
SALVINI AND KACZYNSKI - THE NEW 'AXIS' POWERS?

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It is a measure of how much Europe's political centre of gravity has shifted that the recent meeting between Matteo Salvini and Jaroslaw Kaczynski in Warsaw has been a major political event in the EU.

Only a few years ago the meeting between the leader of the Italian League party and the leader of the Polish Law and Justice party would have been little more than a get-together of nationalist politicians, isolated at home and uninfluential abroad.

Now, Salvini and Kaczynski are de facto leaders of their countries, and in bringing together the strongest politicians of what will be after the UK's departure the third- and fifth-largest member states of the EU, their meeting was in effect a diplomatic summit with important repercussions.

'Axis' powers?

Salvini's proclamation that Italy and Poland would form an 'axis' against Franco-German dominance was no bombast.

Coordination between populists in power in Italy, Poland and elsewhere could be crucial in shaping the outlook of the EU for the next five years.

After May's European elections, these governments will decide together with other member-states who will occupy the posts of commission president and head of the EU external action service, as well as co-author the mandate of the new commission, potentially pushing for more powers to be returned to national capitals and more focus to be devoted to migration and border protection.

But the prospect of deeper cooperation between nationalists in Rome and Warsaw points to a broader reality for European politics: the fact that the direction of the EU is increasingly determined by the ability of political leaders to promote national agendas by recasting them as European ideological projects.

In a Europe where national political arenas are increasingly intertwined due to the impact of issues of continental importance – the economy, immigration, terrorism – politicians' ability to address audiences beyond their national electorates raises their countries' negotiating heft in EU institutions.

Today's political landscape of the EU then is neither the federalist vision of a supranational public

sphere inhabited by a European demos, nor the classical model of intergovernmental diplomacy between sovereign states.

Rather, the EU is developing into a field of ideological diplomacy, where national foreign policy and transnational partisan and ideological links cut across or reinforce each other in complex ways, and national leaders willingly blur the roles of diplomat and party operative.

The practical impact of this infusion of foreign policy with the logic of ideological advocacy and party politicking is twofold.

Populists need a platform

First, it points to the evolving agenda of populists and Eurosceptics, who are slowly realising that the goal of dismantling the EU is not only unrealistic, costly and unpopular, but also deprives them of valuable opportunities to accumulate political capital and exert influence.

For politicians like Salvini, the political stage on which they perform today is transnational, and this allows them to pursue in tandem the dual goal of dominating their countries' domestic politics and increasing their influence in EU proceedings.

Second, it forces pro-EU parties to reconsider their own ideological diplomacy.

Building impactful cross-border political coalitions is a task that requires serious planning, perseverance and hard-nosed pragmatism, as the inglorious thwarting of Emmanuel Macron's ambition to launch a pan-European liberal movement has shown.

It is ironic that, in comparison to Macron, nationalists like Salvini and Hungary's Viktor Orban have proved much more adept at navigating this intersection of foreign policy with transnational coalition-building and ideological advocacy.

Nationalists' cross-border entrepreneurship should also motivate mainstream parties to rethink the visibility and attractiveness of their own existing structures of transnational cooperation.

Despite efforts like the Spitzenkandidat process to raise the visibility of transnational political competition between mainstream party families, European party federations are still confined mostly to the role of facilitators of communication and networking of national political leaders in EU institutions rather than the expression of distinct ideological visions for Europe.

Even though politicians of the centre-right and the centre-left often call themselves 'pro-European', in practice the political ambitions of most rarely go beyond managing their domestic political scenes.

Yet, as Salvini and company take their anti-EU challenge from the national to the European stage, mainstream politicians will also have to think, act and communicate more in ways that resonate and inspire beyond their national political systems.

For European politicians today, mainstream and populist alike, the promotion of their own and their states' interests in the EU can no longer be divorced from the ability to articulate these in ideological terms that transcend national borders.

It is a paradox of today's EU that the augmented role of national interests in the politics of European integration also means that political strategy and ideological advocacy are becoming European in scope, content and ambition more than ever before.

Angelos Chrysosgelos is a fellow in the research cluster Global Populism/Challenges to Democracy of the Weatherhead Center for International Affairs, Harvard University

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