

## *The Post-1989 Radical Left in Europe: Results and Prospects*

*Marcello Musto*

### **The end of ‘actually existing socialism’**

The fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 brought about a profound change in the European political landscape. The implosion of the repressive bureaucratic regimes of the Soviet bloc had the positive effect of freeing communism from ‘actually existing socialism’, and of opening it up again to the struggle for working-class emancipation. The structural political upheavals, however, together with major economic transformations, set in train a process of capitalist restoration that had severe social repercussions on a global scale. In Europe, anticapitalist forces found their influence being irresistibly squeezed: it became more and more difficult for them to organize and orientate social struggles, and ideologically the Left as a whole lost the hegemonic positions it had won after 1968 in key areas of many national cultures.

This reverse was also apparent at an electoral level. From the 1980s on, the parties united around the idea of Eurocommunism<sup>1</sup> as well as those still strongly tied to Moscow<sup>2</sup> suffered a sharp decline in support, which turned into a veritable crash after the collapse of the Soviet Union. A similar fate also affected the various New Left groups and Trotskyist parties.<sup>3</sup>

A phase of reconstruction then began, in which new political formations often emerged through the regrouping of anticapitalist elements still in existence. This enabled the traditional forces of the Left to open up to the ecological, feminist and peace movements that

- 
1. In 1989 the Italian Communist Party (PCI), the Communist Party of Spain (PCE), the Greek Left (EAR) and the Socialist People’s Party (SF) in Denmark formed the Group for the European United Left in the European Parliament.
  2. Beginning in 1989, the French Communist Party (PCF), the Portuguese Communist Party (PCP), the Communist Party of Greece (KKE) and the Workers’ Party (WP) in Ireland formed a Left Unity group in the European Parliament.
  3. The most significant of these electorally was Workers’ Struggle (LO) in France.

had developed in the previous decades. Izquierda Unida in Spain, created in 1986, was the pioneer in this respect. Similar initiatives then took shape in Portugal (where the Unitary Democratic Coalition [CDU] was formed in 1987); Denmark (the Unity List/Red-Greens, in 1989); Finland (the Left Alliance, in 1990); and Italy and Greece in 1991, when the Communist Refoundation Party (PRC) and Synaspismos (Coalition of the Left Movements and Ecology) came into being. The organizational forms of these new aggregations varied considerably. The parties comprising Izquierda Unida – including the Communist Party of Spain – maintained their existence; the Unitary Democratic Coalition in Portugal functioned only as an electoral bloc; and the Communist Refoundation Party and Synaspismos constituted themselves as new unitary political subjects.

In other countries, however, there were attempts (some only cosmetic) to renew the parties that had existed before the fall of the Berlin Wall. In 1989, following the foundation of the Czech Republic, the Communist Party of Bohemia and Moravia (KSČM) was proclaimed; and in 1990 the Party of Democratic Socialism (PDS) appeared in Germany, taking over from the Socialist Unity Party that had ruled the GDR since 1949. Also in 1990, in Sweden, the Left Party–Communists adopted more moderate positions and dropped the name ‘Communist’ from its title.

### **Failures in government**

These new parties, like others that had not changed their name, managed to retain a political presence on their respective national stages. Together with the social movements and progressive trade-union forces, they contributed to the heightened resistance against neoliberal policies after 1993, when the Maastricht Treaty came into effect and set rigid monetarist parameters for new member-states joining the European Union.

In 1994 a European United Left group was formed in the European Parliament, and the next year, following new adhesions from Scandinavia, it changed its name to the European United Left/Nordic Green Left (GUE/NGL).

In the mid-1990s, buoyed up by strikes and large demonstrations against their respective governments (Berlusconi and Dini in Italy, Juppé in France, González and Aznar in Spain), some forces of the radical Left even achieved modest electoral breakthroughs. Izquierda Unida scored 13.4 percent in the European elections in 1994; the Communist Refoundation Party 8.5 percent in the national elections of 1996;

and the French Communist Party almost 10 percent in the parliamentary elections of 1997. At the same time, these parties increased their membership and their implantation at local level and in workplaces.

Apart from the Czech Republic (with its Communist KSČM), the countries of Eastern Europe were an exception to this phase of consolidation; the legacy of the postwar 'communist' dictatorships ruled out – and continues to hinder – a process of rebirth of forces of the Left. As the new century dawned, a huge, politically heterogeneous movement of struggle against neoliberal globalization spread to every corner of the globe. Since the late 1990s, self-organized collectives, rank-and-file union movements, anticapitalist parties and non-governmental organizations had already been promoting mass protests at the summits of the G8, the International Monetary Fund, the World Trade Organization and the World Economic Forum (in Davos, Switzerland). The subsequent birth of the World Social Forum (WSF), in Brazil in 2001, and the European Social Forum (ESF) encouraged broader discussion of alternatives to the dominant policies.

Meanwhile, with the rise of Tony Blair as Labour Party leader (1994) and UK prime minister (1997–2007), the way was open for a profound shift in the ideology and programme of the Socialist International.<sup>4</sup> Blair's 'Third Way' – in fact, supine acceptance of the neoliberal mantra masked by vacuous exaltation of 'the new' – was supported in varying degrees and forms by the SPD (Socialdemocratic Party of Germany) government of Gerhard Schröder (chancellor from 1998 to 2005),<sup>5</sup> and by the Portuguese José Sócrates, prime minister of the Socialist Party (PS) from 2005 to 2011. Romano Prodi in Italy (prime minister and head of centre-left coalitions from 1996 to 1998 and 2006 to 2008) also shared many of the same themes and echoed the search for a 'new way'.

In the name of 'future generations' (who in the meantime were to be deprived of the right to work), and inspired by the EU's adoption of

- 
4. The government led by Lionel Jospin in France, which reduced the working week to thirty-five hours, was an exception to this tendency. In Spain, the Zapatero government pursued the same neoliberal policies as in other European countries and was swept away by the effects of the economic crisis. Nevertheless, it adopted a number of important reforms with regard to civil rights. For a full analysis of social-democratic tendencies in Europe, see Jean-Michel de Waele, Fabien Escalona and Mathieu Vieira (eds.), *The Palgrave Handbook of Social Democracy in the European Union*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013.
  5. See Anthony Blair and Gerhard Schröder, *Europe: The Third Way - die Neue Mitte*, London/Berlin, Labour Party/SPD, 1999.

the Lisbon Programme in 2000, these governments pursued a series of economic counter-reforms that have eroded the European social model. They rigidly initiated deep cuts in public expenditure, made labour relations more precarious (by limiting legal safeguards and generally worsening conditions at work), implemented policies of wage 'moderation', and liberalized markets and services in line with the disastrous Bolkestein directive of 2006. The so-called Agenda 2010 in Germany, especially Schröder's 'Hartz IV' plan, were the most conclusive evidence of this new policy direction.

Many parts of southern Europe saw the whittling down of what remained of the welfare state, attacks on the pension system, another massive round of privatization, the commodification of education, drastic cuts in the funding of research and development, and a lack of effective industrial policies. These trends were also apparent in the governments headed by Konstantinos Simitis (1996–2004) in Greece, Massimo D'Alema (1998–2000) in Italy and José Zapatero (2004–2011) in Spain.

Similar choices operated in Eastern Europe, where the Socialist governments of Leszek Miller (2001–2004) in Poland and Ferenc Gyurcsány (2004–2010) in Hungary were among the most dedicated followers of neoliberalism and enforcers of public spending cuts. They thereby alienated the working classes and the poorest sections of the population, to the extent that today the forces of the Socialist International occupy a completely marginal position in both countries.

As regards economic policy, it is hard to detect anything more than minimal differences between these social-democratic governments and conservative regimes in power at the time. Indeed, in many cases the social-democratic or centre-left administrations were more efficient in carrying through the neoliberal project, since the trade unions found the government actions more acceptable because of an old illusory belief that they were 'friendly' to the labour movement. Over time, the adoption of a pliant, non-conflictual model has made the trade unions less and less representative of the weakest sections of society.

Foreign-policy orientations involved a similar discontinuity with the past. In 1999 a government headed by the Left Democrats (DS), the inheritors of the old Communist Party, authorized Italy's second military intervention since the war – the NATO bombing in Kosovo, with its much-reported use of depleted uranium weapons. In 2003 British Labour Party leaders stood in the frontline alongside George W. Bush in a war they waged against the Iraqi 'rogue state'

that they falsely accused of possessing weapons of mass destruction.<sup>6</sup> Between these two conflicts, no force within European Socialism opposed the intervention in Afghanistan (whose devastating ‘collateral damage’ affected the population at large) or spoke out against the more general Enduring Freedom campaign waged by the United States.

