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Battleground Europe: the rise of anti-woke movements and their threat to democracy

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Introduction

In 2003, within Black communities, the term “woke” served as a vital reminder to remain alert to the systemic police brutality targeting Black people in the United States (Allen, 2023). It symbolized the commitment of those dedicated to social justice and remaining vigilant. During the resurgence of the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement in 2020—sparked by the murder of George Floyd, a Black American man who was fatally asphyxiated in Minneapolis on 25 May 2020 after police officer Derek Chauvin knelt on his neck and back for more than 9 min—the term regained prominence, reinforcing its original meaning (Madrid Gil, 2023).

Since then, the word has spread rapidly, demonstrating how digital activism has globalized the language of social justice while intertwining with Europe's historical and contemporary challenges with racism, colonialism, and identity politics. Its evolution has expanded well beyond its American origins, molding European political and cultural discourse (Madrid Gil, 2023) even as it has encountered significant resistance. Conservative actors increasingly adopt the so-called “anti-woke” rhetoric to attack issues they deem incompatible with societal norms, often invoking free speech as justification (Steel, 2023). This stance has resulted in efforts to marginalize LGBTQ+ rights, restrict migration, and condemn Islam, with some of these views frequently accompanied by conspiracy theories and hate speech (Nygren and Ives, 2024). By 2023, the term had not only become widely misunderstood by the public but was also increasingly used in a ridiculing manner (Asen, 2024; Smith et al., 2023). This confusion is evident in several in-depth studies examining the term's usage and implications (The Policy Institute, 2023; YouGov, 2024), which reveal that respondents struggle to provide a clear definition of what “woke” truly means.

The meaning and use of the term vary across national contexts (Cammaerts, 2022), including in the nature of its criticism. In the United Kingdom, the term gained prominence amid debates over institutional racism following the 2020 BLM protests, as critics used it to attack initiatives aimed at decolonizing education and addressing police brutality (Madrid Gil, 2023). In Germany, discussions about “woke” have focused on concerns regarding immigration and national identity, with far-right parties such as the Alternative for Germany (AfD) employing “anti-woke” rhetoric to advocate a return to traditional values (Hansen and Olsen, 2024). Meanwhile, in Italy, under the neo-fascist government of Giorgia Meloni (Pietruci, 2023), “anti-woke” rhetoric centers on promoting family values, opposing LGBTQ+ rights and feminism, and combatting cancel culture at a governmental level (De Blasio and Selva, 2024).

Different contexts

“Anti-woke” rhetoric, as examined in various contexts, has been weaponized against marginalized communities and used to undermine basic human rights. In the United Kingdom, this discourse draws comparisons between Donald Trump and Nigel Farage—the leader of Reform UK—to highlight perceived transatlantic political trends (Vinocur and Barigazzi, 2025). Reform UK has consistently amplified narratives that merge Islamophobia, anti-migration sentiment, and nationalism (Barker, 2024; Kilty, 2025). Capitalizing on this momentum, the Conservative Party, under its newly elected leader Kemi Badenoch, has adopted elements of Farage’s rhetoric regarding the “woke agenda” in its leadership campaign (Geiger, 2024). Meanwhile, tabloids such as the *Daily Mail* have echoed and amplified these “anti-woke” narratives, further targeting progressive movements (Davies and MacRae, 2023). While political amplification is significant, the role of the media is equally crucial and must not be overlooked.

Meanwhile, in France—a nation steeped in universalist ideals—the concept has provoked fierce backlash. Public intellectuals and politicians, including President Emmanuel Macron, have portrayed “woke” as an Anglo-American import that contradicts French republican principles (Campagne, 2023), conflating it with “Islamism” and perceived threats to secularism (Wagener, 2022). Marine Le Pen, leader of the far-right National Rally and daughter of Jean-Marie Le Pen, has demonstrated a commitment to opposing the “woke agenda” by targeting multiculturalism, while borrowing elements from the American context to further her anti-leftist stance (Dolan and Tower, 2022).

In Germany, debates over “Woke-Kultur” (woke culture) frequently intersect with concerns about immigration and national identity, as far-right parties such as the AfD harness such rhetoric to advocate a return to traditional values (Hansen and Olsen, 2024). Under the leadership of Alice Weidel, the party has combined “anti-woke” politics with a staunch anti-migration stance (Klinger et al., 2023). Weidel’s alliance with far-right technocrat Elon Musk—and his subsequent endorsement of her—has sparked considerable controversy (Politico, 2025), with critics alleging that she appears to have been swayed by his “anti-woke” politics (Galasso, 2024). Ahead of the German election in February 2025, she launched a campaign promising to eradicate what she terms “queer-woke insanity”—a claim that is particularly contentious given her own queer identity—and to restrict the definition of family to a father, mother, and children (Hoyer, 2025). These tactics, echoing strategies seen in the US yet tailored to local contexts, focus on defending so-called traditional values by opposing LGBTQ+ rights and gender diversity. The contradictions in Weidel’s rhetoric reveal a provocative approach aimed at fomenting moral panic.

