



All CCS and Cross-sectoral Spotlight All Europe Countries Inclusion

Culture is the far right's secret weapon

Across Europe, the far right is winning over some of the educated, multilingual youth. By offering a deep sense of cultural belonging, nationalist movements are now filling a narrative vacuum left by the European Union, argues Deniz Torcu.

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Across Europe, an emerging pattern is unsettling the assumptions of liberal educators and policymakers alike. Students who study in multiple countries, speak three or four languages, and graduate from globally ranked institutions are gravitating towards nationalist narratives. Not all of them, of course, but enough to make us pause.

It is increasingly clear that the far right no longer appeals solely to those left behind by globalisation. In addition to resentment and anger, it has successfully tapped into something much more primordial and elemental: belonging.

And Europe's institutions have no answer.

The numbers speak for themselves. The [2024 European Parliament elections](#) produced the highest-ever vote share for far-right parties, with 27% of seats – 191 out of 720 – now held by MEPs aligned with far-right groupings.

This was not merely a protest vote from economically marginalised peripheries. Analysis of the [European Election Studies 2024](#), covering nearly 25,000 voters across 27 countries, shows that far-right support among young men under 30 reached over 21%, a figure that has grown consistently across every election cycle since 1989.

In Germany, [AfD](#) grew from 5% among 18-24 year olds when it

was founded in 2013 to 19% in 2025. In France, [Marine Le Pen's National Rally](#) was the most popular party among 18-34 year olds in 2024. Across all ages groups, far-right parties now account for [almost 25%](#) of Europe's overall vote share.

The far right is almost uniformly Eurosceptic, and poses a very real threat to the EU's integrity. The 2025 Great Reset report, backed by far-right parties from across Europe, presented an explicit, detailed roadmap for [dismantling the EU from within](#).

Despite this existential threat, the EU's standard response has generally been to point to values statements, institutional reform, and economic reassurance. None of these come close to addressing the question that nationalist movements have learned to so capably exploit: who are you, and where do you belong?

The EU's narrative vacuum

Nationalist movements are not winning on policy platforms, they are winning on identity. They offer a story – one that is emotionally legible, culturally rooted, and often exclusionary – about who counts as a real European, a real German, a real Frenchman. Against this, the EU offers a passport, a market, a currency, and a set of rights. These are all valuable, but they are not a story, let alone a compelling one.

This is not a new observation. As French philosopher Étienne Balibar argued in his 2004 book [We, the People of Europe?](#), European integration has always contained a tension – between the universalist rhetoric of the European project and the exclusionary logics of nation, race, and language that it never fully displaced.

Rightwing MEPs recently chanted 'send them back' after deportation plans were passed in the European Parliament.

Over recent decades, the EU has neglected culture, assuming that cultural belonging would emerge as a natural byproduct of political and economic integration. It didn't, and the absence of a genuine cultural strategy to build that belonging left a narrative vacuum that the far right has gradually expanded to fill.

What makes the current failure particularly striking is that Europe has, at earlier moments, understood the cultural stakes, and acted on them decisively.

Capitals of culture

The [Council of Europe](#) signed the European Cultural Convention in 1954, just nine years after the end of World War II. This agreement created the institutional architecture for collective cultural diplomacy among European states. The motivation was explicit: political and economic reconstruction alone would not be enough. Europe needed a shared cultural project.

The most enduring expression of that instinct came in 1985, when Greek Minister of Culture [Melina Mercouri](#) and her French counterpart [Jack Lang](#) persuaded their EU counterparts to establish what would become the [European Capital of Culture programme](#). The stated purpose, as the European Commission now acknowledges, was to “strengthen the sense of belonging of European citizens to a common cultural area” and emphasise the cultural characteristics shared by all Europeans.

Since Athens inaugurated the initiative in 1985, over 70 cities across more than 30 countries have held the title. From Florence to Istanbul, Glasgow, Krakow, Valletta and Timișoara, each city hosts a year-long programme of cultural events, explicitly intended to build a shared sense of European identity. Independent evaluations consistently confirm the programme’s success in fostering intercultural exchange and civic engagement.

Advertisement for Chemnitz’s bid to become the European Capital of Culture 2025. [Aagnverglaser/Wikimedia Commons, CC BY-SA](#)

What distinguished this earlier period was a fundamentally different understanding of what European integration meant. The founders of the European project – [Schuman](#), [Monnet](#), [De Gasperi](#) – were acutely aware that political and economic structures needed cultural legitimacy to survive. Culture was not an add-on or a soft footnote to harder work. It was the precondition, the foundation on which everything else was built.