The Socialist parties often shunted the ecological question into declarations of principle, but almost never translated these into effective legislation to solve the major problems facing the environment.<sup>7</sup> This was helped by the moderate turn on the part of most Green parties, which, in choosing to ally indiscriminately with parties of the Right or Left, mutated into ‘post-ideological’ formations and gave up the battle against the existing mode of production.

The shifts in European social democracy, involving uncritical acceptance of capitalism and all the principles of neoliberalism, demonstrated that the events of 1989 had shaken not only the Communist camp but all the forces of Socialism. For these abandoned any reforming ambition and no longer espoused the kind of state intervention in the economy that had been their main distinguishing feature after World War II.

Despite these profound changes, many parties of the European radical Left allied themselves with social-democratic forces – whether out of a legitimate concern to block the advent of right-wing governments that would further degrade the situation of young people, workers and pensioners, or in some cases to avoid isolation or to prevent the logic of ‘tactical voting’ from working against them. Thus, within the space of a few years, the Communist Refoundation Party in Italy (1996–1998 and 2006–2008), the French Communist Party (1997–2002), Izquierda Unida in Spain (2004–2008) and the Socialist Left Party in Norway (2005–2013)<sup>8</sup> all supported, or served as ministers in, governments of the centre-left. More recently, the Left Alliance (2011–2014) and the Socialist People’s Party (2011–2015) have assumed governmental responsibilities in

---

6. In 2015 British newspapers published a secret document (‘Secret/Noform’), dated 28 March 2002 (a year before the Iraq war), which proved that the British prime minister – while publicly declaring his resolve to seek a diplomatic solution to the crisis – had offered Bush his support to persuade world public opinion that Saddam Hussein possessed weapons of mass destruction.

7. I will discuss the topic ‘left and ecology’ more extensively in a forthcoming article.

8. This party only joined the Nordic Green Left, not the European United Left/Nordic Green Left group in the European parliament.

Finland and Denmark respectively. Such choices had already been consistently made at the local level, often without serious attention to the programmes of the political forces accepted as coalition partners.<sup>9</sup>

The neoliberal wind that blew unopposed from the Iberian Peninsula to Russia, together with the absence of large social movements capable of shaping government actions in a socialist direction, evidently represented a negative constellation for radical left-wing parties. Moreover, whether they were called upon to occupy low-profile ministries (as in France or Italy) or had to content themselves with tiny parliamentary groups (as in Spain), the relationship of forces vis-à-vis the ruling executive was extremely unfavourable to them. The anticapitalist Left did not succeed in extracting any significant social gains that ran counter to the basic economic guidelines; all they could achieve was an occasional feeble palliative. Most often, they had to swallow a bitter pill and vote for measures against which they had earlier promised the most intransigent opposition. Steered by parliamentarians and local figures selected for their uncritical loyalty to the leadership, these parties were swallowed up by the policies of the cabinets they supported. A gap with their own base grew slowly but constantly wider, with a resulting loss of credibility and consent among their electorate.

Yet the results at the ballot box were disastrous everywhere. In the presidential elections of 2007, the French Communists obtained less than 2 percent of the vote, and the next year Izquierda Unida hit rock bottom with a score of 3.8 percent. In Italy, for the first time in the history of the Republic, the Communists were shut out of parliament, reaching a dismal total of 3.1 percent and only under the umbrella of the Rainbow Left.<sup>10</sup>

- 
9. The Left Party ('Die Linke') took the same decision in Germany, entering government with the Social Democrats in Brandenburg State (where its vote fell as a result from 27.2 percent in 2009 to 18.6 percent in 2014) and in Berlin (where it halved from 22.6 percent in 2001 to 11.6 percent in 2011). In the Netherlands, the Socialist Party is in government in six of the country's twelve provinces, having joined in some cases with centre-right parties, while the Labour Party (PvdA), the affiliate of the Socialist International, has remained in opposition.
  10. In Denmark, the Socialist People's Party scored 13 percent in 2007, but then plunged to its present 4.2 percent after a moderate political turn in favour of the government. This fall took place at the same time that the party crossed from the European United Left/Nordic Green Left group in the European parliament to the European Green Party group – a move approved by its national congress in 2008.

## The Troika dictatorship

In the course of 2007, the United States was hit by one of the gravest financial crises in history, which soon affected Europe and plunged it into a deep recession. As the soaring public debt increased the dangers of insolvency, many countries had to resort to credits from the (so-called) Troika, consisting of the European Commission, the European Central Bank and the International Monetary Fund. Nations at risk of default were granted loans in return for the introduction of rigid austerity policies, beside which the 'restructuring' measures of the 1990s seemed quite restrained. Beginning in 2008, there have been a total of 13 bailout programmes in the EU: one in Hungary (2008–2010), one in Latvia (2008–2011)<sup>11</sup> and three in Romania, plus – within the Eurozone – three in Greece (2010–2018), one in Ireland (2010–2013), one in Portugal (2011–2014), two in Cyprus (2011–2016) and one in Spain (2012–2013).

The very term 'structural reforms' underwent a radical semantic transformation. Originally, in the vocabulary of the workers' movement, it had indicated a slow but steady improvement in social conditions, but now it became synonymous with a profound erosion of the welfare state. The pseudo-reforms in question – regressions would be a better word – have cancelled a host of achievements and re-established legal and economic conditions reminiscent of the rapacious capitalism of the nineteenth century.

This was the setting for the terrible recession from which Europe has still not emerged, and which at present sees it grappling with the spectre of deflation. A strong downward pressure on wages has caused a collapse of demand, with a resulting fall in GDP, and unemployment has reached levels never before recorded since World War II. Between 2007 and 2014, the jobless rate soared from 8.4 percent to 26.5 percent in Greece, from 8.2 percent to 24.5 percent in Spain, from 6.1 percent to 12.7 percent in Italy, and from 9.1 percent to 14.1 percent in Portugal. In 2014 unemployment reached epidemic proportions for a whole generation of young people: 24.1 percent in France, 34.7 percent in Portugal, 42.7 percent in Italy, 52.4 percent in Greece and 53.2 percent in Spain. More than a million, often the most skilled and best educated, have been forced to emigrate from these five countries.<sup>12</sup>

11. Latvia adopted the euro on 1 January 2014.

12. The Portuguese National Institute of Statistics has calculated that, from 2010 to 2014, at least 200,000 people between the ages of twenty and forty left the country. In Spain, the National Institute of Statistics counted at least 133,000 new young emigrants between 2008 to 2013. And in Italy, at least 136,000 young people left for

We are thus facing new forms of class struggle: it is waged with great determination by the dominant classes against the subaltern classes, while the resistance of the latter has often been feeble, disorganized and fragmented.<sup>13</sup> This has been the case both in the most developed capitalist heartlands, where the curbs on workers' rights have exceeded anything imaginable thirty years ago, and in the periphery of the world economy, where corporations (many of them multinational) exploit their workforce in extreme forms and ruthlessly strip countries of their precious natural resources. This has led to a huge growth in inequalities and a major redistribution of wealth in favour of the wealthiest inhabitants of the planet. Social relations have undergone profound changes, driven by job insecurity, competition among workers, commodification of every sphere of life, social warfare among the most impoverished strata, and a new, more invasive capitalism that corrupts people's lives and consciences in ways never seen before.

At the same time, the crisis in Europe has rapidly spread to the world of politics. In the last twenty years, decision-making powers have been increasingly transferred from the political to the economic sphere; economics now dominates politics and is often depicted as a separate realm unsusceptible to change, setting the agenda and ensuring that the key choices are outside popular control.

What used to be seen, not so long ago, as a field for political action is now governed by economic pseudo-imperatives, which, behind their ideological mask of non-politics, actually present a dangerously authoritarian form and a totally reactionary content. The most emblematic case in point is the Treaty on Stability, Coordination and Governance in the Economic and Monetary Union (TSCG) – the 'fiscal compact', as it is widely known, that rammed the obligation of balanced budgets into the law of EU countries. This means that each member-state undertakes to comply, within the space of twenty years, with the provisions of the Maastricht Treaty of 1993, according to which public debt must not exceed the threshold of 60 percent of Gross Domestic Product. In fact, according to the statistics

---

abroad between 2010 and 2014. In reality, these estimates are well below the true figures. In the Greek case there are no official data, because the national statistical board does not record youth emigration.

