

The spectre of neo-fascism that is haunting Europe

Prior to their opening game at the ongoing UEFA Euro 2024, Kylian Mbappé made news for his comments regarding the French elections. In his pre-match press conference, the France captain issued a warning: "Extremes are at the gates of power." He also stated, "I don't want to represent a country that doesn't correspond to my values or our values." Marcus Thuram, his teammate, went one step further and urged the French people to stop Marine Le Pen's National Rally (RN) party from becoming powerful.

At inflection point

About 175 years after the Communist Manifesto was first published, a spectre is again haunting Europe. But it is the spectre of the ultra-right and neo-fascism. Europe is at an inflection point. The ultra-right gained ground in Europe during the European Union (EU) elections that just finished. Wrote Timothy Garton Ash in *The Guardian*, "A Europe that just celebrated on the beaches of Normandy the 80-year-old D-day beginning of its liberation from war, nationalism and fascism now again faces fascism, nationalism and war." And, Paris is unquestionably the epicentre of the earthquake. Emmanuel Macron, the President of France, promptly announced a snap parliamentary election after being humiliated by Le Pen's party by a 32%-15% vote margin in the European elections.

Why did Mr. Macron take such a reckless gamble? He justified the surprise snap-election call as the "most responsible solution". But a columnist for the popular French newspaper, *Le Monde*, even described Mr. Macron's decision as a "choice to play France at poker". However, was Mr. Macron hoping that moderate and progressive voters would use their strategic voting to counter the ultra-right and maybe undo some of the damage to his party, at least in the second round? Nonetheless, in the first round of



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Paris is the epicentre of the storm where July 7 could be the change-point in French and European history

France's snap two-round general election on June 30, the RN raised its vote share to 34% from its historic high in the EU elections. In third place, well behind the 28% vote share of the New Popular Front (NPF), an alliance of left-wing and progressive parties, lies Mr. Macron's centrist "Ensemble" or "Together" alliance with 21%.

Thus, has Mr. Macron allowed the far-right to capitalise on the momentum created by the European elections? Did he incur an unwarranted and hazardous risk by assuming that the latent political turmoil that has been hurting France and Europe for years will explode into a major crisis? It is possible that France may soon find itself in uncharted territory, where far-right political groups not only become more mainstream but also become the most powerful political force in the country.

Growth of the far-right

The far-right is becoming more influential in resistance to the immigrants from Africa and Asia who are expanding their foothold throughout Europe, which is partly a carry-over effect of their colonising legacy. Although this has been going on for decades, it has gained momentum recently. This long-standing issue in French society was portrayed in the novel *Soumission* (*Submission*, in English), by French poet and author Michel Houellebecq in 2015. In the novel, the Socialist Party teams up with the recently established Muslim Brotherhood Party in the 2022 French presidential elections to oppose Le Pen, with additional backing from the right-wing Union for a Popular Movement. Following the election of Mohammed Ben-Abbes as president, Islamic law was instituted in France. Although some real-life politicians, such as Le Pen and François Hollande, are the characters in *Soumission*, there is nobody like Emmanuel Macron in the novel. In fact, Mr. Macron would launch his party "En Marche" in 2016 and run for

the presidential election in 2017. Certainly, Houellebecq could not have imagined such a fairytale. Furthermore, Mr. Macron's centrist politics would effectively quell the far-right wave – at least temporarily. But for how long?

Houellebecq came up with another novel in 2022 titled *Anéantir* (*Annihilate, Destroy, or Obliterate*). It was written against the backdrop of the 2027 French presidential election, when the departing young President, who is similar to Mr. Macron, was finishing up his second term in office. In *Anéantir*, a youthful far-right contender is dangerously close behind the front-runner in the polls in 2027.

The far-right is undeniably riding on popularity throughout Europe. Italy elected Giorgia Meloni as its first far-right leader since Benito Mussolini in October 2022, precisely a century after Mussolini took power. From Sweden to Portugal, Germany to Spain, and the Netherlands to Austria, the far-right is spreading its tentacles. Furthermore, they undoubtedly share certain things in common in terms of their anti-immigration and euroscepticism.

Immigration, eh? French football's succession of megastars of African, Arab, or Antillean descent, including Kylian Mbappé, Thierry Henry and Zinedine Zidane, represents only one side of the story. However, what is their level of integration into French society? French footballer Karim Benzema effectively summarised this fact when he remarked, "If I score, I'm French... If I don't, I'm an Arab."

Needless to say, the two rounds of French elections could turn out to be a change-point in both French and European history if the far-right wins on July 7. This could lead to the emergence of neo-fascism throughout Europe. But as history has shown us, every storm eventually calms down, and this ultra-right wave in Europe will eventually normalise. However, the effects of this particular cyclone would last for a very long time.

Question -1)

Statement: Kylian Mbappé expressed concern about the rise of extremism in French politics.

