



Immigration and the Rise of the European Right

One of the great ironies in European politics today is that German Chancellor Angela Merkel, Pope Francis and other immigration proponents have caused European voters to turn to right-wing political parties to express their anxieties and anger over what is happening in Europe today. Merkel and Pope Francis, as well as other European Union leaders, have encouraged a flood of millions of immigrants into Europe. These immigrants have created social problems, contributing to rising crime rates, unemployment, and growing welfare and educational expenditures. The pro-immigration policies were announced in the name of social justice and humanitarianism, reflective of a liberal society. The consequence, though, has been a backlash by voters across Europe, who have increasingly voted for populist party candidates.

Europe is experiencing far greater political polarization than America. This polarization in Europe threatens the “liberal order” erected by European leaders after the Second World War. While Angela Merkel, Pope Francis and others denounce “intolerance” toward immigrants, many European voters are simply fed up with policies that are disrupting their communities. Voters are not bigoted for worrying about the safety of their families, their own decreasing employment opportunities, and long-established values of what makes for a good society.

Let’s give Merkel, Pope Francis and EU bureaucrats the benefit of the doubt in that they sought to address a humanitarian crisis caused by wars in the Middle East and Africa. Whatever their good intentions, the unintended result is the rupture of the political and social order of Europe. For all their denunciation of demagoguery, bigotry and the threat of fascism, these leaders have created the conditions in which Europe is coming apart today.

Pope Francis presents himself as the conscience of Europe in his vociferous denunciation of anti-immigration sentiment. His rhetoric against anti-immigration views manifests the self-righteousness of a religious leader tone-deaf to the anxieties of the average European. In January 2018, he labeled

anti-immigrant views a “sin” and urged people to overcome their fears that these new arrivals might “disturb the established order” of their local communities.¹ Actually, there is plenty of evidence that these “newly arrived” migrants are already disturbing the “established order.” It is not misplaced anxiety. Moreover, fearing the wave of immigration washing over Europe is not the same as hating immigrants per se, any more than fearing a flood is the same as hating water.

The Misplaced Conscience of Pope Francis

While Pope Francis is quick to denounce anti-immigration rhetoric as demagogic, his own rhetoric is hyperbolic. He decried anti-immigration views as sinful at a special Mass held at St. Peter’s Basilica in early January, attended by several thousand migrants, refugees and immigrants from 49 countries. He called for the new arrivals to “know and respect the laws, the culture and the traditions of countries that take them in,” but he was most vehement in lecturing native Europeans to “open themselves without prejudices to [the immigrants’] rich diversity, to understand the hopes and potential of the newly arrived as well as their fears and vulnerabilities.” He added, “Having doubts and fears is not a sin. The sin is to allow these fears to determine our responses, to limit our choices, to compromise respect and generosity, to feed hostility and rejection.” Elaborating, he said, “The sin is to refuse to encounter the other, the different neighbor,” instead of seeing it as a “privileged opportunity” to encounter God.²

The pope praised the global campaign “Share the Journey” launched by Caritas Internationalis, a Rome-based federation of Catholic charitable agencies that welcome refugees and assist their families. “I encourage you to support this praiseworthy initiative of our solidarity with our many brothers and sisters in need,” he exhorted native Europeans, as “a sign of a Church that tries to be open, inclusive and welcoming.” Widely extending his arms, he declared, “Just like this, arms wide open, ready for a sincere, affectionate, enveloping embrace.”³

The pontiff's calls for generosity toward newly arrived refugees extend beyond just charitable acts. In August 2017 he adjured governments around the world to relax their immigration laws. He urged Catholics to lobby their governments to be more welcoming to migrants and to promote United Nations compacts on immigration and refugees. He was specific in what governments should do: simplify their visa system, stop the detention of underage immigrants, give work permits to refugees and asylum seekers, and guarantee the right of all migrants to practice their religion.⁴ By offering specifics for immigration reform, Pope Francis presents himself not only as a spokesman for the Catholic faithful, but as a policy expert.