13. In 2006, the US investor and magnate Warren Buffett eloquently stated in an interview: 'There's class warfare all right, but it's my class, the rich class, that's making war, and we're winning.' See Ben Stein, 'In Class Warfare, Guess Which Class Is Winning', *New York Times*, 26 November 2006.



for 2014, this figure is currently 92 percent in the Eurozone; it stands at 74.4 percent in Germany and 89.4 percent in the UK (along with the Czech Republic, the only country not to have signed the pact), and rises to 106.5 percent in Belgium, 130.2 percent in Portugal, 132 percent in Italy and 177 percent in Greece.

In building a wall to prevent national parliaments from taking independent decisions on political-economic objectives, the TSCG thus serves to undermine the social state in the most heavily indebted EU countries and threatens to deepen still further the ongoing recession. As part of this general offensive, and inspired by some English-speaking countries, France (from 2007 on) and Italy (in 2011) introduced new 'spending review' commissioners to 'rationalize' public expenditure. The measures they proposed not only reduced waste, as intended, but led to a decline in the quantity and quality of services.

The next stage of this project is meant to be the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP), an accord between the EU and the USA. There have been highly confidential negotiations about the details, geared to the further deregulation of trade, the primacy of corporate profit over the general interest, and a consequent rise in destructive downward competition to bring about further wage cuts and fewer rights for workers. However, approval of the TTIP was abruptly interrupted in January 2017, when Donald Trump became the 45<sup>th</sup> president of the United States.

Already the shift from proportional electoral systems towards others based on majority 'bonuses' of one kind or another, as well as anti-democratic tendencies to strengthen the executive against the legislative power, have undermined the representative character of national parliaments. But this latest transfer of power from parliament to the market and its oligarchic institutions is the gravest impediment to democracy in our times.<sup>14</sup> It demonstrates that capitalism today is in the throes of a deep crisis of consensus and is incompatible with democracy.

On the other hand, in the few national referenda since the adoption of the Maastricht Treaty, the choices of the dominant technocratic powers in Europe have more than once been defeated at the ballot box. This happened in France and the Netherlands in 2005, with

---

14. On the relationship between capitalism and democracy - a theme on which a vast literature has blossomed in recent years - see Ellen Meiksins Wood, *Democracy Against Capitalism*, London: Cambridge University Press, 1995.

regard to the Treaty establishing a Constitution for Europe,<sup>15</sup> and in Ireland in 2008 with regard to the Lisbon Treaty.<sup>16</sup>

Stock-exchange indices, rating-agency assessments and the yield spread between government bonds are huge fetishes for contemporary society: they have acquired greater value than the people's will. Hence the decisions that cause most harm to the mass of the population are presented as absolutely indispensable for 'restoration of market confidence'.

At the most, politics is summoned to lend support to economics, as in the case of the banking bailouts in the US and Europe in the wake of 2008. The representatives of high finance needed public intervention to mitigate the devastating effects of the most recent capitalist crisis, but they stoutly refused to reopen discussion on the underlying rules and economic options.

Not even the rotation of centre-right and centre-left governments has changed the basic social-economic direction, since it is increasingly economics that determines the formation, composition and purpose of the administrations holding the reins of power. Whereas, in the past, the main factor was the large sums of money given by 'vested interests' to the governments or parties they sought to control, as well as the shaping of the mass media in their service, the key element in the twenty-first century is, rather, the edicts issued by international institutions.

The clearest evidence of this came with the season of 'technocratic governments'. Within less than a single week – from 11 to 16 November 2011 – two paragons of economic power, Lucas Papademos (vice-president of the European Central Bank from 2002 to 2010) and Mario Monti, were appointed as prime ministers of Greece and Italy respectively, without the benefit of elections. Papademos remained in office for only seven months, while Monti, thanks to the resolute support of the Democratic Party (PD), held on for a year and a half. Having built themselves up as champions of austerity, they simultaneously introduced drastic spending cuts and further social sacrifices. Their experience proved short-lived, since they were seen off in short order as soon as the voters were given a say. But the activity of their governments had deeply damaging effects, both at an economic level

---

15. Approved only in Spain and Luxemburg, the ratification of this treaty came to a standstill precisely as a result of these rejections in France and the Netherlands.

16. In Greece, the consultative referendum held by the Tsipras government in July 2015 also delivered a resounding 'no' on the relevant policies of Brussels.

and, perhaps even more, because of the harm to democracy caused by the form of their investiture.

During those years, some forces in the Socialist International took a path that ended in a similar way. Ideologically convinced that there was no alternative to neoliberalism – even though the crisis of 2008 had shown its disastrous potential and the Obama administration had opted for a different course with its American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009 – they allied with the forces of the European People’s Party (EPP) group of centre-right parties and uncritically adopted the main elements of its approach to the economy and society.

The prototype of this tendency was the *Grosse Koalition* in Germany, the agreement whereby the German Socialdemocratic Party, in supporting Angela Merkel as chancellor from 2005 to 2009 and from 2013 to the present, has to all intents and purposes given up its autonomy. Other experiments in ‘national unity’ have occurred in southern Europe. In Greece, between 2012 and 2015, the Pan-Hellenic Socialist Movement (PASOK) and, for a time, the Democratic Left (DIMAR), gave their support to the New Democracy (ND) prime minister, Antonis Samaras. In Italy, after the 2013 elections, the Democratic Party entered government (with its deputy secretary, Enrico Letta, as prime minister) alongside the centre-right People of Liberty (PdL) coalition headed by Silvio Berlusconi. In February 2014 the young neo-Blairite ‘iconoclast’ Matteo Renzi took over and gave life to a government in which the Democratic Party (PD) has worked with the New Centre-Right (NCD), a splinter group from Berlusconi’s movement, and reached an agreement with it on some significant ‘reforms’ of the labour market and amendments to the constitution. The constitutional reform advanced by Renzi was rejected by almost 60 percent of the voters in a December 2016 referendum, following which he resigned. Nonetheless, the alliance between the PD and the NCD remains in effect and currently sustains the government of the centrist Paolo Gentiloni, a bland copy of its predecessor.

Since the election of Jean-Claude Juncker<sup>17</sup> in 2014 as president of the European Commission, the grand coalition between the European People’s Party and the Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats (S&D) has continued to govern the main institutions of the European Union.

---

17. As prime minister of Luxembourg, Juncker had enabled more than three hundred multinationals to take advantage of a special tax regime in his country.

### **Anti-politics, populism and xenophobia**

The harmful uniformity of approach to political and economic questions – which has been confirmed since 2012 by the evolution of Hollande’s Socialist administration in France – and the growing hostility of public opinion to the Brussels technocracy have helped to produce a second major change (after that of 1989) in the European political context.

In the last few years, a profound aversion has developed everywhere on the old continent towards anything that can be described as ‘politics’; this has become synonymous with power for its own sake, rather than a commitment to, and a collective interest in, social change, as it was mostly understood in the 1960s and 1970s. This new phenomenon concerns particularly, but not exclusively, the younger generations. It has also encouraged a more diffuse apathy and a decline in social conflicts, especially as the organizations of the trade-union movement are increasingly seen as approved by the powers that be.

In a number of countries, the tide of anti-politics has also washed over the forces of the radical Left. Largely because of their poor performance in government, they are even blamed for adaptation to the existing climate and gradual abandonment of the militant demands that they used to champion.

There have been significant changes in the European balance of forces. Some bipartisan systems have simply imploded, as in post-dictatorship Spain and Greece, where socialist and centre-right forces regularly used to account for three-quarters of the electorate. Similar trends have affected the political systems in France and Italy, where for decades the vote was divided between the centre-right and centre-left blocs. Furthermore, the three political groups in the European Parliament elected in 2009 – the European People’s Party, the Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats and the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe (ALDE) – lost more than 13 percent of their deputies at the elections held in 2014.

The political-electoral landscape has been modified by abstentionism, the rise of new populist formations, the major advance of far-Right forces, and in some cases the consolidation of a Left alternative to neo-liberal policies.

The higher levels of electoral abstentionism, a tendency apparent in a variety of countries, are mainly attributable to the growing detachment from political parties in general. The turnout at parliamentary elections declined in France from 67.9 percent in 1997 to 57.2 percent

in 2013;<sup>18</sup> in Germany from 84.3 percent in 1987 to 71.5 percent in 2013; in the UK from 77 percent in 1992 to 66.1 percent in 2015; in Italy from 87.3 percent in 1992 to 72.2 percent in 2013; in Portugal from 71.5 percent in 1987 to 57 percent in 2015; in Greece from 76.6 percent in 2004 to 56.5 percent in 2015; and in Poland (at presidential elections) from 64.7 percent in 1995 to 48.9 percent in 2015.

