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## *A cordon populiste* from the Baltic to the Adriatic Sea: is a new populist alliance emerging in the EU?

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Much attention has been recently dedicated to the “populist alliance” stretching from Poland via Hungary and Austria to Italy, with Viktor Orbán and Matteo Salvini styling themselves as the leaders of the anti-establishment Europe. But while these countries do cooperate more closely, a comprehensive alliance remains unlikely as disagreements among them persist in virtually all policy areas. Nonetheless, ignoring the appeal of their political discourse among the voters would be foolish as their ascendancy highlights real problems which the EU will have to take seriously.

### **Introduction: populists on the rise**

When the fortunes of Eurosceptic populism started to rise across the European Union some ten years ago, many argued that as long as the new populists were not in the governing coalitions, there was no need to worry. Later on, when the Visegrad Four countries have become a hotbed of populism, some reduced the problem to a heritage of Communism, arguing

that it did not affect the European Union as a whole. Occasionally, the media brought an article about the deteriorating state of democracy in Poland or in Hungary, but the developments in the East were still seen as a deviation from the EU-wide norm.

However, recently, the dominant narrative started to change, particularly in the connection with the political changes in Austria and Italy: The new Austrian government with the extreme right Freedom Party of Austria (FPÖ) as a junior partner was appointed on 18 December 2017, and the new Italian government, consisting of, among others, the Northern League and the Five Star Movement, came to power in early May 2018. Suddenly, the interpretation which was based on the lingering Western condescension towards the Eastern part of the Union lost its explanatory appeal.

Instead, a novel narrative emerged which presents a different picture in which two strong,

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clearly defined camps have emerged in the EU. Suspiciously, it is a narrative on which both sides agree. Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán put it quite concisely: “There are two sides at the moment in Europe. One is led by Macron, who is supporting migration. The other one is supported by countries who want to protect their borders. Hungary and Italy belong to the latter”.<sup>1</sup> President Macron, on his part, confirmed this reading of the situation in Europe and argued that if the Hungarian and Italian governments “want to see (him) as their main opponent, they’re right”.<sup>2</sup>

This picture, as oversimplified as it is, is the result of a fundamental political earthquake. There is no doubt that the old European political cleavage between the traditional left and the traditional right has collapsed. The left has all but disappeared from many European countries. The German SPD, for the first time in the history of German politics, has been overtaken by the anti-migration Alternative für Deutschland,<sup>3</sup> but the German Social Democrats are still better off than their French colleagues.<sup>4</sup> The Czech Social Democrats, who were once routinely winning their country’s elections, stand at 7%. In Hungary, the left does not exist anymore. And the British Labour Party, once seen as a hope for the renewal of the European left, cannot even unite behind the opposition to Brexit.

But in spite of all appearances, the traditional right is at least as troubled. While it is seemingly doing well, it is only due to the right-wing appropriation of the anti-migration, Eurosceptic agenda that often borders on nativist xenophobia (just have a look at the United Kingdom, Poland or Italy). What we witness in some European countries is an outright merger, and the distinction between extreme right and the ruling right-wing parties makes less and less sense. In short, the slogan of the time seems to be “adapt to the nationalist pressure or perish”, whereby the right has chosen the former and the left the latter.

### How much agreement is there really?

It is true that the rhetoric of the new European populists is in many ways similar. It revolves around the critique of the European Union and the “liberal elites”, obviously including the previous governments, but its main target is culturally-defined otherness, which at the moment means migrants and refugees, particularly if they are Muslim. On this general level, it is true that a new anti-migration alliance has indeed been born. A simple indicator is to look at what various European governments say about the UN-sponsored Global Compact for Migration: Prominent among its critics are the governments of Poland, Hungary, Czechia, Austria and Italy.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Lorenzo Tondo, “Matteo Salvini and Viktor Orbán to form anti-migration front,” *The Guardian*, August 28, 2018

<sup>2</sup> Esther King, “Macron: Orbán and Salvini are right to ‘see me as their main opponent’,” *Politico*, August 29, 2018

