes to power. There are early signs of her potential to disrupt politics nationally, regionally, and globally.

- **National.** Her leadership has shifted the Brothers of Italy from the political fringe.¹²⁰ At the national level, Giorgia Meloni and her party have normalized rampant anti-immigration rhetoric and opposition to multiculturalism. Meloni's acceptance into the Italian mainstream makes her radical views on immigration, LGBT rights, and abortion appear acceptable.¹²¹ Giorgia Meloni's actions demonstrate the potential for democratic backsliding should the Brothers of Italy come to power.
- **Regional.** Meloni's leadership in the European Conservatives and Reformists Alliance (ECR) and her push for regional cooperation with far-right populist parties may advance their spread across Europe and undermine the EU. Brothers of Italy decided to align with many European parties to form a far-right political network.¹²² Far-right populist coalitions undermine the strength of the EU because they sow division among the member states. Giorgia Meloni's regional leadership position as the president of the ECR alliance makes her the only woman to lead a European and Italian party simultaneously.¹²³ Thus, Meloni's positions give her significant sway over domestic and regional politics.
- **Global.** Giorgia Meloni is rising through the ranks of Italian politics and becoming a household name in European politics. As her success continues, her relations with other far right and illiberal leaders will become increasingly threatening. Giorgia Meloni and her party have demonstrated a warmer stance towards the Kremlin, which should raise alarm bells for the United States and the EU.¹²⁴ Meloni's relationship with Moscow poses a threat to the stability of the European continent should the Brothers of Italy become more influential. The Brothers of Italy under Giorgia Meloni have also allied with Hungary's Fidesz, which shares notoriously close ties with Moscow.¹²⁵ Thus, Giorgia Meloni could potentially lead Italy down an illiberal path that may threaten European stability and security moving forward.

Conclusion

Far-right populist parties threaten global democracy and reveal the fragility of the liberal order. When these parties come into power, they undermine democratic checks and balances and skirt the rule of law within their countries. FRPPs also band together across national borders and actively cooperate with one another in order to remake the EU in their own image and reduce the influence of NATO.

Female leaders make far-right populist parties more palatable due to their gender. These women move their party's messaging into the mainstream by employing a carefully constructed dual persona encompassing both 'masculine' and 'feminine' traits, which allows them to 'soften' the otherwise polarizing rhetoric of their parties. In doing so, female leaders entrench FRPPs further

into the national political sphere. These influential actors in domestic politics also influence regional security, which has global repercussions. Thus, the women who appear to be innocent flowers reveal the serpent underneath their persona when they assume positions of power.

In order to address the threat that female far-right populist leaders present to European stability and the sustainability of the transatlantic alliance, policymakers must first apply the framework described above. In doing so, they can identify and create a database of FRPP female leaders, and their extremist policy positions to distribute among the Transatlantic alliance to ensure their strategic value no longer goes overlooked. At the regional level, the European Union and NATO could commission a working group to examine the intersection of gender and security and the threat of female leaders of far-right populist coalitions. At the global level, the United Nations could host a security forum highlighting the dangers of far-right populist parties to global democracy with a special emphasis on the role female leaders play within them.

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⁴¹ Ben-Shitrit, Elad-Strenger, and Hirsch-Hoefler, “‘Pinkwashing’,” 86–110.

⁴² Mudde, “The Study of Populist Radical Right Parties.”

⁴³ Gutsche, *Triumph of the Women?*

⁴⁴ Mudde, “The Study of Populist Radical Right Parties.”

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

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⁵⁷ Smith, “The Name Is Szydlo.”

⁵⁸ Gwiazda, “Analysing the ‘What’”, 689.

⁵⁹ Smith, “The Name Is Szydlo.” Jaroslaw Kaczynski is the chairman of Law and Justice, who is behind all of the major decisions undertaken by the party. He is the real decision maker although he does not hold a position in elected office.

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