Participation in elections for the European Parliament has also fallen, from 62 percent in 1979 to 42.6 percent at the most recent polls.<sup>19</sup> This reflects loss of interest in an institution that represents an ever more technocratic, ever less political model for Europe. Riding the anti-EU wave, new 'post-ideological' movements have arisen in recent years, guided by generic denunciation of the corrupt existing system or by the myth of online democracy as a guarantee of rank-and-file political participation in contrast to the usual practice of political parties.

On the basis of these principles, a Pirate Party (PP) was founded almost simultaneously in Sweden and Germany in 2006. Three years later, it won 7.1 percent of the vote at the Swedish Euro-elections and 2 percent at the elections for the Bundestag. In 2012, this party was also established in Iceland, where it scored 5 percent at the elections held the following year. These are significant percentages if we consider the Pirate Party's limited political programme, but tiny when compared with the Five Star Movement (M5S) that the comedian Beppe Grillo created in 2009. At the next general elections it became the first political force in Italy, with 25.5 percent of the vote.

In 2013 Alternative for Germany (AfD) was founded in Berlin, and thanks to the surge of euroscepticism it won 4.7 percent at the federal elections in 2013, 7 percent at the Euro-elections the following year, and an astounding rise in the 2016 regional elections to 12.6 percent in Rhineland-Palatinate, 14.2 percent in Berlin, 15.1 percent in Baden-Württemberg, 20.8 percent in Mecklenburg-West Pomerania and 24.2 percent in Saxony-Anhalt. In 2014 it was the turn of The River (TP) in Greece, which notched up 6.6 percent and 4.1 percent at the next European and national elections respectively. Meanwhile, Ciudadanos

---

18. It should be noted, however, that participation in France's more important presidential elections has been much higher, as shown by the 77.8 percent turnout in 2017 (74.5 percent at the second round).

19. In many countries of Eastern Europe the figures were extremely low: Slovakia 13 percent; Czech Republic 18.2 percent; Slovenia 24.5 percent; Croatia 25.2 percent; Hungary 28.9 percent. Also noteworthy were the 33.6 percent in Portugal and the 35.6 percent in the UK. See [http://www.europarl.europa.eu/pdf/elections\\_results/review.pdf](http://www.europarl.europa.eu/pdf/elections_results/review.pdf).

(Cs) – a movement founded in Catalonia in 2006 – broke through to score 3.2 percent at the Euro-elections, 6.6 percent at the local council elections in 2015 and doubled its share to 13.1 percent in the June 2016 general elections. Moreover, at the recent presidential elections in Poland, the right-wing populist singer Pawel Kukiz captured 21.3 percent of the vote; his movement, Kukiz'15, has become the third political force in the country, winning 8.8 percent at the legislative elections in October 2015.

Finally, among the most successful of the new political movements, the case that stands out is that of *En Marche!* (On the Move!). Founded in April 2016 by then-Minister of the Economy and ex-member of the French Socialist Party Emmanuel Macron, this political force gained the enthusiastic backing of powerful interests for its strongly neoliberal program. Moreover, thanks to its litany of overcoming ideological divisions between Right and Left, it was quickly joined by many representatives of the French political class who had held office in recent years, including Prime Minister Manuel Valls. In the 2017 presidential elections, *En Marche!* emerged as the leading political force in France, with over 8,600,000 votes (24 percent) in the first round and more than 20,700,000 (66.1 percent) in the second, when Macron became President of the Republic.

In earlier years, a number of already existing formations boosted their presence on the basis of similar political platforms. The most striking example is the United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP), which, by combining populism with nationalism and xenophobia, topped the Euro polls in 2014 (26.6 percent) and achieved 12.6 percent at the general election in May 2015. In the European Parliament, United Kingdom Independence Party deputies have joined with the Five Star Movement to form a new group, the Europe of Freedom and Direct Democracy (EFDD).<sup>20</sup>

In Switzerland, the Swiss People's Party/Democratic Union of the Centre (SVP-UDC) pulled off its best-ever result in 2015, winning 29.4 percent at the October elections. Although its name might suggest something else, it is in fact a xenophobic far-Right formation, which distinguished itself in the past by advocating a referendum (actually passed in 2009) for a ban on new minarets.

In many European countries, xenophobic, nationalist or openly neo-fascist parties have made big advances as the effects of economic

---

20. At the beginning of 2017, the Five Star Movement sought to join ALDE. But its entry into this liberal group was rejected, and its Italian deputies awkwardly went back to their alliance with UKIP.

crisis have made themselves felt. In some cases, they have modified their political language, replacing the classical Left-Right division with a new struggle specific to contemporary society: what Marine Le Pen calls the conflict 'between those at the top and those at the bottom'.<sup>21</sup> In this new polarization, far-Right candidates are supposed to represent the 'people' against the establishment (or the forces that have for a long time alternated in government) and against the elites who favour an all-powerful free market.

The ideological profile of these political movements has also changed. The racist component is often shifted to the background and economic issues brought to the fore. The blind, restrictive opposition to EU immigration policies is taken a stage further by playing on the war among the poor, even more than discrimination based on skin colour or religious affiliation. In a context of high unemployment and grave social conflict, xenophobia is raised through propaganda asserting that migrants take jobs from local workers and that the latter should have priority in employment, social services and welfare entitlements.<sup>22</sup>

This change of course has certainly played a role in the recent successes of the National Front (FN), which, under Marine Le Pen's leadership, shot up to 17.9 percent in the 2012 presidential elections, became the largest French political party (24.8 percent) at the 2014 Euro-elections, and gained 25.2 percent of the vote at the local elections in March 2015 and 27.7 percent at the regional elections of December 2015, although failed to take any regional governments.<sup>23</sup> Support for the FN was also very strong in the 2017 presidential elections, during which Le Pen campaigned on the slogan of *souverainisme* (defence of sovereignty) and withdrawal from the European Union. In the first round, in fact, Le Pen got 21.3 percent of the votes, trailing only Macron. In the second round, the FN received 33.9 percent, corresponding to more than 10,638,000 votes, almost double the 5,525,000 obtained by Jean-Marie Le Pen in 2002, against Jacques Chirac.<sup>24</sup>

In Italy, meanwhile, the Northern League (LN) has also undergone a metamorphosis. It was born in 1989 demanding independence for 'Padania' (its name for northern Italy), and after 1996 it envisaged

---

21. After the municipal elections of March 2014.

22. 'Priority for the French' is an old xenophobic slogan of Jean-Marie Le Pen: see his *Les Français d'abord*, Paris: Carrère-Michel Lafont, 1984.

23. From 2012 to 2015, the Front national has stood as part of a broader coalition calling itself the Navy Blue Rally (Rassemblement Bleu Marine - RBM).

24. Following her defeat, in order to further expand her base of support, Marine Le Pen announced her intention to found a new political organization.

the unilateral secession of the region. But recently it has turned itself into a national party, whose 'non-euro', anti-immigrant platform is the lynchpin of an alliance with the main forces stemming from the fascist tradition, in particular Brothers of Italy (Fd'I). As a result, its electoral score has climbed dramatically: it is now the largest organization of the Italian centre-right, having overtaken Silvio Berlusconi's Forza Italia (FI).

In both France and Italy, some historical fortresses of the working-class and Communist vote have mutated into stable electoral bases of the above two parties.<sup>25</sup> A coalition agreement between the National Front and the Northern League led to the formation in June 2015 of a Europe of Nations and Freedom (ENL) at the European Parliament in Brussels; this also includes established political parties which, alongside lesser organizations, have for some time been demanding withdrawal from the euro, a revision of the treaties on immigration and a return to national sovereignty. Among the most representative forces in this respect is the Austrian Freedom Party (FPÖ), which won 20.5 percent of the vote at the 2013 national elections, 19.7 percent in 2014 at the European elections, 30.8 percent at the Viennese elections in 2015, 35.1 percent at the first round of the April 2016 presidential elections and 46.2 percent at the second round in December 2016.<sup>26</sup> Also remarkable is the support obtained by the Flemish Interest (VB) in Belgium and by the Party for Freedom (PVV) in the Netherlands, founded in 2006, which scored 13.3 percent at the last European elections and 13.1 percent at the Dutch general elections of 2017, becoming the second political force in the country.

Far-Right forces have joined more than one group in the European Parliament and, for the first time since World War II, have made important advances in various parts of the continent. In every Scandinavian country, for example, they are already an established reality, not to speak of the ideological reorientation that their electoral successes have encouraged in society. In the homeland *par excellence* of the 'Nordic model', the Swedish Democrats (SD), which arose in 1988 through a fusion of neo-Nazi groups, have emerged as the third largest political force, and are allied with UKIP in Europe. In Denmark and Finland, two parties founded in 1995 and affiliated to

---

25. A significant counter-tendency was manifested in the recent French presidential election, in which *La France Insoumise* (Rebellious France) recaptured votes from wage-earners in regions and cities – such as Marseille – where the FN had long been the leading party.

