

A MID-SPRING EUROPEAN NIGHTMARE AFTER THE AUSTRIAN VOTE

Carlo Bastasin

MIGRATION, INEQUALITY, MIDDLE CLASS DECLINE, the euro-crisis, mistrust of the establishment—there is no shortage of explanations for the angry message voters in European countries are delivering with their ballots. However, most of the time, we dismiss the message as a temporary burst of irascibility that will eventually self-modulate. For at least 20 years, we have deemed public irritation as a negligible price for democracy.

In reality, support for radical parties has only grown. Traditional parties—Christian democrat and social-democrat—are threatened all across Europe. New radical parties, particularly on the far right, are popping up everywhere. They represent a powerful and minatory force with time on its side. Every four years, the Christian Democratic Union of Germany (CDU) loses one million voters for purely demographic reasons. The same applies to the Social Democratic Party of Germany (SPD). Victims of the area’s high youth unemployment, young voters in Germany, Italy, Austria, Spain, and elsewhere often vote differently and unpredictably.

Those who claim that a new era is about to dawn have never understood the era in which they live. It is past time to consider these developments for what they are—a permanent change in the European political landscape. Last Sunday, Austrian presidential elections once again demonstrated that the traditional parties, elbowed aside by a xenophobic nationalist formation such as the FPÖ, attract a negligible share of voters.

There are reasons to believe that this is not an occasional protest, but a step toward a new form of authoritarian populism. This trend is taking hold of Europe in much the same manner as what happened in the first half of the previous century. This may sound alarmist if not for the fact that European societies are on a slippery slope that provides momentum for authoritarian politics—a slope formed by the combined effects of the economic and migrant crises, which makes the prospect of closing national borders compelling for voters. We have already assented to barbed wire fences going up in Eastern Europe to keep refugees out. Now, Austria is erecting “walls” on the Slovenian and Italian borders.

The continent is back to building barriers. It will not take long before economic retaliation and trade limitation begin to erode the Single Market—the bedrock of the European Union. Autarchic policies might come of age once more. It is already in the making. The renationalization of politics has been a defining feature of the European crisis since 2008. As I have tried to highlight in my book “Saving Europe”, the rhetoric of “to each his own” or the idea of “risk reduction without risk-sharing” hides a lack of willingness to respond with solidarity to a common threat. This is a remnant of the European nation states of past centuries, which had been founded on the principle of self-sufficiency, rather than interdependency, in order to prepare for the frequent eventuality of war.

Autarchy might become tempting once again for politicians, who are eager to wave national flags and unite their supporters against an outside threat, real or imagined. While negotiations on the Transatlantic Trade agreements are stalling, anti-trade movements are growing stronger. Economic isolation was bad in last century, but, for societies and economic systems that have developed in the past six decades into open market economies, the autarchic risk is existential. Poverty and mass unemployment could result from the disruption of entire sectors of exporting and importing industries, outsourcers, producers linked to global supply chains, and so on. Beyond the standard effects of border controls, mobility of people and capital could become constrained by electronic surveillance.

An even more authoritarian response—perhaps even a military one—could become the inevitable consequence of the economic and political crises.