

The new Illiberal International

The dream of a united, integrated Europe is collapsing under the pressure of mass migration and the rise of a global populist movement.

By [John Lloyd](#)

The two dominant revolutionary movements of the 20th century both had “internationals”: organisations that brought together national revolutionary parties, sought to co-ordinate their policies and activities and provided an ideological compass. We are now seeing the creation of a third international in the 21st century, the so-called illiberal, or populist, international, and it is still unclear if it will be revolutionary.

The Communist or Third International (also the Comintern), founded in 1919, emerged out of the failure of the First and the Second Internationals. The First, otherwise known as the International Workingmen’s Association (founded in 1864, with the participation of Karl Marx), ended in acrimony in 1876. The Second was formed in 1889 and collapsed in 1916 after most of the members defied their own commitment to oppose a capitalist war. The Communist International was founded by Lenin on an explicit commitment to “struggle by all available means, including armed force, for the overthrow of the international bourgeoisie and the creation of an international Soviet republic as a transition stage to the complete abolition of the state”. The creature of the Soviet Communist Party, it had authority over the other national parties struggling to be born, or to survive.

The fascist “international”, or the “Axis”, grew out of a treaty between Nazi Germany and Italy in October 1936, and took its name from a subsequent declaration by Benito Mussolini that all European states would, from then on, rotate on the axis created by the treaty. In November of the same year, Germany signed an “anti-Comintern Pact” with imperial Japan. This was joined by Italy in 1937 to create a Tripartite Pact. In 1940 the treaties were transformed into a military alliance, and the three states agreed on active hostility to the established Western powers, plutocracy and communism.

The Illiberal International remains more embryonic than established – though, with either deliberate provocation or youthful ignorance, the Austrian

chancellor, Sebastian Kurz, who is 31, pronounced an anti-immigration “Axis of the Willing” among Austria, Italy and the Bavarian Christian Social Union (CSU). The CSU’s president, Horst Seehofer, is also Germany’s interior minister, and at bitter odds with Angela Merkel and her Christian Democratic Union (CDU) over his demand to close German borders to migrants.

Three figures stand out in this emerging international: Kurz of Austria; Viktor Orbán, prime minister of Hungary; and Matteo Salvini, the Italian interior minister and leader of the Lega (formerly the Northern League), which on 1 June this year formed a coalition government with the Five Star Movement.

Kurz, whose Popular Party is in a governing coalition with the far right Freedom Party, took over the presidency of the EU in July, under the motto of “A Europe that Protects”. In his introductory speech to the European parliament, he named “security and protection against illegal migration” as priorities, calling for “a paradigm shift in our migration policy... we need to focus more on safeguarding our external borders”.

Kurz’s position on immigration hardened as he rose through government ranks in the early 2010s, as he showed an increasing determination to make it the centre of his politics. At the height of the refugee crisis in Europe in 2015 he was foreign minister, but refused to join other politicians in welcoming refugees at the train station. “It’s the wrong signal to criminal smugglers that people who gave them that much money and made it across the Mediterranean are greeted with smiles from European politicians,” he said.

Kurz’s understanding that immigration was the electorate’s main concern propelled him to the leadership of his party. Austrian borders are now largely closed against migrants, and the government has been active in “Austrianising” Islam – sermons in mosques must be in German and foreign funding of the mosques is prohibited. Kurz’s purpose is to ensure integration of Muslims already within Europe’s borders – and to stop others coming.

He wants to build bridges – another explicit aim in his introductory speech – but he leans towards harder solutions than Chancellor Merkel or France’s Emmanuel Macron. Fearful that the deal between Merkel and Seehofer to build holding centres for migrants on the Austrian border will mean more seeking entry to his country, Kurz intends to strengthen border controls. His longer-term aim is to seal as far as possible the external borders of the EU, a project achieving a growing consensus – though with little thought and

preparation given to addressing the poverty and conflicts that impel the migrants to come to Europe in the first place.

The phrase “illiberal democracy” was taken from a speech which Viktor Orbán, now 55, gave to a Fidesz party summer school four years ago this month. Though he did not use the phrase “illiberal democracy” (according to the English translation) he made it clear that he saw liberal democracies as increasingly out-dated. Prefacing a passage on the failures of liberalism after the 2008 financial crash, he said that “we are going to live in a different world from now on... [there is] a race to figure out a way of organising communities, a state that is most capable of making a nation competitive”.

He talked of states that “are not Western, not liberal, not liberal democracies, maybe not even democracies, and yet are making nations successful. Today, the stars of international analyses are Singapore, China, India, Turkey, Russia.”

All but one of these, Russia, have forecasts of medium to high growth in 2018: India 7.4 per cent, China 6.4 per cent, Singapore 2.5-3.5 per cent, Turkey 4.1 per cent.