26. The second round that took place in May 2016 was annulled.



the European Conservatives and Reformists Group have scored even more surprising results, becoming the second largest parties in their respective countries. To general amazement, the Danish People's Party (DPP) won the highest number of votes at the last European elections, with 26.6 percent of the total; it then consolidated its success with 21.1 percent at the 2015 legislative elections and joined the government majority. In Finland, the True Finns (PS) also now sit on the government benches, having attracted 17.6 percent support at the ballot box in 2015. Finally, in Norway, the Progress Party (FpP) – which already collected 22.9 percent of the vote in 2009, and whose political views are equally reactionary – has entered government for the first time, with a score of 16.3 percent.

The near-uniform advance of these parties, in a region where the organizations of the workers' movement had exercised undisputed hegemony for a very long time, may also be attributed to the fact that they have taken up battles and issues once dear to both social democrats and communists. Two other useful, though not fundamental, factors are their carefully designed political symbolism – the Swedish Democrats, for instance, have replaced the old flame common among fascist movements with a reassuring wild flower in the national colours – and the rise of young leaders skilled at communication with the media.

The Right has made its breakthroughs not only by means of classical reactionary instruments, such as campaigns against globalization, but also through the arrival of new asylum-seekers and the spectre of the 'Islamization' of society. Above all, however, they have called for social policies traditionally associated with the Left, at a time when the Social Democrats were opting for public spending cuts and the radical Left was gagged because of its support for, or actual participation in, government. The rightist 'welfare' is of a different kind, however: no longer universal, inclusive and solidaristic, but based on a principle that has been described as 'welfare nationalism'. In other words, it involves the offer of rights and services only to members of the already existing national community.

In addition to its widespread support in rural areas and the provinces, which are often depopulated and hit by high unemployment because of the economic crisis, the Scandinavian far Right has been able to draw on a significant number of workers who have yielded to the blackmail of 'either immigration or the welfare state'.

The radical Right has also managed to reorganize in a number of East European countries since the end of the pro-Soviet regimes there. Bulgaria's 'National Attack Union' (ATAKA), the Slovak

National Party (SNS) and the Greater Romania Party (RM) are some of the political forces that have often obtained good results and sent their own deputies to parliament.

In Poland, the populist Law and Justice (PiS) party won the presidential elections in May 2015 and, having scored 37.6 percent at the legislative elections in October 2015, holds the first absolute majority of seats in parliament since the end of the Cold War. Unlike the usual appeals to nationalism and ultra-conservative religious values, the PiS economic programme highlights promises to increase social spending, to improve wage levels and to lower the retirement age. It is a Left platform, in a country where the anticapitalist Left is non-existent and social democracy is confined to a small residual space after its pursuit of policies that hit the weakest layers of society.

The most alarming case in this part of Europe, however, is Hungary. After the Hungarian Socialist Party (MSZP) government had imposed severe austerity measures at the behest of the Troika, causing a lurch into deflation, the Hungarian Civic Union/Fidesz (which is affiliated to the European People's Party) took over the reins of office. Then in 2012, having purged the judiciary and brought the mass media under control, the government introduced a new constitution with authoritarian overtones that took the country a perilously long way from the rule of law. As if that were not enough, the Movement for a Better Hungary (Jobbik) has been the third party in the country since 2010, netting 20.5 percent of the vote at the 2014 elections. Unlike most of the radical Right in Western Europe and Scandinavia, Jobbik is a classic example – now dominant in the East – of a far-Right formation that uses hatred of minorities (especially Roma), anti-Semitism and anticommunism as major instruments of propaganda and action.

To complete this survey, we should mention some of the neo-Nazi organizations spread across parts of Europe. Two of these have obtained good results at the polls. The National Democratic Party of Germany (NPD) has a foothold in two regional parliaments; it secured 1.5 percent in the elections of 2013; and it has had one Euro-deputy since 2012. In Greece, Golden Dawn (GD) picked up 9.4 percent of the vote in the European elections of 2014 and 7 percent in the general elections of 2015, thereby asserting itself as the third political force in the country.<sup>27</sup>

---

27. For a study of far-Right forces in Europe, see the volume edited by Andrea Mammone, Emmanuel Godin and Brian Jenkins, *Mapping the Extreme Right in Contemporary Europe*, London: Routledge, 2012.

In recent years, therefore, the parties of the populist, nationalist or neofascist Right have considerably broadened their support in almost every part of Europe. In many cases, they have proved capable of dominating political debate and have sometimes entered government in a coalition with the more moderate Right. It is a disturbing epidemic, to which it is certainly impossible to respond without fighting the virus that caused it in the first place: the neoliberal mantra still so fashionable in Brussels.

Nevertheless, neither in Greece nor in eastern regions of Germany has the far Right done as well as it might have done; and in Spain, Portugal and the Czech Republic – that is, in places where the Communist Left has maintained its roots in society and developed a coherent opposition policy in recent years<sup>28</sup> – the conditions for a new rise of the radical Right have not been fulfilled.

### **The new political geography of the European radical Left**

The political and economic crisis traversing Europe has not only led to the advance of populist, xenophobic and far-Right forces. At the same time, it has prompted major struggles and protest demonstrations against the austerity measures imposed by the European Commission and implemented by national governments.

Especially in southern Europe, this has encouraged a renaissance of the radical Left, as well as notable electoral breakthroughs. Greece, Spain and Portugal, along with Ireland and, in a lesser key, other countries, have been the scene of imposing mass mobilizations against neoliberal policies. In Greece, more than forty general strikes were called between 2010 and 2015.

In Spain, millions of citizens participated in a huge rebellion beginning on 15 May 2011 that gave rise to the movement later called the *Indignados*. The demonstrators occupied Madrid's main square, the *Puerta del Sol*, for a good four weeks. A few days after their action began, a similar protest movement took to the streets in Athens, at *Syntagma Square*. And in both countries, the social struggles effectively laid the foundations for a subsequent growth and affirmation of the Left.

On the other hand, although the trade-union movement faced a common situation – official post-crisis measures had caused the same social disasters in the countries of Europe – it did not have the

---

28. This is true even if we take into account the oscillations in the stance of *Izquierda Unida* towards the government in Spain between 2004 and 2008.

political will to formulate a shared platform of demands and to organize a series of continent-wide mobilizations. The only partial exception was the general strike of 14 November 2012 in Spain, Italy, Portugal, Cyprus and Malta, which was also supported by solidarity actions in France, Greece and Belgium.

At a political level, the anticapitalist Left stuck to its course of rebuilding and regrouping its forces in the field. New formations inspired by pluralism took shape and came to constitute a wide arc of political subjects, at the same time securing greater democracy through the principle of 'one person, one vote'.

In 1999 the Left Bloc (BE) in Portugal brought together the most important forces to the left of the Portuguese Communist Party, and in the same year the foundation of The Left marked a fresh departure in Luxemburg. In 2004 Synaspismos and a range of other anticapitalist forces in Greece came together to form Syriza, the Coalition of the Radical Left (although its fusion into an actual party occurred only in 2012).

In May 2004, the foundation of the Party of the European Left initially associated fifteen communist, socialist and ecological parties, with the aim of building a political subject that could unite the main forces of the European militant Left around a common programme. At the present time, political organizations from twenty countries are part of it.<sup>29</sup> This regrouping had been preceded, a few months earlier, by the creation of the Alliance of the Nordic Green Left, involving seven parties from northern Europe.

Apart from the European Left coalition, there is also the European Anticapitalist Left (EACL), a smaller formation launched in 2000 and consisting of more than thirty (often diminutive) Trotskyist organizations. Its chief promoters were the Left Bloc in Portugal, the Unity List/Red-Greens in Denmark and the New Anticapitalist Party in France. In the European Parliament, representatives of these forces have joined the European United Left/Nordic Green Left group.<sup>30</sup>

A few years later, the most radical components of the German SPD and the French Socialist Party (PS)<sup>31</sup> split away and rapidly adopted

---

29. For a list of the forces comprising the Party of the European Left, see <http://www.european-left.org/about-el/member-parties>.

30. This group does not, however, include formations participating in the Initiative of Communist and Workers' Parties, an alliance launched in 2013 that comprises - apart from the Communist Party of Greece (KKE), its main component - twenty-nine tiny orthodox Stalinist parties.