In Italy, PM Meloni is widely recognized as a leading advocate of “anti-woke” rhetoric in Europe (De Blasio and Selva, 2024). Positioning herself as a defender of the nuclear family, she has championed strict legislation that targets LGBTQ+ couples and individuals, including dismantling key laws recognizing same-sex adoption (Hall, 2023; Kassam, 2023). Meloni has placed gender issues at the forefront of her government’s agenda, aligning openly with other far-right figures within her coalition and across Europe under the banner of “anti-woke” campaigns. She has forged

strong domestic alliances—notably with the far-right League—and expanded her influence in European Union (EU) politics, despite criticisms that her policies undermine democratic principles and target vulnerable groups in society (Pirozzi, 2025).

In Greece, the decline of the neo-Nazi party Golden Dawn over the past 6 years has paved the way for the emergence of three far-right parties (Samaras, 2020). These parties attribute many societal issues to “woke” politics, accusing gender-friendly policies and diversity initiatives of corrupting society—a stance that appears to have resonated with voters, as evidenced by the strong performance of Greek Solution, Victory, and Voice of Reason in recent opinion polls (To Vima, 2024).

Centrist normalization

By mimicking far-right rhetoric, centrist parties risk undermining their ideological integrity and alienating moderate supporters, thereby triggering a “snowball effect” in which voters increasingly favor far-right parties that are perceived as more genuine in their “anti-woke” stance (Rooduijn, 2024). In the UK, PM Keir Starmer appears to have conceded to a prevailing moral panic by aligning with transphobic movements and scaling back diversity and inclusion initiatives in favor of engaging in culture wars (Featherstone, 2024). This trend began before Starmer’s premiership, when figures such as Tony Blair raised these issues in a less substantive manner (The Guardian, 2022) and has since evolved into a broader strategy within the Labor Party. The party now frequently targets gender transition debates by arguing that trans people should be prevented from entering women’s spaces and by reinforcing a binary view of gender (BBC, 2024)—for example, by asserting that “only women have a cervix.” In the run-up to the 2024 general election, Starmer further aligned himself against what he termed “gender ideology” (The Independent, 2024), a label popularized by far-right parties (Gal, 2021). Moreover, Starmer argued that the government should deprioritize areas such as AI security and legislation in favor of development over “woke” concerns (Financial Times, 2025). This shift in focus, characterized by ambiguous policy connections, risks coming across as sensationalist and may delegitimize serious and legitimate debates over technological governance.

Anticipating the defeat by Marine Le Pen in the 2024 legislative election, Macron increasingly framed his discourse around denouncing “woke” ideology as a foreign, American import. Following the 2020 BLM protests, he argued that several social science theories imported from the US are ill-suited to the French context (Politico, 2024). On multiple occasions, he has criticized what he terms “woke language,” even contending that the EU should abandon its use (The Independent, 2021). Macron also maintains that France must forge its own path toward a multiethnic democracy, distinct from what he perceives as an “identity-obsessed” politics. In his October 2020 speech against what he labeled “Islamist separatism,” he declared, “We have left the intellectual debate to ... Anglo-Saxon traditions based on a different history, which is not ours” (The Atlantic, 2023). Some of these statements also invoke Islamophobic sentiment, which is intrinsically linked to “anti-woke” politics (Zhang, 2024).

Similarly, the German center-right CDU has diverged significantly from its traditional ideological foundations established under Angela Merkel. Under the leadership of Friedrich Merz, the CDU has, in certain instances (Schultheis et al., 2025), embraced “anti-woke” rhetoric—a shift the party has publicly acknowledged (France24, 2024). Prior to the 2025 election, Merz pledged to limit “woke” policies and gender-sensitive language (France24, 2025), while asserting that the party is not defined by gender and committing to key measures such as tackling migration (Zeller, 2024). Merz has also pledged to restrict protections for the LGBTQ+ community in order to limit trans rights (Context, 2025).