Understanding that the calls for border control involve for many an issue of national security, Pope Francis took on the issue directly, placing the safety of refugees and immigrants above national security. "The principle of the human person, firmly stated by my beloved predecessor Benedict XV, obliges us to always prioritize personal safety over national security," he said.⁵ This distinction between national security and personal safety seemingly ignores the problem that without national security, personal safety becomes meaningless.⁶

Pope Francis's New Year's Day address called on global leaders to offer more assistance to migrants and refugees: "It is important that everyone, civil institutions, welfare and ecclesial realities are committed to ensuring refugees, migrants and everyone a future of peace." At the same time, he warned that freedom was "being corroded by the banality of consumerism, the blare of commercials, the stream of empty words and the overpowering waves of empty chatter and loud shouting."⁷ His call to welcome with open hearts and to shun the "banality of consumerism" was directed to citizens in countries already experiencing high unemployment and fiscal crises.

Italian Voters Ignore the Pope

On Election Day in March, Italian voters ignored Pope Francis's message of open borders by voting for anti-immigration populist candidates. On March 4, Italian voters went to the polls to choose more than 900 members of the two houses of parliament. The results turned Italian politics on its head when the Five Star Party, led by Luigi Di Maio, won more than 30 percent of the vote, leaving the party in the driver's seat to form a new coalition. The Five Star Party is decidedly anti-EU and nationalistic. Silvio Berlusconi, the former prime minister of Italy, known for his rude manners, sex parties and corruption, failed to make a political comeback, with his Forza Italia party winning only 14 percent of the vote. The big losers in the election were mainstream center-right and center-left parties. The Democratic Party, a center-right party, garnered only 19 percent of the vote.

Of particular importance, the League, an anti-EU and anti-immigration party, made a stunning comeback under Matteo Salvini by winning nearly 18 percent of the vote and tripling its representation in parliament. This was a dramatic comeback for a party that won only 4 percent of the national vote in the parliamentary elections in 2013.⁸

The Five Star Movement is by far the most popular party in Italy today. Its growth is phenomenal. Formed in 2009 by an Italian comedian, the party took advantage of high unemployment, anti-EU sentiment and the refugee-immigration crisis facing Italy. Its message was nationalistic, populist and anti-establishment.⁹ A coalition government will have to be formed, but it is clear that immigration restriction is a major concern for Italian voters.

Italy has been on the front lines of Europe's migration crisis. A staggering **750,000 seaborne migrants have landed on Italy's shores since 2011**. Italy's foreign population has doubled since 2000.¹⁰ The League's anti-immigration message resonated in its stronghold in the north, where resident foreigners are heavily concentrated, but also picked up strength in the south.

The message sent by Italian voters is that they are sick of globalism, the European Union and mainstream politics as usual. The message of the populist parties—the Five Star Movement and the League—is that Italy needs to be rechristened and Italy-first economic policies pursued. Whether this is possible politically or economically remains uncertain, but the left and center in Italy have clearly stumbled. Media pundits across Europe have portrayed the rise of the populist right as neo-fascist, which is a misleading characterization of what occurred in the Italian vote.¹¹ The appeal of right and center-right parties is to people simply fed up with established political leadership.

Unnoticed by the press is how ineffectual Pope Francis's pro-immigration messaging has been in persuading Italian voters to open up their borders even more to refugees and immigrants. Moreover, the rise of right-wing parties is a Europe-wide phenomenon, found in Germany, France, Scandinavia, Austria and Central and Eastern Europe.

Merkel and German Populism

In September, German Chancellor Angela Merkel won a fourth term to lead her country's government, but her victory was marred by a precipitate fall in her party's support and the astounding rise of the right-wing Alternative for Germany (AfD), an anti-immigrant, anti-Islam, Euroskeptic party that took 13 percent of the vote. After months of negotiations, Merkel finally formed a coalition government in March.

The rise of the AfD stunned the political class in Germany. Formed only four years ago, the AfD took strong—sometimes

intemperate—positions on immigration and the threat posed by Islamic extremism. Not only did AfD candidates pick up 94 seats in the German parliament, the Bundestag; Merkel's party, the Christian Democratic Party, and its Bavarian sister party, the Christian Social Union, received an embarrassingly small 41.5 percent of the vote. Both parties declined in voter support since the last election in 2013.