31. Oskar Lafontaine's cartel Labour and Social Justice - The Electoral Alternative (WASG) came into being in 2005, and the foundation of the Parti de Gauche (PG)

positions to the left of the leaderships of the Party of Democratic Socialism (in Germany) or the French Communist Party. This encouraged the launch of The Left (Die Linke – DL) in Germany in 2007 and of the Left Front (FdG) in France in 2008. Also in France, the transformation of the Revolutionary Communist League (LCR) into the New Anticapitalist Party (NPA) in 2009 may be ascribed to the same vision as that of certain typically class-oriented forces of European Communism: that is, to focus political initiatives on important new contradictions bound up with social exclusion.

In Italy, also in 2009, the newly founded Left Ecology and Freedom (SEL) brought together three elements: the moderate wing of the Communist Refoundation Party, a group of dissidents from the Left Democrats (DS); and the Federation of the Left (FdS), an alliance between the Communist Refoundation Party and three smaller political movements. In Switzerland, a similar process to that of the FdS was completed in 2010 with the foundation of The Left (AL). Both of the Italian experiments failed and, in 2017, those who remained in SEL merged with former members of the Democratic Party (PD) to form Italian Left (SI).

The same kind of path was tried in Britain, with the foundation of the Respect Party in 2004 and Left Unity in 2013, but in that country it had even less success than in Italy. The trend even crossed the Bosphorus, where Kurdish activists came together in 2012 with several movements of the Turkish Left to form the People's Democratic Party (HDP); this rapidly became the fourth political force in the country, achieving 10.7 percent of the vote in the elections of November 2015.<sup>32</sup>

The year 2014 saw the emergence of the United Left in Slovenia and Podemos in Spain. The latter is a rather special case, since it claims to go beyond the traditional definition of a party of the Left, but it presented candidates for the first time in the last European elections and has joined the European United Left/Nordic Green Left group in the European Parliament. In October 2015, a new electoral coalition called the Anti-Austerity Alliance – People Before Profit (AAA-PBP) put an end to the long feud between the Socialist Party (PS) and the People Before Profit Alliance (APBP).<sup>33</sup>

---

in France under the leadership of Jean-Luc Mélenchon was announced in November 2008 (its founding congress being held in February 2009).

32. At the elections of June 2015, before the spiral of violence and assassinations triggered by President Recep Erdoğan, the HDP won an even larger share of the vote (13.1 percent).

The plural model, so different from the monolithic, 'democratic centralist' party of the twentieth-century Communist movement, quickly spread to most forces of the European radical Left. The most successful experiments have been not so much those that simply unify small pre-existing groups and organizations as genuine recompositions driven by the need to involve the vast, scattered network of social subjects and to weave together different forms of struggle. This approach has been victorious in so far as it has attracted new forces, drawing in young people, bringing back disillusioned militants and assisting the electoral advance of the newly created parties.

In the German elections of 2009, Die Linke won 11.9 percent of the vote – three times more than the 4 percent achieved by the Party of Democratic Socialism seven years earlier. In the French presidential elections of 2012, the candidate of the Left Front, Mélenchon, achieved the highest vote obtained by any party to the left of the Socialist Party since 1981. And in the same year, Syriza began the rapid ascent that took it to 16.8 percent in the May elections, 26.9 percent in June and eventually 36.3 percent in January 2015, when, uniquely for a European anticapitalist party since World War II, it formed a government as the majority partner.<sup>34</sup>

Excellent results were also achieved in the Iberian Peninsula, where the Spanish Plural Left (a new electoral bloc headed by Izquierda Unida) crossed the 10 percent threshold in the 2014 Euro-elections, and Podemos came within a whisker of 8 percent. The total votes gained by all Leftist forces (24.5 percent) was even larger at the general elections of December 2015. On that occasion, Podemos reached 12.6 percent, Popular Unity (PU) – the latest denomination taken on by Izquierda Unida – 3.6 percent, and various local electoral lists – among them, In Common We Can (ECP) (Catalonia – 3.7 percent); Commitment-We Can-It is Time (C-P-E) (Valencia – 2.6 percent); In Tide (EM) (Galicia – 1.6 percent); Basque Country Unite (EH Bildu) (0.8 percent) – that altogether have collected almost 9 percent of the vote. On the other hand, the coalition created at the time of the June 2016 elections, United We Can (UP), suffered a drop of three percentage points, receiving 21.2 percent of the vote.

---

33. For a map of the European Left, see Birgit Daiber, Cornelia Hildebrandt and Anna Strienhorst (eds.), *From Revolution to Coalition: Radical Left Parties in Europe*, Berlin: Rosa Luxemburg Foundation, 2012; and, more recently, Babak Amini (ed.), *The Radical Left in Europe in the Age of Austerity*, London: Routledge, 2016.

34. The only other example is the small state of Cyprus, where the Progressive Party of the Working People (AKEL) formed a coalition government in 2009.

As for Portugal, the Unitary Democratic Coalition totalled 8.3 percent in the general election of October 2015, while the Left Bloc, with 10.2 percent, scored its best result ever, becoming the third political force in the country. This result was confirmed at the presidential elections of January 2016, when the Left Bloc once again surpassed 10 percent.

Plural Left experiments, always characterized by a clear opposition to neoliberalism, have also borne fruit in local ballots. A good case in point was the municipal elections in Spain, where the Madrid *Ahora* and Barcelona *en Comú* lists (including both *Izquierda Unida* and *Podemos*) won the two largest cities in the country. Broad alliances driven by the rank and file made it possible to overcome differences between the national leadership groups.

Parties that chose not to bloc with other political forces have also sometimes achieved notable electoral results in the past decade. In the Netherlands, for example, the Socialist Party (SP) rose to 16.6 percent of the vote in 2006, in the wake of its call for a 'no' vote in the referendum on the European Constitution; and in Cyprus the AKEL general secretary Demetris Christofias won the presidential elections of 2009 with 33.2 percent in the first-round vote and 53.3 percent in the second. Christofias's term in office ended in major setbacks, however, since he was unable to end the conflict that has divided the island since 1974, and explicitly bowed to the Troika's demands on the economy.

Another turnaround that has shaken the geography of the European Left would have been at least as unpredictable a few years ago as was Syriza's governmental victory in Greece. In primary-style elections held in September 2015, 59.5 percent of British Labour Party members and registered supporters voted in favour of Jeremy Corbyn as their new leader. In the country where Tony Blair ruled the roost twenty years ago, a self-declared anticapitalist now occupies the top post in the Labour Party, the most left-wing in its history. This extraordinary turn of events represents a further significant example of the revival of the Left. After his election, Corbyn was harshly attacked by the right wing of the party, and in June 2016, after the resignation of two-thirds of the members of the shadow-government, more than 80 percent of the Parliamentary Labour Party voted no confidence in him. In September, in a new leadership contest, he was re-elected as head of the Labour Party with 61.8 percent of the vote.

Finally, in February 2016, Mélenchon founded *La France Insoumise* (Rebellious France). Within a few months, this new political movement – based on individual endorsements of the political platform *L'Avenir*

*en commun* (For a Common Future) and not on membership in a party or association – transformed the French political scene. In the first round (April 2017) of the presidential elections, Mélenchon obtained more than 7 million votes (19.6 percent), only 600,000 fewer than Le Pen and short of qualifying for the second round. This was a historic result for the French radical Left.

At the level of the EU, the general advance of the radical Left was confirmed at the last European elections in 2014. Its total number of votes reached 12,981,378, or 8 percent, with an increase of 1,885,574 over 2009.<sup>35</sup> Even by the sole criterion of the number of elected deputies (6.9 percent, or 52 MPs), the European United Left/Nordic Green Left is now the fifth political force in the European Parliament, up from seventh in 2009.<sup>36</sup> It thus comes behind the European People's Party (29.4 percent), the Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats (25.4 percent), the European Conservatives and Reformists (9.3 percent) and the Alliance of Democrats and Liberals for Europe (8.9 percent); but ahead of the Greens/European Free Alliance (6.6 percent), Europe of Freedom and Direct Democracy (6.4 percent) and Europe of Nations and Freedom (5.2 percent).

There are some negative elements that cloud this picture, however. In many countries of Eastern Europe, the radical Left still expresses a marginal, if not totally isolated, position;<sup>37</sup> it is remote from social struggles, lacks roots in local areas and the trade unions, is unknown to the younger generation, and is repeatedly shaken by a damaging sectarianism and rending internal divisions. In other words, it has no immediate prospect of development.