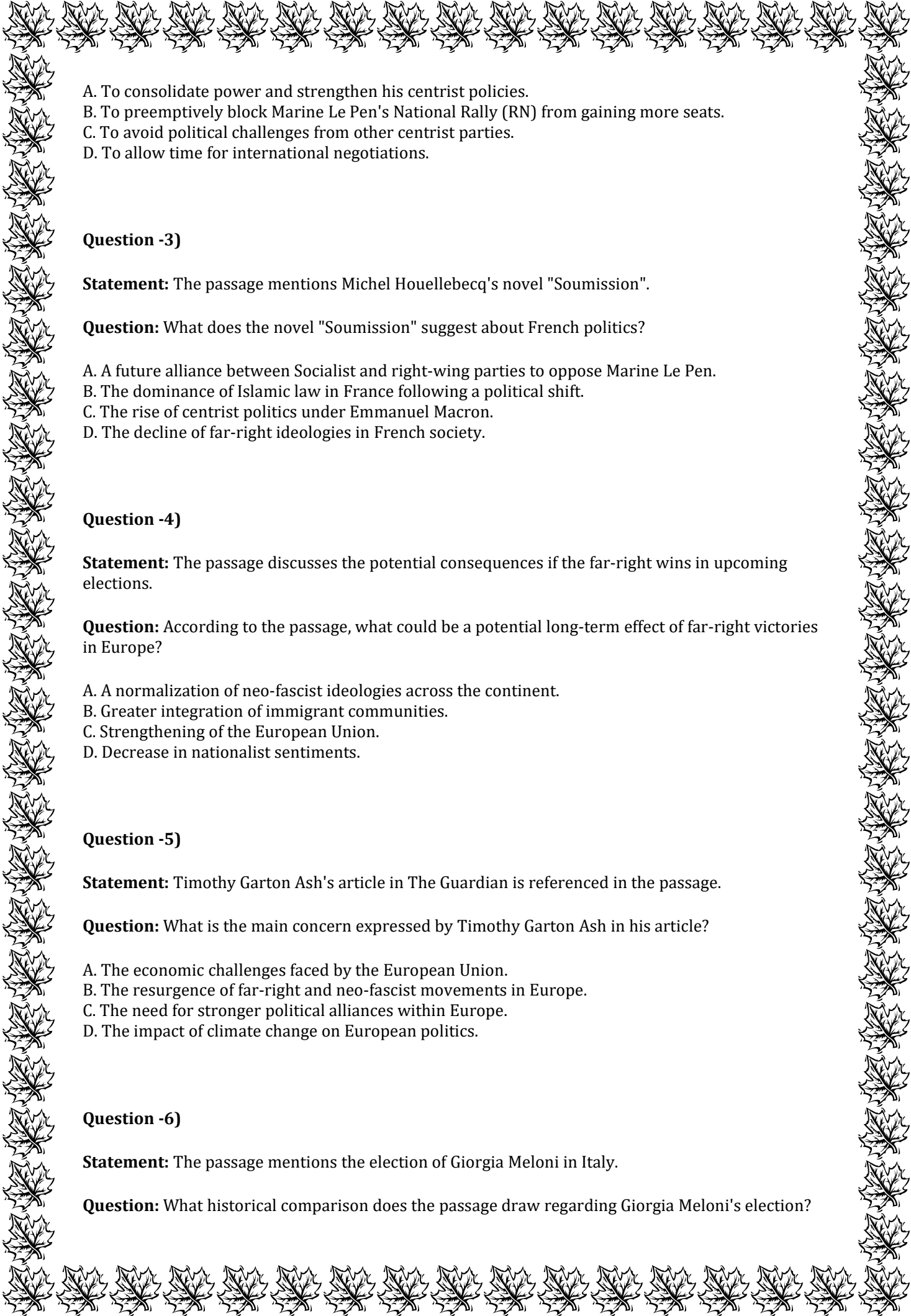
Question: Which of the following statements can be inferred from Kylian Mbappé's comments?

- A. Mbappé supports Marine Le Pen's National Rally (RN) party.
- B. Mbappé believes extremism threatens French values.
- C. Mbappé is running for political office in the upcoming elections.
- D. Mbappé thinks all political parties should unite against the centrist government.

Question -2)

Statement: Emmanuel Macron called for a snap parliamentary election after his party's defeat in the European elections.

Question: What was likely Emmanuel Macron's primary motive for calling a snap election?

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- A. To consolidate power and strengthen his centrist policies.
 - B. To preemptively block Marine Le Pen's National Rally (RN) from gaining more seats.
 - C. To avoid political challenges from other centrist parties.
 - D. To allow time for international negotiations.

Question -3)

Statement: The passage mentions Michel Houellebecq's novel "Soumission".

Question: What does the novel "Soumission" suggest about French politics?

- A. A future alliance between Socialist and right-wing parties to oppose Marine Le Pen.
- B. The dominance of Islamic law in France following a political shift.
- C. The rise of centrist politics under Emmanuel Macron.
- D. The decline of far-right ideologies in French society.

Question -4)

Statement: The passage discusses the potential consequences if the far-right wins in upcoming elections.

Question: According to the passage, what could be a potential long-term effect of far-right victories in Europe?