<sup>3</sup> DPA/The Local, “Right-wing AfD second most popular party in Germany, poll finds,” *The Local*, September 21, 2018

<sup>4</sup> Cf. “The incredible disappearing French Socialist Party,” *The Economist*, June 21, 2018

<sup>5</sup> Eline Schaart, “Czech Republic latest EU country to reject UN migration treaty,” *Politico*, November 14, 2018; ANSA, “Italy not signing Global Compact-Salvini,” *ANSA*, November 28, 2018

But this supposedly solid bloc is more fragile than meets the eye. Even as far as migration is concerned, their views fundamentally differ as a deep rift exists here between the Italian position and that of Italy's alleged Central European allies. In spite of the flurry of diplomatic visits between the Visegrad leaders and their Italian counterparts, their unity on how to tackle migration to Europe and in Europe goes only as far as repeating the cliché about the need to protect the EU external border.

When Italian Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte sent a letter to the EU leaders asking them to accept recently arrived refugees, the Czech Prime Minister Andrej Babiš tweeted that accepting refugees was “a road to hell”.<sup>6</sup> In a manner typical of the Czech Prime Minister, Babiš declared that the EU should send a clear signal and not accept any refugees as this would “only worsen the problem” without, however, giving any indication about what Italy and the other Mediterranean countries are supposed to do about those who have already arrived.<sup>7</sup> Unsurprisingly, the President of the Italian Chamber of Deputies Roberto Fico replied that “hell was not being able to welcome people”.<sup>8</sup>

In a similar and very public show of a deep disagreement, this time between Italy and Hungary, Prime Minister Orbán also retorted that “Hungary will accept no one”.<sup>9</sup> István Hollik,

the parliamentary speaker of the ruling Fidesz-KDNP coalition, refused the proposed measures, absurdly declaring that “the Hungarians refuse the Soros plan”, again showing that the Fidesz obsession with Soros stands in the way of meaningful cooperation.<sup>10</sup>

Similar problems pertain to the relationship between Italy and Austria. Italians were, for instance, rather adamant in their efforts to revise the Dublin regulation regarding asylum applications during the Bulgarian Presidency. The Italian government was clearly worried that once Austria took over, the result would be a far cry from what Italy had been asking for. Again, both Austria and Hungary have been identified as having a position that is the opposite of Italy's.<sup>11</sup>

The same pattern stretches among other policies as well, and very little mutual support is visible between the Visegrad Four, Austria and Italy even across those issues that are considered fundamentally important for the domestic politics of these countries. Take, for instance, the budget row the Italian government is engaged in with the European Commission. There was not a trace of understanding for the Italians when Prime Minister Sebastian Kurz, speaking as the representative of the rotating Council Presidency, supported the position of the European Commission and rebuked the

<sup>6</sup> “Conte: “Solidarietà Ue sta diventando realtà”. Praga: “È la strada per l'inferno”. Fico: “Inferno è non saper accogliere””, *La Repubblica*, July 15, 2018

<sup>7</sup> “PM Babiš may meet Italian counterpart in late August,” *Prague Daily Monitor*, July 24, 2018

<sup>8</sup> “Conte: “Solidarietà Ue sta diventando realtà”. Praga: “È la strada per l'inferno”. Fico: “Inferno è non saper accogliere””, *La Repubblica*, July 15, 2018

<sup>9</sup> ANSA, “Ungheria, 'non accogliamo alcun migrante!”, *ANSA*, July 15, 2018  
<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> David M. Hersenhorn, Florian Eder and Jacopo Barigazzi, “Sebastian Kurz's European debutante ball”, *Politico*, July 5, 2018

Italian government in very sharp terms: “Austria is not prepared to stand up for the debts of other states while these states knowingly contribute to uncertainty in financial markets”, adding that “now the EU must prove that it has learned from the Greece crisis.”<sup>12</sup>

In regard to another key issue which is high on the EU agenda, the budget negotiations, the positions of these six countries are rather fragmented as well. While Austria welcomed the decreased budget in the proposal of the European Commission from May 2018, the Visegrad Four are not enthusiastic about it, to say the least.<sup>13</sup> In particular, the decrease in the EU’s Cohesion Policy (7 % in real terms)<sup>14</sup> has been causing them headaches. But even among the Visegrad countries, disagreements exist – the Common Agricultural Policy subsidies are vitally important for Poland while they are of much less relevance for the Czech Republic.