But today, the EU’s funding data reveals just how little importance it attaches to culture. The [Creative Europe programme](#), the EU’s flagship cultural funding instrument, operates with a budget of €2.44 billion for 2021–2027. That may sound significant, but it only represents [around 0.15% of the total EU budget](#).

In stark comparison, [Culture Action Europe has documented](#) that in 2024 alone, Russia spent over €1 billion on cultural propaganda – three times the EU’s entire Creative Europe annual budget. And that does not count the billions more Russia

has spent on [media influence operations](#) targeting European audiences.

Put simply, Europe is being massively outspent on the terrain that matters most.

Media landscape

The media landscape of the EU's early days no longer exists. However imperfect and nationally segmented it was, the media environment of the 1960s, 70s, and 80s was one in which public broadcasters, shared cultural references, and curated common spaces of meaning were possible.

Today, algorithmic platforms are the main channel through which young Europeans encounter the world. But these platforms are not culturally neutral. They are designed to maximise emotional engagement, giving nationalism's simple, identity-affirming narratives a built-in head start.

Initiatives like the European Capital of Culture were conceived for a different world, one where culture moved through cities and institutions. They were never updated for a world where culture moves through feeds.

The EU's own data points to the mismatch. A [2021 European Parliament youth survey](#) found that 64% of young people use Instagram and 25% use TikTok as primary sources of information. A separate Eurobarometer found that [79% of young Europeans aged 15 to 24](#) use influencers or content creators on social media as their main source of news.

A [2024 study](#) found that, in the lead-up to the 2024 elections, far-right parties consistently outperformed mainstream parties on engagement metrics across Facebook and Instagram in Germany, Sweden, Hungary, and Poland. This was partly because their negative, provocative content is structurally rewarded by current platform algorithms.

Erasmus and identity

This is not only a policy failure, but an educational one too. The signs are visible to anyone who teaches in an international setting.

What I observe in my own classroom is complex. Students who have lived in Berlin, studied in Copenhagen, and interned in Amsterdam still speak about "our people" and "their culture". This rhetoric suggests that the experience of mobility has

produced exposure without integration. They know how to navigate differences, but they are not always sure what, if anything, holds them together.

Much of this is baked into the way students experience the continent. [Research on student exchange](#) consistently identifies what scholars call a “selection effect”: students who go abroad tend to already be pro-European before they leave. Exchanges like the Erasmus programme therefore do not create an identity, they just reinforce one that was already there.

The students who most need exposure to European difference – those who are economically precarious, educationally less mobile, or more culturally rooted in national narratives – are largely absent from these experiences.

An [analysis](#) of Erasmus exchange patterns between 2008 and 2014 found that student flows are strongly stratified along axes of academic prestige and economic capital. Dominant universities send students to dominant universities, reproducing existing hierarchies rather than disrupting them.

This means the cosmopolitan education system is largely speaking to itself. Even at the highest globally ranked institutions, the student body can be diverse in nationality but extraordinarily homogeneous in terms of social class. When we congratulate ourselves on producing globally minded graduates, we are often describing a segment of European youth that was never seriously at risk of nationalist capture in the first place.

Student flows in Europe are strongly stratified along axes of academic prestige and economic capital.

[CarlosBarquero/Shutterstock](#)

The more uncomfortable question is what happens when even that slice begins to show cracks. And the cracks are appearing. [Research on European identity](#) has shown that students who have studied in three countries sometimes express more resentment toward “Brussels” and more attachment to national cultural specificity than their biographies would predict.

The international experience has not produced cosmopolitan loyalty. It has produced something more ambivalent: a familiarity with difference that co-exists with a hunger for rootedness that no institution has managed to satisfy. Nationalist movements understand this hunger. Universities and business schools largely do not.

Who could fill the void today?

The far right is not the only thing capable of filling Europe's institutional and narrative vacuums. Three sets of actors have the mandate, the reach or the power to change the continent's cultural course.

1. European institutions

EU institutions have the mandate but lack the resources or the direction. In late 2024, the European Commission announced its forthcoming [Culture Compass](#), described by Commission President Ursula von der Leyen as a framework to add "a human face to the European project so people can identify with it".

That framing is promising, but the Culture Compass will only be meaningful if backed by real resources. With just 0.15% of the total EU budget, Creative Europe is not a cultural strategy, it is a footnote.

It also needs a directional shift. The EU has framed cultural diplomacy almost entirely as an external tool, projecting European values outward to third countries. It needs to do the same within Europe's borders.

