

THREE IDEAS FOR CHANGING ITALY'S DISCOURSE ON EUROPE: RENAISSANCE IN THE CITIES, EU FUNDS FOR IMMIGRATION, AND OPPORTUNITY SHARING

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ACROSS EUROPE, traditional political parties are being challenged by new political formations that barely fit the classic classification of left versus right. Drawing support from the divide between “open” and “closed” societies, they mainly feature anti-establishment claims in the name of protecting people, advocating closed borders in response to the tumultuous transformation caused by globalization in the past few decades. Globalization is generally seen as a powerful source of inequality and disempowerment—a political design coinciding with only the interests of elites.

For some reason, analysts struggle to understand the whole scope of the political change underway. Defending the prerogatives of protected or closed societies, insurgent parties are winning office month after month. In one third of EU countries, they are members of government coalitions and, according to a survey, they currently hold more than 1,300 seats in 25 national parliaments. Although we keep referring to them as “fringe” or “non-mainstream,” these parties are hijacking the political agenda and forcing mainstream parties to align along their positions.

With borders an essential part of the rhetoric in the debate regarding closed vs. open societies, the new parties' political orientation is unusually focused on international affairs. While, in the past, traditional populist movements were mainly concerned with national issues, most of the new populists are now interested in defining their politics as protecting against external threats. The international context thus becomes the main battlefield of politics today.

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Consequently, new political movements of different origins and from different countries are all responding similarly, decrying either globalization or established political rituals.

In particular, the new parties developed a negative view of migration, cross-border movements, and free trade. They also see traditional parties and elites as enemies of the people, who need to be replaced by either returning power to the people through unfettered direct democracy or, eventually, by non-democratic means edging on autocratic systems. Globalization being too much of an abstraction, the political targets narrow to what looks like a slew of straw-men: the United States as the main promoter of opening markets at the global level, the European Union as a force that aims to tear down national barriers, and multinationals and bankers as the main beneficiaries of the market economy. As for representative democracy, many among the new parties favor direct democracy and the binary language intrinsic to referenda. The rhetoric of returning power to the people frequently and surprisingly coexists with a sense of admiration for strong leaders such as Russian president Vladimir Putin, Hungarian leader Viktor Orbán, Turkish autocrat Recep Tayyip Erdogan, or U.S. presidential candidate Donald Trump. In all these cases, the three items on the new-parties' political agenda—low migration, restoring borders, and no free trade—are convincingly endorsed by leaders who are less than keen on democracy.

The struggle to defend the European Union now coincides with the defense of liberal values embodied by open and democratic societies. However, neglecting, on the grounds of moral superiority, the real-life hardships and discomfort from which the new wall builders are drawing their strength, ultimately means losing the more profound reasons for defending democracy and open societies. Finally, it is the fastest way to lose all political contests.

For all these reasons, pro-Europeans should change their strategy and language. This brief hints at a few significant changes that should be embraced by people defending an open society in Italy when confronted with the main concerns of anti-Europeans.

The three prescriptions can be summarized as a renaissance in the cities, well-ordered immigration, and pan-European investment funds.

1) The first change pertains to the emotional nature of the pro-European argument. Rational intellectual advocacy of the advantages of Europe are not sufficient. Rational arguments may be cogent, but they surrender the emotional advantage to anti-Europeans who claim to be protecting national identity and traditional values from the aggression of obscure powers or foreign invaders. Pro-Europeans regularly refer to a single emotional argument—fear of the consequences of closing borders or of losing contact with other European peoples and cultures. The underlying assumption is that an isolated Italy would revert to its history of weak democracy and crooked economy. Though legitimate, this line of argument leaves all the patriotic passion and sense of community to advocates of closed borders and a strongly-defined national identity.

Pro-Europeans require a credible account of what Italy's history means today and how its past can best find expression in the European context rather than in isolation. The country's lack of clarity regarding its role in the two world wars makes it harder now to defend the case of Europe as a source of peace and a bulwark against dictatorship and fascism. For psychological reasons, pejorative representations of Italy's history are hardly a sell that would warm hearts in favor of Europe. The connection with Italy's history should build on the positive impact of global trade on Italian cities and the exchange of cultures that saw Venice and Florence become beacons of western civilization. Pro-Europeans should focus on Italy's Renaissance and its evolution into a multifaceted society. All over the world, metropolitan areas are central to economic development and define it better than national GDP. Recalling a

resonating historical period could provide the emotional factor needed to encourage Italians to embrace a culture of openness. In actual fact, even today, cities like Milan are finding new lifelines in their links to the global economy. Similarly, cities like Rome, Palermo, and Naples could regain their pivotal roles and attractiveness through development plans designed on the principle of freedom of movement of people and goods. European food, football, and cheap flights have helped bring people closer throughout Europe, but they have not negated the fear of many in moving from one place to another. Better infrastructure and public services—a state-of-the-art healthcare system and efficient police—aimed at welcoming investors and tourists, could be game-changers that encourage Italians to adopt a new mentality of openness in thriving local economies.

