

European Politics and the Cordon Sanitaire

How bad can it get? This bad.

By Bruce Bawer

After I moved from New York to Europe in 1988, and began reading the European media online with some regularity, I became accustomed to a certain term that recurred in their reports with surprising frequency.

That term: *cordon sanitaire*.



Its original meaning is medical. To impose a *cordon sanitaire*, or “health cordon,” is to quarantine an area within which people have been exposed to an infection, the

objective being to prevent its spread.

These days, however, the more common use of the term is political. Politically, a *cordon sanitaire* is an agreement by two or more political parties to isolate, and thereby limit the power of, a party that they perceive as a threat to the established order. These upstart parties, in addition to being excluded from power, are also routinely demonized in the establishment media.

Cordons sanitaires have worked well in the parliamentary systems of Europe, where there are often several major parties

in a single country, and where the party that gets the most votes in an election can nonetheless be kept out of government if two or more other parties manage to form a coalition.

During the last couple of decades, *cordons sanitaires* have been used against the so-called far right – the parties that openly criticize the Islamization of Europe and call for meaningful immigration reforms.

In recent years, however, as these outsider parties have gained more and more voter support, *cordons sanitaires* have become less and less effective.

In Belgium, for example, where a *cordon sanitaire* was first imposed on the fiercely vilified Vlaams Blok, now Vlaams Belang, following its electoral success in 1982, local parties were obliged, after last year's elections, to form coalitions with Vlaams Belang – a huge game-changer.

An even greater departure from standard practice occurred after the 2022 Swedish elections, in which the long-demonized Sweden Democrats (SD) came in second. As a result of this shock result, the Moderates (M), Christian Democrats (KD), and Liberals (L) were obliged to cut a deal with DC, forming a government without official SD participation, but dependent on SD support.

In the 2023 Dutch elections, Geert Wilders's perennially maligned Freedom Party (PVV) came in first, astonishing that nation's political and media establishment. Wilders should have become prime minister. But four other parties – the People's Party for Freedom and Democracy (VVD), the New Social Contract (NSC) and the Farmer–Citizen Movement (BBB) – managed to put together a deal whereby the PVV was included in the governing coalition, a non-PVV member, Dick Schoof, was selected as prime minister, and a PVV member was named deputy prime minister.

Then there's the 2024 French elections, in which Marine Le

Pen's Rassemblement National (RN) won the largest number of votes in the first round but, as one British news site [put it](#), was "bumped to third by tactical voting in the final round."

NBC's [take](#) on the French elections sums up all of these recent elections: "France prevents far-right takeover, but its famed 'cordon sanitaire' has cracks."

Indeed, on January 30 of this year, a European news website ran an [article](#) headlined: "Germany's far right cordon sanitaire collapses. CDU and AfD align against migrants." With three weeks to go until the German election, Friedrich Merz, head of the Christian Democrats (CDU) had collaborated with the upstart Alternative for Germany (AfD) on a "tough motion on immigration," thereby ending an era during which Angela Merkel had steadfastly refused to work with the AfD.

Although Merz, now set to become the next Chancellor, swiftly reversed himself on immigration after the elections, the point remains: the *cordon sanitaire* endures, but in a weakened form. Parties like SD, RN, PVV, and AfD are becoming too big to exclude entirely – but not big enough yet to form their own governments. Increasingly, arrangements have to be made whereby the formerly anathema parties are given *something* by the new governments – some degree of influence, some form of insidership – in exchange for their support.

To an extent, moreover, mainstream parties, in order to avoid complete irrelevance, are taking up the cause of immigration reform, if only in watered-down forms. It is embarrassingly clear that their commitment to these policies is founded entirely on pragmatic grounds. And Merz, in Germany, has shown – like Macron before him – that these establishment politicians' sweeping promises of change in regard to Islam, immigration, and integration cannot necessarily be trusted.

So it is that the *cordons sanitaires* around certain parties are indeed falling like the Berlin Wall. But as public support

for those parties continues to grow, the establishment parties are exhibiting more solidarity with one another, and less solidarity with the people. The situation is most striking, perhaps, in Britain, where the Tories and Labour can almost seem (like the animals and humans at the end of Orwell's *Animal Farm*) indistinguishable from each other. Increasingly, both parties appear to represent no one but themselves.

Yes, Nigel Farage's new party, Reform UK, is on its way up. At some point, something's got to give. But in the meantime, it seems exceedingly odd that in Westminster – in the Mother of Parliaments, in the land of Magna Carta – the MPs are so out of touch with their supposed constituencies.

And the UK, needless to say, isn't alone in this regard. Indeed, it can feel that in several European countries, the ruling parties – desperate to maintain their power and taking their cue, perhaps, from Brussels, where you can hear countless languages being spoken but rarely if ever hear the voice of the people – have striven to expand the distance between themselves and the ordinary citizens whom they profess to represent.

Which is another way of saying that Europe's ruling parties have increasingly surrounded the inhabitants of their countries with something that can only be described as – dare I say it? – a *cordon sanitaire*.

Among those not surrounded by these *cordons sanitaires* are Muslims. Observing the behavior of the powers that be, it can be hard not to conclude that they've already thrown in the towel, resigned themselves to Europe's Islamic future, and decided to butter up their future overlords while ignoring the infidel rabble.

How bad can it get? This bad. On February 26, while Shiri Bibas and her young sons, all three murdered by Hamas, were

being buried, Norway's Prime Minister, Jonas Gahr Støre, as [reported](#) by Julie Dahle, "chose to spend the day in the Rabita Mosque, surrounded by dialogue and candles, to speak about Palestinian suffering. He singled out Palestinian prisoners in Israeli jails and called them 'hostages.'"

So it is that while the new U.S. administration is dedicating itself tirelessly to the interests of the electorate, more and more of Europe's leaders are taking the opposite course. Europe's only hope is that the support for change-oriented parties soars big time – and *prontissimo* – so that Wilders, Le Pen, and company can't be denied the reins of power any longer.

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