Merkel's response to the rise of the AfD was simply: "AfD presents an extraordinary challenge for Germany. We need to listen to their voters." Yes, Merkel needs to listen to German voters upset by the disorder being caused by newly arrived immigrants, evidenced in rising crime rates, welfare costs, and cities and villages unable to house, educate or integrate these new arrivals.

The leaders of AfD were jubilant in their gains. "We have arrived," Alice Weidel, the openly gay AfD co-leader and former investment banker, told AfD supporters. (AfD opposes gay marriage.)¹² The party had begun to make gains beginning in 2015-16 when Merkel opened Germany's borders to more than one million refugees, mostly coming from Syria and Afghanistan. Estimates are that AfD grabbed more than one million votes from Merkel's Christian Democratic Party.

Anti-Migration Wave Throughout Europe

The political upheaval caused by the anti-immigrant voter backlash has occurred throughout Europe. France, Austria, the Czech Republic, Poland and Hungary are experiencing similar expressions by voters wary of the inflow of immigrants into their countries. Anti-immigration parties within these countries differ in platforms and even ideology, but a common thread runs through their campaign rhetoric: Leaders have failed to protect the nation from this flood of immigrants.

The political establishments in these countries have responded in various ways to voter discontent.¹³ Merkel in her campaign began to temper her earlier strong open-border stance. In France, President Emmanuel Macron has walked a fine line on immigration. On the one hand he told the French people, "These [immigrants] are human beings to whom we have a duty of humanity. You need to be exemplary, and you need to respect the dignity of each individual."¹⁴ At the same time he has defended his interior minister for conducting searches of illegal migrants in emergency shelters and stepping up deportations. In addition, he has castigated charitable organizations for encouraging illegal migrants to come to France.

Macron recently came out in support for legislation that drastically reduces the time asylum seekers have to appeal a deportation order from 30 days to 15 days and increases

the maximum detention period for an asylum seeker from 45 days to 115 days. This proposal caused left-wing pundits to denounce Macron for capitulating to xenophobia, but Macron is an astute politician who does not need Marine Le Pen and the National Front to see which way the political winds are blowing in his country.

Central and Eastern Europe Feels Pressure

The European left and the political establishment have worked themselves into a frenzy of lambasting what they see as xenophobia sweeping the continent. When the new ruling coalition in Austria announced in late December that it was implementing a strong anti-immigration policy, the European left's hysteria went up a notch. The upstart Freedom Party, led by 31-year-old Sebastian Kurz, redrafted migration legislation from scratch, making a clear distinction between immigration and asylum. Immigration policy is to be based on merit to meet the country's labor needs, while asylum should be limited. Critics warned that if this legislation were enacted it would be challenged in the European courts.¹⁵ Kurz has been careful not to overtly flout the European Union's refugee resettlement policy, but he is proposing tough new policies.

Anti-immigration sentiment pervades Eastern European politics. In the Czech Republic, Poland and Hungary, anti-immigration politics is ascendant. In the recent elections in the Czech Republic, Milos Zeman won reelection by attacking his opponent, Jiri Drahos, as welcoming immigrants. Zeman won workers in the traditional sectors of industry, agriculture, construction and the crafts. The response by the European left to Zeman's victory was predictable. Writing for the Green Foundation, a European environmental think tank, Heinrich Stiftung captured the shock when he wrote in an op-ed, "Many who followed the course of the Czech presidential elections during the past few weeks in detail must feel that they are trapped in a nightmare."¹⁶

Sending the Message

European voters are sending a message to the political and cultural elite: We care about our nation and want the immigration flood stopped. No doubt, a few unsavory political opportunists have seized upon anti-immigration sentiment to advance their parties and careers, using authoritarian and demagogic language.