2) Immigration is probably the most powerful factor behind the increasing diffidence of the public against the European Union and its philosophy of open borders. The rhetoric of the past, focused on the European mission to build brotherly relations among different peoples, is severely challenged as a widespread sense of discomfort and insecurity takes root throughout Europe. On this issue, the emotional character of peaceful integration clashes every day with a sense of danger and precarious living conditions. The rhetoric of good and convenient immigration backfires and irritates ordinary people.

It is almost a no-brainer that European states should pool their security forces and patrol borders or even intervene in conflict areas. However, the way we think about immigration should be overhauled at the national levels as well. Immigration should be framed as a wide-range program of re-qualification for each country, Italy in particular. The influx of foreign residents should be turned into an opportunity to put security and social integration at the center of policy action. Schools, non-profit organizations, hospitals, public administration, police, and civil service should join forces to plan a well-ordered society. Immigrants should be assisted through a transitory period of education before gaining full citizenship. Municipalities on the frontier of integration should receive visible fiscal benefits as an incentive to enforce better immigration policies.

Most importantly, this intensive program of re-qualification should be funded directly by the EU. Europe would become a synonym for civil rights and civic duties, as well as an engine for local economic development. Once the European Union makes clear what it requires from immigrants, it will probably have also set the basis for a new EU Constitution.

The economic crisis in the euro-area has damaged Europe's reputation as a driver of prosperity. A depressed economy has turned the hope of a smooth intra- and extra-European integration upside down, shadowed by increasing concerns over future welfare. A defensive attitude has emerged as the primary logic of policy coordination. In fact, the balance between risk reduction at the national level and risk sharing at the common/European level is proving to be a hindrance rather than a stabilizer. Risk reduction is never significant enough to trigger risk sharing. This way of thinking must be abandoned.

If risk sharing is impossible, then it is time to concentrate on something else: basically, on a new balance between increasing opportunity at the national level and opportunity sharing at the European level. A new market for private investment should help circulate capitals from one country to the other in a quest for the best allocation of resources. Capital market union is a first step in the right direction, but new financial institutions, public and private, should act as Euro-area investors in an age where macroeconomic imbalances are mainly caused by excess saving in a few countries and lack of fiscal margins in others.

If public debt mutualization proves politically unacceptable, then pooling private savings could do the trick. Setting up new Pan-European Investment vehicles should become a

priority for the EU Commission's agenda. For Italy in particular, the supply of private foreign investment—and the competition it would engender among countries—should be an opportunity to mold economic legislation at home, turning it into a much more favorable framework for new investors or startups.

These are only a few ideas that could improve the way Italian politicians think and speak about Europe. A head of government who often refers to his previous experience as mayor of Florence should seize the opportunity to build a better narrative of Italian towns and their potential in an integrated European economy. Beyond the suggested tactics and “micro-policies,” there is a greater strategy policymakers must consider. Immigration will remain a major concern for Italian citizens, and there is no way to ignore it. Daily hardships in towns and villages must be confronted without hesitation. Trade and immigration create many losers and their side-effects must be acknowledged and mitigated through a solid social safety-net and a stronger focus on job creation at both the Italian and European level. Eventually, economic growth is the only real remedy for the sense of decline that the middle-class associates with globalization and immigration. Contrary to the wishes of wall-builders, barriers to business must be torn down and pan-European investment vehicles must be employed to bring capital where it is needed.

The whole European rhetoric must become pro-active. There should be no timidity in making the case for political integration in Europe. Public discourse cannot be left to an overheated debate between mainstream and populist parties. The new movements have an obvious interest in polarizing the debate about Europe against the incumbents. However, a binary dialectic at the national level prevents the kind of creative compromise between different countries that had made Europe grow closer and stronger in the past decades. Polarizing the debate on immigration, trade, or economic models is a sure way to scupper the European project. Consequently, the political discourse must rise to the current challenge, moving to a supranational level. Defenders of open and integrated economies need to make their case more vigorously and remind European citizens why closing borders hinders prosperity and modernity. They must highlight that immigration is inescapable given the demographic shift of our societies and the dynamics underway in the rest of the world. Eventually, they must make the case for a more ambitious agenda that contemplates an active geo-strategic role for Europe that would not be possible for individual nations.