In order to place Hungary among the winners, Orbán will steer away from the losers. In his summer school speech, he said that, “We are searching for... ways of parting with western European dogmas... [and for] the form of organising a community, that is capable of making us competitive in this great world-race.” Illiberalism, then, is not primarily a political choice, but an economic choice with political consequences. Hungary’s many critics see these consequences as a narrowing of democratic and civil options; a more controlled judiciary; an electoral system skewed towards privileging Fidesz; ruthless and untruthful campaigning; and attacks on civil society, especially NGOs and on the news media.

Orbán believes that the centre right in Europe is tainted by liberalism: a taint particularly strong in the Christian Democratic parties of the Netherlands and Scandinavia as well as Merkel’s CDU. Apparently serious about a decay of religious values, he has for some time talked of a Christian rather than illiberal democracy; one shorn of the damage liberalism has done to Western parties bearing that name. In a radio interview after his election victory in April this

year, Orbán said that, “We are working on building an old-school Christian democracy, rooted in European traditions ... we believe in the importance of the nation, and in Hungary we do not want to yield ground to any supranational business or political empire.”

In claiming ownership of “old-school” Christian democracy, Orbán invokes the period when it emerged in the 1870s into active politics in Europe as the Vatican, and Protestant faiths, sought to inculcate religious values as moral guidance to both workers and capitalists, and to use these values as a prophylactic against socialism.

Wojciech Przybylski, a Polish writer and director of media group the Res Publica Foundation, says that Hungary is locked in a new culture war. “Orbán is using the memory of an idea of Christian law against the barbarians from the former east. And now, he’s saying, we must defend Europe against the threat from the West – even if people are not aware of the threat.”

The liberal, pro-EU intelligentsia in central Europe are deeply hostile to the political practice both of Orbán and of Jaroslaw Kaczynski, leader of Poland’s governing Law and Justice Party and the dominant force in the country’s politics. Kaczynski is an apparently devout Catholic and operates in a country still strongly attached to Catholicism. Orbán is a member of the Hungarian Reformed Church, in the Calvinist tradition, but “Hungary is one of the least religious countries in Europe,” according to Anna Kende, social psychologist at the Eötvös Loránd University in Budapest (Orbán’s alma mater). Orbán’s crusade would seem to lack, as the hymn has it, soldiers of the cross who would “stand up, stand up for Jesus”.

The rector of Budapest’s Central European University – which was founded by George Soros and has been threatened with closure by the Hungarian government – is writer and former Canadian Liberal Party leader Michael Ignatieff. He says of Orbán’s new attachment that “if he invokes Christian democracy, he must be aware that it’s a substantial ideological movement. It was a builder of postwar Europe, with a very honourable tradition. The question is – how far is he returning to that tradition? It was a liberal movement in everything. It’s perhaps a Gaullist Europe he sees – a ‘Europe des patries’ – also an authentic European tradition, in which you respect the constitutional norms and rules.”

Kende pays close attention to Fidesz's strategies. Liberals, she believes – following the work done by the American scholar Jonathon Haidt – privilege individual moral goods such as justice, fairness and reciprocity. Conservatives may do so too, but often value more strongly loyalty, respect, sanctity and authority. Much of what liberals consider to be bad about conservatives is for the latter expressions of goodness.

Speaking at a meeting of Hungary's embattled Europe Society in Budapest in June, Kende said that Fidesz had, in its years in government since 2010, instituted national consultations on political and social issues, gathering peoples' views on how the country should be governed, with questions slanted to achieve the desired responses. These responses showed strongly conservative positions on immigration, on minorities and on crime, and also showed disapproval of fellow citizens who didn't share the same views, while praising values of group solidarity, and support of strong government authority. She said that "conservatives who profess these virtues count in the eyes of the government here – because they sustain the group. Liberals have individual moral positions, but they are not seen as binding the group together." Kende says that in the past three years, these insights have been used not only to define who is within the national group but also "to identify some 'outsiders' that threaten us – such as the European Union and immigrants."

Orbán's steady concentration on building a party that fills much of the political space in Hungary has made him an attractive example to other authoritarian leaders and populist-nationalists. At a rally in May this year in Budapest, Steve Bannon, the populist agitator and former adviser to Donald Trump, said of the Hungarian premier that he was "Trump before Trump", and emphasised his religious-political purpose. "What matters is the survival of the Judeo-Christian West," Bannon said. "The West does not have to decline. This is not a law of physics. It can be reversed."

Matteo Salvini, who is 45, though "only" a deputy prime minister and interior minister, has quickly emerged as the most powerful force in Italian politics. The party he leads, the Lega, came first in the March election among the three parties making up the right-wing coalition. This meant – as Salvini interpreted it – that he spoke for the right, which together received 37 per cent of the votes

while the party with which the Lega formed a coalition, the Five Star Movement, received more than 32 per cent.

