The Threatening Advancement of the Far Right in Europe

By Marcello Musto

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The second round of the French regional elections in December 2015 ended with a defeat for the National Front. Nevertheless, this party is now a concrete threat for France and Europe. Under Marine Le Pen's leadership, it shot up to 17.9 per cent in the 2012 presidential elections, became the largest French political party at the 2014 Euro-elections, carried away one fourth of the vote at the departmental elections in March 2015, and has finally scored 27.7 per cent at these regional elections. It is a success that cannot be explained only in relation to the Paris attack in November; it concerns a deeper political change that is taking place all over Europe.

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.

The uniformity of approach of socialdemocratic and conservative parties to political and economic questions, and the growing hostility of public opinion to the Brussels technocracy have helped to produce a major transformation in the political context.

Populist Wind

In the last few years, a profound aversion has developed towards anything that can be described as 'politics'. 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 seem to have affected the political systems in France and Italy, where for decades the vote was divided between the centre-right and centre-left blocs.

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 neoliberal policies – a topic that deserves separate consideration.

The first of these phenomena is mainly attributable to the growing detachment from political parties in general.

The second has developed on the crest of the anti-EU wave. New 'post-ideological' movements have arisen in recent years, guided by general denunciation of the corrupt existing system, by the myth of online democracy as a guarantee of rank-and-file participation in contrast to the usual practice of political parties, and by euroscepticism. On the basis of these principles, a Pirate Party was founded almost simultaneously in Sweden and Germany. The Five Star Movement created by the comedian Beppe Grillo became the first political force in Italy, with 25.5 per cent of the vote. Alternative for Germany, The River in Greece, and Ciudadanos in Spain also became important political actors in their respective countries. Finally, at the recent presidential elections in Poland, the right-wing populist singer Pawel Kukiz captured 21.3 per cent of the vote and his movement, Kukiz'15, has become the third political force in the country at the legislative elections in October 2015.

During the same period, 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, which topped the Euro polls in 2014 with 26.6 per cent.

The "New" Face of the Right

In many European countries, xenophobic, nationalist or openly neofascist parties have made big advances as the effects of economic crisis have made themselves felt.

In some cases, they have modified their political discourse, replacing the classical left-right division with a new polarization specific to contemporary society: what Marine Le Pen calls the conflict 'between those at the top and those at the bottom'. In this, far-right candidates are supposed to represent the 'people' 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.

This change of course has certainly played a role in the recent successes of the National Front in France. In Italy, meanwhile, the Northern League has also undergone a metamorphosis. It was born in 1989 demanding independence for 'Padania' (its name for northern Italy), and after 1996 it envisaged the unilateral secession of the region. But recently it has turned itself into a national party, whit a 'non'euro', anti-immigrant platform. 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. 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.

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 are the Austrian Freedom Party, which won 20.5 per cent of the vote at the 2013 national elections, and 30.8 per cent at the Viennese elections in 2015; and the Party for Freedom in the Netherlands, which scored 13.3 per cent at the last European elections. The latter two parties have risen to occupy third position in their national polities.

Far-right forces have made important advances in various parts of the continent. In Switzerland, the Swiss People's Party, which distinguished itself in the past by advocating a referendum (actually approved in 2009) for a ban on new minarets, pulled off its best-ever result in 2015, winning 29.4 per cent at the October elections.

In every Scandinavian country, they also are already an established reality. 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 with 12.8 per cent at the last elections. In Denmark and Finland, two parties founded in 1995 have scored even more surprising results, becoming the second largest parties in their respective countries. To general amazement, the Danish People's Party won the highest number of votes at the last European elections, with 26.6 per cent of the total; it then consolidated its success with 21.1 per cent at the 2015 legislative elections and joined the government majority. In Finland, the True Finns also now sit on the government benches, having attracted 17.6 per cent support at the ballot box in 2015. Finally, in Norway, the Progress Party – which already collected 22.9 per cent 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 per cent.

The near-uniform assertion 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 the Social Democratic and Communist Left. Two other useful, though not fundamental, factors are their carefully designed political symbolism 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 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 some theorists have 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 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 Danger in East

The radical Right has also managed to reorganize in a number of East European countries, since the end of the pro-Soviet regimes there.

In Poland, the populist Law and Justice party won the presidential elections in May 2015 and, having scored 37.6 per cent 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 Law and Justice 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 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 Socialist Party government had imposed severe austerity measures at the behest of the Troika, causing a lurch into deflation, the Hungarian Civic Union/Fidesz took over the reins of office. Then in 2102, 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 has been the third party in the country since 2010, netting 20.5 per cent of the vote at the 2014 elections. Unlike most of the radical Right in Western Europe and Scandinavia, Jobbik is a classical example – now dominant in the East – of a far-right formation that uses hatred of minorities (especially Roma), anti-Semitism and anti-communism 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. One of these has obtained good results at the polls. In Greece, Golden Dawn picked up 9.4 per cent of the vote in the European elections of 2014 and 7 per cent in the general elections of 2015, thereby asserting itself as the third political force in the country.

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 hegemonizing political debate and 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 Troika's neoliberal mantra still so fashionable in Brussels.

Marcello Musto teaches Sociological Theory at York University (Toronto). Among his most recent books, there are: ***Marx for Today*** *(Routledge, 2012) and* ***Workers Unite!*** *(Bloomsbury, 2014).*