Elements of “anti-woke” rhetoric are evident within the Greek government’s ranks. Despite New Democracy under Kyriakos Mitsotakis voting for same-sex marriage in February 2024 (Gregory, 2024), the party has simultaneously veered further to the right. Mitsotakis has employed overtly far-right rhetoric to attack diversity and portray himself as “anti-woke” (Prime Minister’s Office, 2024). This situation is particularly peculiar as New Democracy faces criticism for its handling of the economy (European Commission, 2024), the cost-of-living crisis, and ongoing neglect of the working class. Instead of addressing these substantive issues, the party has redirected the narrative to suggest that their declining popularity stems from the vote on same-sex marriage (Bali, 2025), a bill directly and indirectly condemned by several ministers of Mitsotakis’ cabinet.

Democratic resilience

These examples reveal a moral panic infiltrating centrist politics under far-right pressure. The long-term implications for liberal democracy can be severe, as the normalization of “anti-woke” sentiments within the center—further amplified by parties that once championed diversity (Johnson, 2023)—now endangers fundamental human rights. Marginal groups, such as trans individuals, are increasingly targeted in a European context that once embraced inclusivity in line with the EU’s foundational values. Moreover, the broader assault on LGBTQ+ rights, particularly in nations like Italy that appear to be sliding toward illiberal politics, is deeply concerning given PM Meloni’s prominent role within the EU. The fixation on Islam—often conflated with “woke” ideology—further undermines the longstanding commitment to multicultural and multireligious societies in Europe.

Some scholars argue that although the phenomenon is complex, the far-right has effectively transformed these issues into a volatile political crisis, while mainstream parties have largely failed to recognize and counter this trend (Mondon, 2025), instead adopting measures and language that ultimately erode democratic resilience (Katsambekis, 2023). The persistent marginalization of vulnerable communities restricts the freedom of those unable to engage with policymaking processes. Additionally, the rhetoric employed by mainstream parties—including terms such as “gender ideology” and even “woke”—contributes to the gradual normalization of this ideology.

Conclusion

A critical examination of political rhetoric in the UK, France, Germany, Italy, and Greece reveals striking parallels among far-right parties. Instead of engaging with substantive policy debates, these parties fixate on LGBTQ+ issues—particularly trans rights. Despite trans individuals comprising only a small fraction of the population, they are relentlessly targeted and vilified by both mainstream and far-right actors. This calculated exploitation of a marginal minority appears designed to manufacture a pervasive moral panic, a tactic that not only diverts attention from genuine political challenges but also undermines the integrity of democratic discourse.

Notable differences emerge in the rhetoric of European leaders. Macron’s persistent anti-Islam narratives, often paired with critiques of “woke” culture, show a deeper cultural attachment to traditional societal norms that goes well beyond opposition to LGBTQ+ rights. In the UK, Prime Minister Starmer’s repeated transphobic remarks in the run-up to the 2024 election—marked by constant references to trans individuals—are especially concerning. Furthermore, the reference to AI security in February 2025—seemingly an attempt to merge technological concerns with “anti-woke” discourse—reveals a complete lack of ideological substance, relying instead on buzzwords that bear no relevance in this context. In Greece, PM Mitsotakis’ “anti-woke” stance appears to have been spurred by the internal collapse of his own party; within 6 months of the same-sex marriage vote he championed, the party’s performance in the 2024 European Parliament election forced a dramatic rebranding. Greece thus stands as the only instance of a European nation simultaneously endorsing liberal policies while engaging in far-right dog-whistling.

AfD’s Weidel presents a striking political paradox. Despite being openly lesbian—living with a Sri Lankan-born partner and having adopted two sons (Zamana and Jartyś, 2017)—she advocates policies that dismantle LGBTQ+ rights and call for a return to traditional values. This contradiction highlights the superficiality of her ideological stance and exposes the inherent inconsistency in using “anti-woke” rhetoric to marginalize the very communities she represents.

Meloni, on the other hand, is the only politician among the examples discussed who has systematically pursued the dismantling of fundamental rights for LGBTQ+ individuals under an “anti-woke” banner. Her rapid rise within EU politics suggests that the normalization of such views in democratic states may be paving the way for the integration of neo-fascist ideologies. As Italy’s PM, Meloni wields a particularly consequential influence; Italy appears to have moved beyond mere normalization, arguably entering a phase of democratic backsliding once in power.

Collectively, these cases highlight deliberate attempts to erode democratic liberties for marginalized communities, placing fundamental rights under constant threat. In some instances—such as in Italy—these threats have materialized into concrete policies grounded in “anti-woke” rhetoric. Mainstream parties, seeking to stave off electoral decline, have increasingly adopted such language, suggesting that the normalization of these views will persist as far-right influence grows across the continent.

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