Finally, divergences are present in almost all areas of EU external policies too. Everywhere you look – from the interpretation of the War in Ukraine and the focus on the Eastern vs. the Southern neighbourhood via the attitudes to Russia and the relevance of the sanction regime to the attitudes towards the United States – you will again find very little on which all six countries agree.

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One should add that there are also serious doubts about both the unity and the professed liberalism and openness of the Macron-Merkel camp as well. As attractive as it is to style oneself as the opponent of European populists, one wonders if it was not French President Macron who, after criticising the Italian handling of the Aquarius refugee rescue boat, refused to open French harbours to the very same ship.<sup>15</sup> Also, isn’t Viktor Orbán’s Fidesz Party, currently seen as the greatest culprit among the ruling parties in the EU, also a member of the European People’s Party alongside Angela Merkel’s Christian Democratic Union (CDU)?<sup>16</sup> To put it mildly, the picture of two clearly delineated camps with opposite and mutually exclusive agendas is grossly misleading.

### What to do

The rumour of the “populist alliance” among the six countries stretching from the Baltic Sea to Sicily is clearly exaggerated. A stable voting bloc of these countries within the EU is highly unlikely to emerge. Instead, what we should expect from them is ad-hoc common voting, especially when

<sup>12</sup> Francois Murphy, “Austria says EU must reject Italy’s draft budget unless it’s changed”, *Reuters*, October 22, 2018

<sup>13</sup> “Visegrad Bulletin 8 (1/2018),” Visegrad Group, last modified August 24, 2018

<sup>14</sup> Zsolt Darvas and Nicolas Moës, “How large is the proposed decline in EU agricultural and cohesion spending?”, Bruegel, last modified may 4, 2018

<sup>15</sup> “Macron takes flak for unwelcoming approach to EU migrant crisis”, *Financial Times*, 8 July 2018

<sup>16</sup> “Emmanuel Macron takes on Viktor Orban and Matteo Salvini”, *The Economist*, September 8, 2018

they are rejecting common proposals, rather than proposing new initiatives. Supporting their comrades in arms by a negative vote is an easy way for them to support one another, and a way well tested among the Visegrad countries at that. When the Commission proposes to take steps against the increasingly authoritarian Polish or Hungarian government, it is easy for the Czech government to reject the proposal and sell the no vote to the domestic audience as a brave stand against “Brussels”.<sup>17</sup>

Nonetheless, it is important to learn lessons from what the populists in these six countries say and why what they say remains so attractive to their voters. First, the political leaders in these countries are entirely correct in pointing to the double standards in the EU. It is not so long ago that France and Italy, under Matteo Renzi’s government<sup>18</sup>, broke the (new) budgetary rules, and instead of proceeding consistently, the European Commission decided to grant them a rather generous reprieve. Similarly, one has to

concur with Matteo Salvini when he argues that France has no right to lecture Italy on accepting refugees if the French President is similarly reticent to accept more refugees from the Italian border towns.

Second, we should not forget that the new populists have – to some extent – filled in the position of the old left. After the collapse of the left, the anti-migration movements are the only ones who, albeit in their often rather abhorrent way, address the question of socio-economic disparities, thus pointing to the vulnerabilities of the less affluent Europeans. The fact that they combine this focus with a counter-cultural language of an uprising against the liberalism of the ruling classes is just another example of how quickly the ignorance of social problems can be reframed in terms of a culture war. The re-appropriation of topics of the old and new left and their expression in a radically democratic way is the biggest task which stands in front of the European societies today.

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<sup>17</sup> Cf. David M. Herszenhorn and Lili Bayer, “Commission wants bigger budget for smaller EU”, *Politico*, April 5, 2018

<sup>18</sup> Alex Barker and Anne-Sylvaine Chassany, “France and Italy granted reprieve for breaching budget limits”, *Financial Times*, February 25, 2018

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