- A. A normalization of neo-fascist ideologies across the continent.
- B. Greater integration of immigrant communities.
- C. Strengthening of the European Union.
- D. Decrease in nationalist sentiments.

Question -5)

Statement: Timothy Garton Ash's article in The Guardian is referenced in the passage.

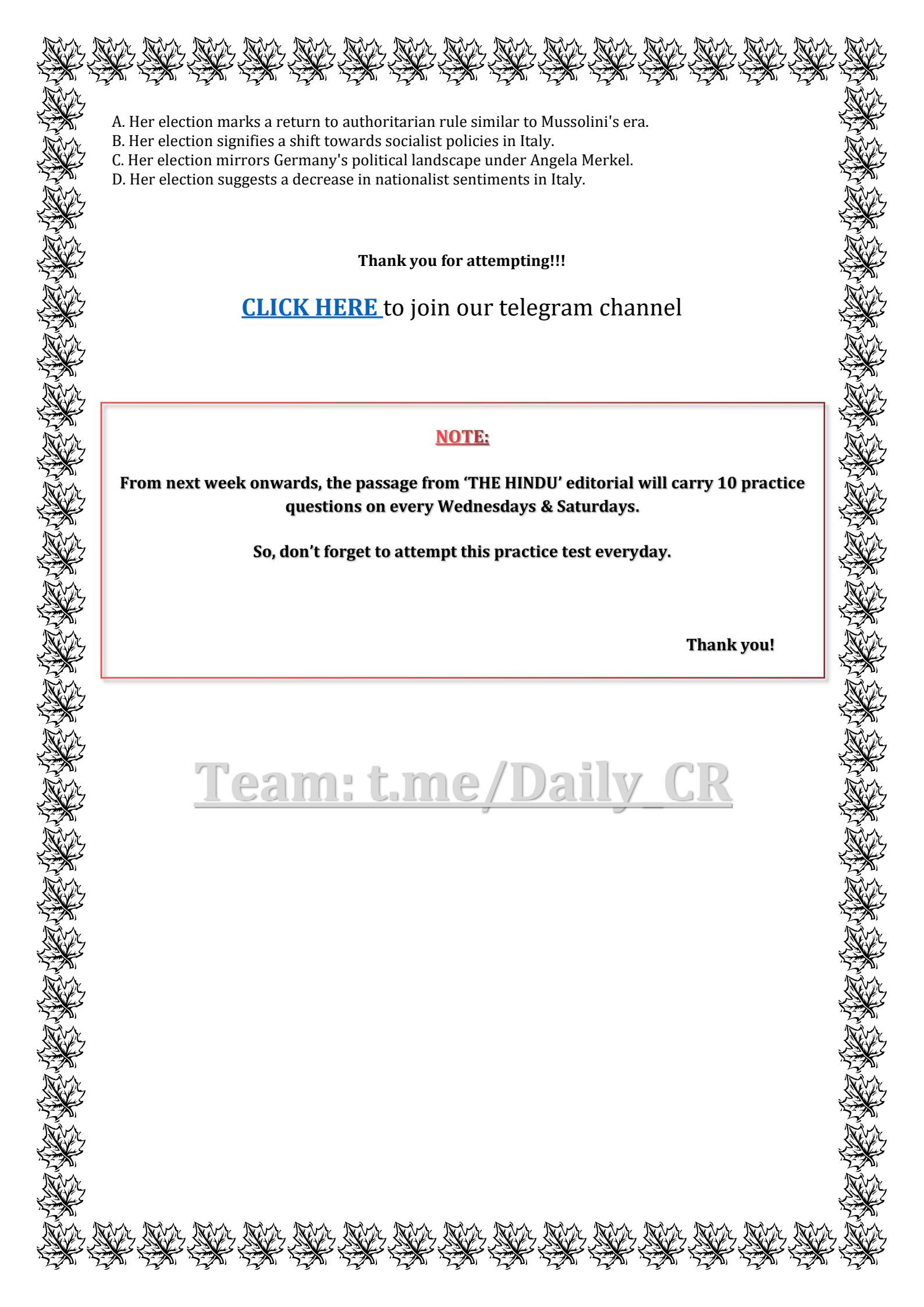
Question: What is the main concern expressed by Timothy Garton Ash in his article?

- A. The economic challenges faced by the European Union.
- B. The resurgence of far-right and neo-fascist movements in Europe.
- C. The need for stronger political alliances within Europe.
- D. The impact of climate change on European politics.

Question -6)

Statement: The passage mentions the election of Giorgia Meloni in Italy.

Question: What historical comparison does the passage draw regarding Giorgia Meloni's election?

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- A. Her election marks a return to authoritarian rule similar to Mussolini's era.
B. Her election signifies a shift towards socialist policies in Italy.
C. Her election mirrors Germany's political landscape under Angela Merkel.
D. Her election suggests a decrease in nationalist sentiments in Italy.

Thank you for attempting!!!

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NOTE:

From next week onwards, the passage from 'THE HINDU' editorial will carry 10 practice questions on every Wednesdays & Saturdays.

So, don't forget to attempt this practice test everyday.

Thank you!

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