The Five Star leader, Luigi di Maio, only a year older than Kurz, at 32, claimed the premiership, as leader of the most successful party; Salvini did so too as leader of the winning coalition. After protracted negotiations they compromised on Giuseppe Conte, a professor of private law at Florence University, who had no experience of government: Salvini and di Maio took the titles of vice premiers. Conte's dependence on the two leaders means that the vice premiers must inevitably joust for primacy and Salvini, head of a party that has nearly three decades of governing experience at regional and national level (as part of coalitions), has emerged as the top dog early on.

Tall, burly and with a short black beard, Salvini is a political bruiser. He seldom wears a tie – appearances mean a great deal in Italy – and he speaks forcefully and dominates a room or a meeting in a way that the slighter di Maio does not. But it is from his responsibilities as interior minister that Salvini derives real power: in charge of immigration policy, he has from his first day in office used his position to trumpet a determination to stop the large (though now much diminished) number of migrants crossing the Mediterranean from North Africa. More than a thousand have died in attempting the crossing this year, with 200 people drowning in early July alone.

Italy is on the front line of Europe's migration crisis. More than 700,000 migrants have entered the country over the past five years; many thousands are lodged in hostels and empty apartments, at an annual cost, according to Salvini, of €5bn. Salvini said that, "I will stop any more migrants being ferried to Italy by sea from Libya and I will deport all of the 500,000 illegal migrants already arrived from Libya by sea who are not refugees – the lot." His adamant stance is popular: from the 17 per cent the Lega obtained in the March election, polls now show it at around 30 per cent, a point or two above the Five Star Movement and far above any other party. It is also a source of gathering dissent: after banning NGO rescue ships from landing in Italy, this month he ordered that a private Italian vessel with 67 migrants on board that the transport minister Danilo Toninelli, a Five Star member, had allowed to dock in the Sicilian port of Trapani, be prevented from disembarking while alleged violent conduct was investigated. However, in a rare intervention Italy's president, Sergio Mattarella, learning of Salvini's order, called Prime

Minister Conte to ask him to release the migrants – which he did, to Salvini’s “regret and amazement”.

One recent hot July day in Pontida, a small town in the region of Lombardy, south of the foothills of the Alps, the Lega gathered for its annual *fiesta*. Pontida’s claim to historical fame – and the reason why it had been chosen for the annual celebration – is that in the 12th century the Lombard League, an alliance of nobles supported by the Pope, took an oath in the town to oppose the Holy Roman Emperor, Frederick I. Its forces stood against the emperor’s numerically superior forces at Legnano – and, after renewing their oath, won. The war wagon round which the infantry gathered – known as a “caroccio” – is the familiar name of the Lega. The symbolism is of resistance to outsiders, conjuring up a hardy northern people leading Italy’s struggles for independence.

Salvini, facing a wildly enthusiastic crowd, was exalted. The triumphant last line of the celebrated “Nessun Dorma” aria from Puccini’s opera *Turandot* – “All’ alba vincero!” – provided an overture to a speech which promised that the Lega would be in power for 30 years and that “in the next European elections [in May 2019] there will be a referendum between the Europe of the banks, finance, immigration and unemployment and the Europe of the people, and of work”. There would, Salvini said, be “a European-wide ‘league of leagues’, an alliance of populists, a word that I take as a compliment, which brings together all the free and sovereign movements which wish to defend their own peoples and their own borders... in order to win it was necessary [for us] to unite Italy, and it will be necessary to unite Europe... the opposition now are the other powers, European states”.

Here was a declaration of intent and indeed of war: a determination to overthrow the current European order, sponsoring the emergence of fraternal parties, cleaving to the aim to salvage a “Europe des patries” from what Salvini has long seen as the doomed enterprise to realise the vision of the EU’s founders, and create what Emmanuel Macron calls “a sovereign state”.

Steve Bannon’s identification of leaders who would cause populism to sweep over Europe brings him often to Italy, which he says he has made “his

headquarters” for developing “the infrastructure, globally, for the global populist movement”. Salvini admires Trump, and in June he said that the American president had kept most of his pledges made during the election campaign.

The forward march of the European Union’s project is not just halted at present: it is in reverse. In a comment to the *New York Times*, Thomas Kleine-Brockhoff, director of the Berlin office of the German Marshall Fund, said that, “The four freedoms of the EU can no longer be enforced. We can’t agree on freedom of movement of refugees and immigrants; the whole system has ceased to function.”

President Macron so far has been blocked in his quest for greater European integration. Mark Rutte, the Dutch prime minister, spoke for most of the smaller EU members when, in early March in Berlin, he said that the EU was not an “unstoppable train speeding towards federalism... The recipe for a larger cake is not centralised bailout funds and printing more money.” He spoke for less, not more Europe.

As greater European integration flounders, as immigration fears rise even as immigration falls, as populism becomes a badge of honour and a pole of attraction, and as serious people such as former US secretary of state Madeleine Albright warn of a new authoritarian era, so the Illiberal International picks up speed: a war wagon, its hour come at last, hurtling towards Brussels.

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