

A Cordon Populiste from the Baltic to the Adriatic Sea: Is a New Populist Alliance Emerging in the EU?

by Petr Kratochvíl

When the fortunes of Eurosceptic populism started to rise across the European Union some ten years ago, many saw this development simply as a deviation from the EU-wide norm. Even when the Visegrad countries became a hotbed of populism, explanations were often reduced to the heritage of Communism.¹ However, with the addition of Austria and Italy to the mix of populist-led governments in Europe over the last twelve months, the dominant narrative started to change.

A new narrative now presents a picture in which two strong and clearly defined camps have emerged in the EU. As Hungary's Viktor Orbán put it, "there are two sides at the moment in Europe. One is led by [French President Emmanuel] Macron [...]. The other one is supported by countries who want to protect their borders. Hungary and Italy

belong to the latter."² President Macron, on his part, confirmed this reading, arguing that if the Hungarian and Italian governments "want to see me as their main opponent, they're right".³

This picture, as oversimplified as it is, is the result of a fundamental political earthquake. There is no doubt that the old political cleavage between traditional left and right wing parties has collapsed. The left has all but disappeared from many European countries. The German Social Democratic Party (SPD), for the first time in the history of German politics, has been overtaken by the anti-migration

¹ Visegrad Group countries include the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland and Slovakia.

² Lorenzo Tondo, "Matteo Salvini and Viktor Orbán to Form Anti-Migration Front", in *The Guardian*, 28 August 2018, <https://gu.com/p/993b9>.

³ Esther King, "Macron: Orbán and Salvini Are Right to 'See Me As Their Main Opponent'", in *Politico*, 29 August 2018, <https://www.politico.eu/article/emmanuel-macron-viktor-orban-matteo-salvini-enemies>.

Petr Kratochvíl is Associate Fellow at the Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI) and Senior Researcher at the Institute of International Relations (IIR), Prague. A previous, extended version of this paper was first published as a TEPESA Brief by the Trans European Policy Studies Association on 21 December 2018, <http://www.tepsa.eu/?p=24222>.

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Alternative für Deutschland (AFD), but the German Social Democrats are still better off than their French colleagues. The Czech Social Democrats, once routinely winning elections, today stand at 7 per cent of the vote. In Hungary, the left has ceased to exist. The British Labour Party, once seen as possibly spurring a renewal of the European left, remains relatively strong, but is internally split and cannot even unite behind opposition to Brexit.

In spite of appearances, the traditional right is at least as troubled as the left. While the right is seemingly doing well, this is due to its appropriation of the anti-migration, Eurosceptic agenda that often borders on nativist xenophobia (suffice it to look at the UK, Poland or Italy in this regard). What we are witnessing in some European countries is an outright merger, one that is making the traditional distinction between extreme right and ruling centre right-wing parties less and less explanatory.

In short, the slogan of the times seems to be “adapt to the nationalist pressure, or perish” whereby the right has chosen the former and the left the latter.

It is true that the rhetoric of new European populists is in many ways similar. It revolves around a critique of the European Union and the “liberal elites”, obviously including previous national governments. Yet, their main target is culturally defined otherness, which at the moment means migrants and refugees, particularly if they are Muslim. On this general level, it is true that a new anti-migration alliance has been formed across Europe. A simple

indicator is to look at what various European governments say about the UN-sponsored Global Compact for Migration. Prominent critics include Austria, the Czech Republic, Hungary, Italy and Poland.

Yet, this supposedly solid bloc is more fragile than meets the eye. To start with, nationalists are, by definition, less likely to see the advantage in international cooperation. But also policy-wise, they disagree on as many issues as they agree on. Even as far as migration is concerned, their views differ fundamentally. A deep rift in fact exists between the Italian position and that of Italy’s alleged Central European allies, Hungary in particular. In spite of the flurry of diplomatic visits between Visegrad leaders and their Italian counterparts, their unity on how to tackle migration goes only as far as repeating the cliché about the need to protect their national border or – at best – the EU’s external border.

When Italian Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte sent a letter to EU leaders asking them to accept refugees recently saved in the Mediterranean, Hungary refused to accept a single entry.⁴ Czech Prime Minister Andrej Babiš instead tweeted that accepting the Italian and European proposal for migrant quotas was “a road to hell”.⁵ In response, the President of the Italian Chamber of Deputies

⁴ “Ungheria, ‘non accogliamo alcun migrante’”, in ANSA, 15 July 2018, http://www.ansa.it/sito/notizie/topnews/2018/07/15/ungherianon-accogliamo-alcun-migrante_06d32ef5-4200-4203-be07-15cba6093ff2.html.

⁵ AFP, “Italy’s Request to Take Migrants ‘Road to Hell’: Czech PM”, in *France24*, 15 July 2018, <http://f24.my/3Hkq.T>.