Nonetheless, many average European voters appear to have a better sense of what is at stake than most of the political and cultural establishment. There is plenty of emotion in European politics these days—much like American politics. Voters' concerns about illegal immigration and uncontrolled asylum

policies are branded as xenophobic, racist and fascist, but there is much more common sense being expressed by average voters than the global elite seems to understand. For all their talk—for all of Pope Francis’s rhetoric—of the need for tolerance, welcoming immigrants, and global citizenship—average people are saying “enough is enough.” They see what is happening, and toleration, religious liberty, the public good and national security cut both ways.

1 Associated Press, “Pope Francis: It’s a Sin if Fear Makes Us Hostile to Migrants,” January 15, 2018.

2 Ibid.

3 Ibid.

4 “Pope Francis: Put Migrant Safety Before National Security,” *Catholic Herald*, August 21, 2017.

5 Ibid.

6 For Pope Francis’s many comments over the last year on immigration, see Diana Montagna, “Pope Francis on Welcoming Migrants and Refugees with Both Generosity and Prudence,” <https://aletea.org/2017/01/31/pope-francis-on-welcoming-migrants-and-refugees-with-both-generosity-and-prudence/>.

7 Lauren Sard-Moorhouse and Livia Borghese, “Pope Francis on Migrants: ‘Please Do Not Extinguish the Hope in their Hearts,’” CNN, January 2, 2018.

8 Eric Sylvers and Pietro Lombardi, “Anti-Immigrant Mood Swells in Italy,” *Wall Street Journal*, March 8, 2018.

9 Federico Manfredi Firmia, “Five Star Movement Has Earned the Right to Govern Italy,” *The Guardian*, March 7, 2018; also, “Italian Elections 2018—Full Results,” *The Guardian*, March 5, 2018.

10 Ibid.

11 Joel Weickgenant, “Italy Reboots,” *Real Clear Politics*, March 6, 2018.

12 Eric Reguly, “Merkel Victory Marred by Rise of Germany’s Far-Right,” *Globe and Mail*, September 24, 2017. Also, Jacob Heilbrunn, “Don’t Blame Angela Merkel for the Rise of the Right in Germany,” *Los Angeles Times*, September 28, 2015; Sara Malm, “Desperate Germany Offers Failed Asylum Seekers 3000 Euros if They Voluntarily Return to Their Home Countries,” *Daily Mail*, December 3, 2017; and Amanda Taub, “What the Far Right’s Rise May Mean for Germany’s Future,” *New York Times*, September 26, 2017.

13 Philip Oltermann, “Can Europe’s New Xenophobes Reshape the Continent?” *The Guardian*, February 2, 2018.

14 Adam Nossiter, “Macron Defends Migration Policy in France, Walking a Fine Line,” *New York Times*, January 16, 2018.

15 Leonid Bershidsky, “Why Austria’s Anti-Immigrant Experiment is Worth Watching,” *Bloomberg*, December 18, 2017.

16 Heinrich Stiftung, “The Nightmare of the Czech Presidential Elections,” *The Green Political Foundation*, February 1, 2018. Also, see Jan Twining, “The Fight Against European Populism Is Far from Over,” *Foreign Policy*, February 1, 2018; Nick Miller, “Immigration the ‘Phantom Menace’ Dividing Czech Republic Voters,” *The Sidney Morning*, January 20, 2018; and Karel Janicek, “Czech Election Result: Right-wing Populist Incumbent Milos Zeman Narrowly Defeats Scientist Jiri Drahos,” *The Independent*, January 27, 2018.

The Most Important Person on Earth is a Mother

Cardinal Mindszenty’s respect for mothers was deep. Below is the Cardinal’s quote, available on a 5 1/2" x 3" card in color.



The Most Important Person on earth is a mother. She cannot claim the honor of having built Notre Dame Cathedral. She need not. She has built something more magnificent than any cathedral—a dwelling for an immortal soul, the tiny perfection of her baby’s body ... The angels have not been blessed with such a grace. They cannot share in God’s creative miracle to bring new saints to Heaven. Only a human mother can. Mothers are closer to God the Creator than any other creature; God joins forces with mothers in

performing this act of creation ... What on God’s good earth is more glorious than this: to be a mother?

—*Joseph Cardinal Mindszenty*

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