2. Erasmus+

The second actor with power here is the EU's [Erasmus+ programme](#). Despite its limitations, this programme is still the most powerful proof of concept the EU has. Research published in the [Journal of Common Market Studies](#) confirms that Erasmus participation is significantly and positively associated with increased identification as European. But as we saw earlier, Erasmus exchanges do not create European identity out of thin air.

The young men turning to AfD or Rassemblement National are not typically Erasmus alumni. Extending the logic of Erasmus beyond universities and into vocational training, secondary education, and community-level exchange would perhaps be the highest-leverage investments Europe could make. The programme's mobility is not the problem, but its reach is.

3. Universities and business schools

These institutions bear a particular responsibility. Global higher education institutions, including the one where I teach, routinely claim to produce "global citizens" and "intercultural

leaders”. But cosmopolitan credentials and genuine cultural belonging are not the same thing.

The experience of Europeanness needs to be deliberately built, not assumed to emerge from the mere fact of international mobility. A student cohort that includes twenty nationalities is not, in and of itself, a cultural education – it is just an impressive organisational feat. Institutions that position themselves as training the next generation of European leaders must not ignore the question of what actually holds Europe together.

Europe’s cultural turn

The [Spring 2025 Eurobarometer](#) shows that 75% of Europeans feel like EU citizens, a record high, and that nearly 60% of 15–24 year olds trust the EU. These are encouraging figures, but they hide a more complex reality.

Feeling like a citizen is not the same as feeling a sense of belonging. Trust in institutions is not the same as cultural loyalty to a shared project. And the very demographic most likely to express trust in the EU – educated, mobile young Europeans – is also the one whose cultural formation is being left almost entirely to chance.

The far right has understood two key aspects of this moment. First, the question of identity cannot be answered with prosperity or rights frameworks. Second, the institutions which ignore the cultural dimension of politics will always be outflanked by the movements that embrace it. Far-right parties in Europe did not win 27% of European Parliament seats by offering better economic policy. They won by offering a story.

The most striking recent proof came from Romania, where [Călin Georgescu](#), a virtually unknown independent, won the first round of the 2024 presidential election. He campaigned heavily on a TikTok-native cultural narrative built around Orthodox identity, national sovereignty, and spiritual distinctiveness from Western liberalism.

The election’s [subsequent annulment](#) did not erase the underlying reality: a significant portion of Romanian voters, many of them young, had found in a cultural story what they could not find in any existing party’s programme. Romania is an extreme case, but not an isolated one. In the absence of a European cultural narrative with emotional weight, other narratives will fill the space.

Lessons from China and Russia

There is also a geopolitical dimension that EU cultural policy has been too slow to acknowledge. As the bloc's cultural spending lags, Russia is spending billions on propaganda, directed in part at audiences inside Europe itself.

In a very different vein, China operates its large network of [Confucius Institute](#) education centres, which share Chinese culture and language throughout Europe's universities and cities.

Meanwhile, the EU's own cultural institutions debate whether they have a mandate to work on internal belonging at all. The EU has treated cultural diplomacy as a refinement, a way to project values externally once the harder work of politics is done. Though their approaches vary, Europe's geopolitical rivals treat culture as infrastructure, as foundational to influence as roads are to trade.

There is also an urgency that goes beyond electoral cycles. [Culture Action Europe has noted](#) that the far right, now well represented on the European Parliament's Committee on Culture and Education, is already reshaping the terms of cultural debate within EU institutions. It is normalising the language of "gender propaganda", questioning the funding of projects on migration, and advancing a vision of European culture that is national and exclusionary rather than plural and inclusive.

An urgent need for cultural diplomacy

According to the [V-Dem Institute's Democracy Report 2026](#), nearly a quarter of the world's countries were undergoing autocratisation in 2025, several of them in Europe.

The window for a different cultural strategy is narrowing. Every year that passes without one is a year in which the infrastructure of belonging is either being built by those with the least interest in a genuinely common Europe, or dismantled by those with an active interest in seeing the EU fragment and fail.

By spearheading Europe's postwar cultural push, Melina Mercouri understood something that current EU leadership seems to have forgotten: that Europe's claim to people's loyalty cannot rest on technocratic delivery alone. It has to speak to who they are.

The question is not whether cultural diplomacy is too soft an

instrument for the current moment. The question is whether Europe can afford to keep ignoring the one weapon its opponents have been using all along.

Image: Far-right demonstration on the streets of Paris on 18 January 2026. Pierre Laborde/Shutterstock

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