This situation is reflected at the polls. In six countries – Poland, Romania, Hungary, Bulgaria, Bosnia-Herzegovina and Estonia – the radical Left has garnered less than 1 percent of the vote, while in others such as Croatia, Slovakia, Lithuania and Latvia, it has hardly fared better. It also remains very weak in Austria, Belgium and

---

35. It should be noted that most of the data in circulation about the election results – including those issued by the European Union – refer to percentages of the total number of elected deputies, not of the number of votes cast. One of the laudable exceptions to this practice is Paolo Chiocchetti. See his 'The Radical Left at the 2014 European Parliament Election: A First Assessment' (in the online publication edited by Cornelia Hildebrandt, *Situation on the Left in Europe after the EU Elections: New Challenges*, Berlin: Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung, 2014), and *The Radical Left Party Family in Western Europe, 1989–2015*, London: Routledge, 2016.

36. To these should be added two other Euro MPs from the Communist Party of Greece, who do not belong to the EUL/NGL group.

37. The Eurodeputies of the EUL/NGL group come from only half of the 28 countries making up the European Union.



Switzerland, and in Serbia the Left is still identified with the Socialist Party led for many years by Slobodan Milošević.

The reality we face in Europe is therefore extremely heterogeneous. In the Iberian Peninsula and the Mediterranean Basin – with the exception of Italy – the radical Left has expanded significantly in recent years. In Greece, Spain, France, Portugal and Cyprus, its forces have consolidated themselves and may be recognized among the principal actors in the political arena. In France, too, it has regained a reasonably significant role in society and politics. Meanwhile, in Ireland, the progressive (though moderate and certainly not socialist) republican nationalism of Sinn Fein (SF), which collected 22.8 percent of votes in the 2014 Euro-elections, has acted as a barrier to the advance of conservative forces.

In Central Europe, the radical Left has managed to retain considerable electoral strength in Germany and the Netherlands, but its weight is limited elsewhere. In the Nordic countries, it has defended the positions it secured after 1989 (around 10 percent at the polls), but it has proved incapable of attracting the diffuse popular discontent, which has been captured by the extreme Right instead.

The main problem for the radical Left remains further east, however, where, with the exception of the Communist Party of Bohemia and Moravia in the Czech Republic, and the United Left in Slovenia, it is virtually non-existent and incapable of moving beyond the spectre of ‘actually existing socialism’. In these circumstances, the eastward expansion of the EU has decisively shifted the political centre of gravity to the right, as we can see from the rigidly extreme positions taken by East European governments during the recent crisis in Greece and with regard to the arrival of people fleeing war-torn regions.

### **Beyond the Eurozone enclosure?**

The conversion of radical Left parties into broader, more plural organizations has been useful in reducing their fragmentation, but it has certainly not solved their political problems.

In Greece, when the government headed by Alexis Tsipras took office in 2015, Syriza intended to break with the austerity policies adopted by all the administrations – centre-left, ‘technocratic’ or ‘centre-right’ – that had succeeded one another since 2010. However, because of the huge size of the public debt, the concrete application of this turn was immediately subordinated to negotiations with international creditors.

After five months of exhausting talks – during which the European Central Bank again stopped providing credit to the central bank in Athens, causing branches of Greek banks to dry up – the leaders of the Eurozone imposed a new bailout plan containing all the economic provisions that Syriza had been firmly opposing. Since 2010, the parliamentary arc of political forces that has accepted the Brussels memoranda has been wide indeed. From left to right, they have bowed to the inexorable logic of austerity: New Democracy, the Independent Greeks (ANEL), The River, the Democratic Left, the Panhellenic Socialist Movement and finally even Syriza.<sup>38</sup> Not even the vigorous response at the consultative referendum of 5 July 2015 (when 61.3 percent of Greeks said a firm ‘no’ to the Troika’s proposals) served to bring about a different outcome.

To avoid a Greek exit from the Eurozone, the Tsipras government agreed to further social sacrifices, a massive knock-down sale of public assets, and more generally a whole raft of austerity measures geared to the interests of international creditors rather than development of the Greek economy.<sup>39</sup>

On the other hand, a Greek exit from the Eurozone – a scenario that some envisaged, but only if negotiations with the Eurogroup broke down – would have catapulted the country into a state of economic chaos and deep recession. It would have been necessary to prepare well in advance for such a momentous decision, carefully weighing every eventuality and rigorously planning all the appropriate countermeasures. Above all, it would have been necessary to win over a large array of social and political forces and to count on their support.

The outcome of the negotiations between Tsipras and the Eurogroup made it abundantly clear that, as soon as a left-wing party wins elections and seeks to implement alternative economic policies, the Brussels institutions are ready to intervene and put a stop to them. In the 1990s, unconditional acceptance of the neoliberal credo aligned the forces of European social democracy with the parties of the centre-right. Today, by contrast, when a party of the radical Left comes to power, the Troika itself steps in to prevent the new

---

38. Margaret Thatcher’s famous slogan ‘There is no alternative’ continues to materialize, like a phantom, even at a distance of thirty years.

39. See the collective *Preliminary Report*, edited by the Truth Committee on Public Debt, the commission established on 4 April 2015 on the initiative of the former president of the Greek parliament, Zoe Konstantopoulou: <http://cadtm.org/IMG/pdf/Report.pdf>. The new Tsipras government decided to delete this important document from the official site of the Greek parliament.

government from tampering with its economic directives. To win elections is not enough; the European Union has become a cornerstone of neoliberal capitalism.

Following the Greek episode, there has been deeper collective reflection on the wisdom of keeping the single currency at any cost. Efforts are being made to understand which are the best ways of putting an end to the current economic policies, without abandoning at the same time the project of a new and different European political union. The British referendum of June 2016 on whether to withdraw from the European Union inflicted a hard blow on Europe. The majority of citizens of the United Kingdom voted in favour of leaving the EU, thereby giving an ulterior rationale to those who would argue that it was a mistake to claim that a similar choice would constitute a dangerous leap into the void.

The majority position among the parties of the radical Left remains that it is still possible to modify European policies within the existing context: that is, to do so without ending the monetary union that was achieved in 2002 when the euro came into effect.

Syriza is the most prominent force still holding this view: it had the opportunity in government to formulate and implement alternative solutions – despite improper pressure from the EU institutions to block any change – but it did not take into consideration the ‘Grexit’ option. In September 2015, Tsipras won the early elections he called following the conflict with a section of the party that opposed implementation of the Eurogroup memorandum proposals; he collected 35.5 percent of the popular vote and returned to government with a cohesive parliamentary group, no longer exposed to the dangers of internal dissidence.

So, despite the higher rate of abstention (up 7 percent since the previous election seven months earlier), and despite the fact that a good 600,000 fewer people voted than in the July referendum, Syriza has managed to retain the support of a sizeable section of the Greek people. However, the new vote of confidence they gave it is now being put to the test as the axe imposed by the Eurogroup takes effect, and it is not too rash to predict the emergence of even more unsettled scenarios than those we have seen so far.

In the summer of 2015, Syriza announced its strategy to prevent the loss of support suffered by all other parties that implemented earlier Troika bailout programmes. The Greek government would have had to negotiate a substantial reduction in the public debt, in order to avoid the onset of a new deflationary cycle. Moreover, it would have had to carry out a parallel agenda to the one imposed by Brussels,

taking some redistributive measures that may limit the effects of the most recent memorandum. Both projects, however, turned out to be unrealizable. After the experience of the Tsipras government, and given that the EU institutions will reject any restructuring of the debt, it has become clear that the Left also needs to be prepared for a possible exit from the Eurozone. It would be wrong, however, to think of this as the remedy for all evils.

Apart from Syriza, most of the principal forces in the European Left Party share the view that it is possible to reform the European Union within the existing set-up; this is true of Die Linke in Germany, the French Communist Party and Izquierda Unida in Spain. Podemos, too, fits into this bloc, since its leadership is convinced that if the Greek government had been joined by others prepared to break with Troika-imposed austerity, a space might have opened up to undermine what today seems so unalterable. The recent election result in Portugal – which has generated a hitherto quite unlikely alliance: a minority government led by the Socialist Antonio Costa, with the external support of the Left Bloc and of the United Democratic Coalition<sup>40</sup> – seems to have strengthened such hopes.

In the view of others, the ‘Greek crisis’ – in reality, a crisis of democracy in the age of neoliberal capitalism – seems to prove that the existing EU model cannot be reformed: not so much because the relationship of forces is even less favourable to the anticapitalist Left since the eastward enlargement, as because of its general architecture. The economic parameters that have been imposed with growing rigidity since the signing of the Maastricht Treaty have inevitably reduced, or in some cases virtually quashed, the much more complex and composite exigencies of politics.