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Roberto Fico replied that “the road to hell is not knowing how to welcome” people.⁶

A similar pattern also stretches to other policy domains, including the most sensitive ones. Take, for instance, the recent budget row between the Italian government and the European Commission. There was no trace of understanding for Italian requests when Austrian Prime Minister Sebastian Kurz, speaking as the representative of the rotating Council Presidency, supported the position of the European Commission, rebuking the Italian government in very sharp terms.⁷

Deep disagreements also pertain to the EU’s Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) negotiations, where the positions of key populist-led governments in Europe are as divergent as you can get. Needless to say, everywhere one looks in EU external relations – be it policy towards Russia or the transatlantic relationship with the United States – one will again find very little on which the four Visegrad countries plus Austria and Italy agree.

In all fairness, one should add that there are also serious doubts about the unity and professed openness of the Franco-German camp as well. As attractive as it may be to style oneself as the opponent of European populists, one wonders in how far President Macron’s rhetoric is

matched by his deeds.

Was it not Macron who, after criticizing the Italian handling of the Aquarius refugee rescue boat, refused to open French harbours for the very same ship, only later accepting to host a small number of migrants on board? Also, is not Viktor Orbán’s Fidesz Party, currently seen as the greatest culprit among traditional ruling parties in the EU, also a member of the European People’s Party alongside Angela Merkel’s Christian Democratic Union?

To put it mildly, the picture of two clearly delineated camps with opposite and mutually exclusive agendas is grossly misleading.

Rumours of a “populist alliance” among six countries stretching from the Baltic Sea to Sicily are therefore exaggerated. A stable voting bloc of these countries within the EU is highly unlikely. Instead, what we should expect is ad-hoc forms of alignment and common voting, especially in rejecting common proposals, rather than proposing new initiatives. Supporting their comrades through a negative vote is relatively easy, and is indeed a well tested strategy among the Visegrad countries in particular.

Nonetheless, it is important to not ignore what populists in these six countries say and why their rhetoric remains so attractive to their voters. First, political leaders in these countries are entirely correct in pointing to the EU’s double standards. It is not so long ago that France and Italy, under Matteo Renzi’s government, broke the EU’s (new) budgetary rules

⁶ Roberto Fico on Twitter, *La strada per l’inferno è non saper accogliere...*, 15 July 2018, https://twitter.com/Roberto_Fico/status/1018507092842504193.

⁷ “Austria Says EU Must Reject Italy’s Draft Budget Unless It’s Changed”, in *Reuters*, 22 October 2018, <https://reut.rs/2OIdEdt>.

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on deficits and growth.⁸ Instead of proceeding consistently, the European Commission decided at the time to grant them a rather generous reprieve, making its recent criticism of Italy's proposed budget ring hollow to many.

Similarly, one has to concur with Italy's Deputy Prime Minister and Interior Minister Matteo Salvini when he argues that France has no right to lecture Italy on accepting refugees. The French government is indeed simultaneously engaged in restrictive policies aimed at preventing the arrival of refugees from Italian border towns in the north.⁹

Second, we should not forget that the new populists have – to some extent – filled the vacuum of the old left. After the collapse of the left, anti-migration movements are the only ones who, albeit in their often rather questionable rhetoric, address the question of socio-economic disparities, thus pointing to the vulnerabilities of less affluent Europeans. The fact that they combine this focus with a counter-cultural language of an uprising against the liberalism of the ruling classes is just another example of how quickly social

problems can be reframed in terms of identity and a culture war.

Ultimately, it is the re-appropriation of topics of the old and new left and their expression in radically democratic ways that is the biggest task facing European societies today. It is an illusion to believe that the current political struggle is one between the noble defenders of democracy and their evil populist opponents and that, because of this, old socio-economic themes should be side-lined. It is exactly the opposite: because the serious socio-economic problems Europe faces are real, they must not be left to those who use them to drive forward their agenda of fear of culturally defined otherness.

While this realisation alone would not guarantee the survival of the European mainstream political parties, it would be a step in the right direction. The upcoming European Parliament elections will be a key litmus test of whether such a re-constitution of the political space in Europe is possible or whether it is already too late.

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⁸ Alex Barker and Anne-Sylvaine Chassany "France and Italy Granted Reprieve for Breaching Budget Limits", in *Financial Times*, 25 February 2018, <https://www.ft.com/content/a41a2998-bd13-11e4-9902-00144feab7de>.

⁹ Josephine McKenna, "'No grazie!' Salvini Attacks 'Macron and Friends' after French Police Dump Migrants Back over the Border", in *The Telegraph*, 21 October 2018, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2018/10/21/no-grazie-salvini-attacks-macron-friends-french-police-dump>. See also Chico Harlan and James McAuley, "The French-Italian Border Reveals the Essence of the European Clash on Migration", in *The Washington Post*, 28 June 2018, <https://wapo.st/2lEdyIX>.

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Via Angelo Brunetti, 9 - I-00186 Rome, Italy

T +39 06 3224360

F + 39 06 3224363

iai@iai.it

www.iai.it

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