In the last twenty-five years, neoliberal policies cloaked in a deceptive technocratic, non-ideological garb have triumphed all over Europe, dealing heavy blows to its welfare-state model. Individual countries have found themselves gradually stripped of important political and economic steering instruments, which are indispensable to launch public investment programmes that might change the course of the crisis. And on top of this, the anti-democratic practice of taking major decisions without seeking popular approval has become so entrenched that it now appears quite natural.

Those who consider the goal of democratizing the Eurozone to be illusory may still be a minority in the radical Left, but their ranks have

---

40. In the Portugal of the 1970s, after the Carnation Revolution and the establishment of the republic, the Socialists never negotiated with political forces to their left.

been swelling over the last two years. Alongside traditionally Euro-sceptic forces such as the Portuguese Communist Party, the Communist Party of Greece or the Unitary List/Red-Greens in Denmark, there is now the Popular Unity (LE) breakaway from Syriza. Born in Athens in August 2015, it has recruited a considerable number of former leaders and members who opposed Tsipras's decision to accept the dictates of the Eurogroup. But although it favours a return to the drachma, it remained outside the Greek parliament after the last elections, having notched up only 2.8 percent of the popular vote.

At the same time, various intellectuals and political leaders have explicitly taken a position against the euro.<sup>41</sup> Lafontaine, for instance, has proposed a return (in a flexible form) to the European Monetary System (EMS): that is, the agreement in force before the adoption of the euro, which prescribed a controlled fluctuation of exchange rates among various national currencies. The search for immediate solutions to end the stage of austerity, against the background of new and unacceptable pressures like those exerted on Greece, must nevertheless make provision for all that they entail. At a symbolic level, a return to the old monetary system might be seen as a first step to halting the whole project of European unity; and politically, it might prove a dangerous catalyst that works to the advantage of the *souverainiste* Right.

Apart from the two forthright positions for and against 'democratization of the euro', there is a fairly wide range of opinion that would hesitate to offer a clear answer to the question: 'What should be done if the things that happened in Greece are repeated in another country?' Many worry that other parties or coalition governments might be subjected to the same blackmail as Syriza was, but there is also a

---

41. In addition to authors who have been arguing this for some time – see, e.g., Jacques Sapir, *Faut-il sortir de l'Euro?*, Paris: Le Seuil, 2012, and Heiner Flassbeck and Costas Lapavistas, *Against the Troika: Crisis and Austerity in the Eurozone*, London: Verso, 2015 – there have been a number of recent interventions in this direction. In an interview in the famous German weekly *Der Spiegel*, entitled 'Krise in Griechenland: Lafontaine fordert Ende des Euro' (11 July 2015), Oskar Lafontaine did not beat about the bush in declaring that 'the euro has failed'. In Italy, the recently deceased sociologist Luciano Gallino published an article explaining why Italy can and should leave the euro: 'Perché l'Italia può e deve uscire dall'euro', *La Repubblica* 22 September 2015. And in Portugal the influential Francisco Louçã – who for ten years was the main leader of the Left Bloc – was already publishing increasingly critical views before the outbreak of the Greek crisis. See his volume together with Joao Ferreira do Amaral: *A Solução Novo Escudo*, Alfragide: Lua de Papel, 2014, and more recently his article 'Sair ou não sair do euro', *Público*, 27 February 2015.

widespread fear that, if it contemplates withdrawal from the Eurozone, the anticapitalist Left will alienate large sections of the population who are alarmed at the prospect of inflation and the resulting economic instability and erosion of their wages and pensions. Typical examples of this uncertainty are the shifting positions in recent years of the Left Bloc in Portugal and the Socialist Party in the Netherlands.

The appeal 'A Plan B in Europe', promoted in 2015 by Mélenchon, has given a further stimulus to discussion. Branding EU interference in Greece as a veritable 'coup d'État', it proposed a permanent international commission to design the ways in which an alternative to the euro-based monetary system might become available if the need arises.<sup>42</sup> The Plan B proposal was also used by *La France Insoumise* in the recent electoral campaign. If, in the coming months, other social forces, political parties and intellectuals take up this possibility, the demand to leave the euro might in future become the banner of more than just the nationalist Right.

On the other hand, the conflict that erupted within Syriza might be reproduced elsewhere. There have already been conflicts between the French Communist Party and *La France Insoumise* and internal tremors that have been affecting Die Linke in Germany. For the European radical Left, therefore, the risk of a new period of divisions might take concrete shape. This reveals the limits of the plural form that militant forces have adopted in recent years, with all its lack of programmatic definition. For the diversity of political positions and political cultures among the organizations that animate the new configurations may well require agreements about the strategy to be pursued – which will be difficult to achieve, but not impossible.

Other tensions exist within the radical European Left concerning relations with social-democratic forces. The key issue, constantly present at both municipal and regional level, is whether it is a good idea to take part with them in the experience of government; the obvious danger is that one will end up playing a subservient role, accepting, as in the past, negative downward compromises that erode existing gains in popular support and hand a monopoly of social opposition to the populist Right.

The government option should be considered, however, only if the conditions are present to implement an economic programme that clearly breaks with the austerity policies of the last decade. Any other decision would mean not having learnt the lessons of recent

---

42. The first meeting on the subject was held in Paris on 23–24 January 2016, but it was disappointing both in terms of participation and in the quality of the debate.

years, when the policies pursued by Socialist-led governments compromised the credibility of the radical Left among the working classes, social movements and the weakest sections of society.

Faced with unemployment that in some countries has reached levels not seen since the war, it has become a priority to launch an ambitious plan for labour, supported by public investment, with sustainable development as its guiding principle. This should go together with a clear change of direction regarding the job insecurity that has marked all the latest labour-market 'reforms'; legislation should also be introduced to set a minimum threshold below which wages cannot be allowed to fall. Such measures would make it possible once again for young people to plan their future. There should also be a cut in working hours and a lowering of the retirement age, thereby restoring some elements of social justice to counter the unequal division of wealth that has continually grown under the neo-liberal regime.

To confront the dramatic rise in unemployment, the parties of the radical Left should promote measures that tend to establish a citizenship income and basic forms of support for the less well-off – from a right to housing through transport concessions to free education – in such a way as to combat poverty and the ever more widespread social exclusion.

At the same time, it is essential to reverse the privatization processes that have marked the counter-revolution of the last few decades. All the common goods transformed from community services into means of generating profits for the few should be restored to public ownership and control. Corbyn's proposal on renationalization of the British railways, as well as the need everywhere in Europe to invest significant resources in schools and universities, indicate the right direction to take.

As regards the funding of such reforms, this could come from a tax on capital and on the non-productive activity of large corporations, as well as on financial transactions and income. It is evident that the first necessary means to this end is a referendum to abrogate the 'fiscal compact', and the cancellation of the chains imposed by the Troika.

At a continental level, a real alternative is conceivable only if a broad spectrum of political and social forces is capable of fighting for and achieving a European conference on the restructuring of public debt. This can happen only if the radical Left develops, with greater resolve and consistency, a variety of political campaigns and transnational mobilizations. These should begin with the rejection of war and xenophobia – an even more decisive issue since the numerous

attacks that have struck France since November 2015 – and support for the extension of citizenship and full social rights to migrants arriving on European soil.

An alternative politics does not allow shortcuts. For it is not enough to trust in charismatic leaders; nor does the weakness of today's parties justify their being overruled by the institutions of the state.<sup>43</sup> It is necessary to build new organizations – the Left needs these as much as it did in the twentieth century: organizations that have an extensive presence in workplaces; organizations that strive to unify the struggles of the workers and subaltern classes, at a time when these have never been more fragmented; organizations whose local structures are capable of giving immediate answers (even before legislation for general improvements) to the dramatic problems resulting from poverty and social exclusion. It will also help this to happen if the Left draws again on forms of social resistance and solidarity practised by the workers' movement in other historical epochs.

New priorities also need to be defined, especially a real gender equality and thorough political training of younger members. The lodestar for such work, in an age when democracy is hostage to technocratic organisms, is the encouragement of rank-and-file participation and the development of social struggles.

The only initiatives of the radical Left that can really aspire to change the course of events have a single road before them: to build a new social bloc capable of stimulating mass opposition to the policies initiated by the Maastricht Treaty, and therefore to change at the roots the dominant economic approaches in today's Europe.

*Translated from the Italian by Patrick Camiller*

---

43. When Syriza came to power in January 2015, it had obtained 2,250,000 votes, but its total membership was no more than 36,000. Since its assumption of government responsibilities, the decisions democratically taken by the Greek party have been repeatedly overturned or disregarded.