

# Rise of anti-immigration politics in Italy, Austria

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**T**he rise of nativist anti-immigration politics looks to continue throughout Europe into 2017 following the resignation of Italian prime minister Matteo Renzi and the rise of Austria's far-right Freedom Party.

Renzi announced he would be stepping down after a referendum defeat December 4th, with far-right parties portraying a popular "No" vote against his proposed constitutional reform as an important victory for populist anti-establishment politics. The anti-establishment Five Star Movement and anti-immigration Northern League party look set to dominate post-Renzi Italian politics.

Both parties are opposed to the eurozone and current levels of immigration from the Middle East and North Africa but not Italian membership of the European Union itself.

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Italy has seen unprecedented illegal immigration across the Mediterranean from Libya. An estimated 27,500 migrants and refugees landed on Italian shores in October, the highest recorded monthly figure and more than twice as many as in September, European border agency Frontex reported. Figures such as this are expected to increase.

France's National Front leader Marine Le Pen, an ally of the Northern League who has also spoken out against immigration, posted on Twitter: "The Italians have disavowed the EU and Renzi. We must listen to this thirst for freedom of nations."

Five Star Movement leader Beppe Grillo, a former comedian

who founded the party in 2009, called for an early election before the end of the year following Renzi's resignation. Italy's next elections are scheduled for 2018.

The Five Star Movement has become increasingly popular over the past five years, receiving the third highest number of votes in the 2012 local elections and winning the second most popular votes at the 2013 general election.

"Democracy was the winner," Grillo wrote in a post-vote blog. Many Italian political analysts said the Five Star Movement, thanks to its broad appeal among Italy's working and middle classes, could easily emerge on top at forthcoming elections possibly leading to a change in Italy's response to immigration.

"The people have won," tweeted Matteo Salvini, head of the anti-immigration Northern League party following the referendum vote. The rise of populist anti-establishment politics in Italy, as represented by the Five Star Movement and the Northern League, echoes the rise of similar politics such as the UK Independence Party in Britain, the National Front in France and Donald Trump in the United States.

There has been a push back from EU officials following Brexit and the clear rise of nativist politics not just in the United Kingdom and France but a number of other EU countries following mass immigration amid the worst refugee crisis since the end of the second world war.

EU leaders celebrated the defeat of far-right Freedom Party candidate Norbert Hofer in Austria's presidential elections as a rare ray of light for traditional mainstream politics. Former Green Party leader Alexander Van der Bellen pledged to be an "open-minded, liberal-minded and above all a pro-European president".

Austrian Green party politician Werner Kogler described Van der Bellen's victory as a "small global turning of the tide in these uncertain, not to say hysterical and even stupid times".

Despite failing to secure the presidency, which is a largely ceremonial



Beppe Grillo, the founder of the anti-establishment Five Star Movement, talks during a march in support of the 'No' vote in the upcoming constitutional reform referendum in Rome, on November 26th.

(Reuters)

position in Austria, the far-right anti-immigration and eurosceptic Freedom Party was upbeat about the future. "We made history yesterday. 2017 will be the year of the Freedom Party! Our time comes," said Freedom Party leader Heinz-Christian Strache.

Many liberals and ethnic minorities have expressed concern about the rise of Austria's Freedom Party, particularly towards its stance on immigration. Defeated presidential candidate Norbert Hofer had been particularly outspoken against Islam in his campaign. "Islam is not a part of Austria," he said.

Such Islamophobic statements had gained Hofer a following among many Austrians, which is also witnessing an unprecedented migration crisis. Vienna pushed

through a controversial law in April restricting the rights of asylum and allowing claimants to be rejected at the border. The heightened tensions surrounding Austria's migration crisis has led to the popular emergence of anti-immigration right-wing views as espoused by the Freedom Party.

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"As a lone party against the Social Democrats, the People's Party, the Greens, other parties, the entire media and several major businessmen in the country, we still took

some 2 million votes. That puts us in pole position for the parliamentary elections," Anton Mahdalik, a Freedom Party councillor in Vienna, told the Daily Telegraph, a British newspaper.

Again, Le Pen, the standard-bearer for far-right politics in mainland Europe, was on hand to beat the anti-establishment drum. "Congratulations to the Freedom Party who fought with courage. The next legislative elections will see their victory," she tweeted after the vote.

The next Austrian parliamentary elections are to take place before 2018 with the Freedom Party eyeing an increase on its 2013 third-place finish.

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## Will Europe accommodate Russia's rise?

Viewpoint



Francis Ghilès

**B**ritain's impending withdrawal from the European Union and the election of Donald Trump to the presidency of the United States foretell a shift in the unity against Russia that has been a hallmark of international Western policy since the end of the second world war.

How dramatic such a shift might be is anybody's guess. How far might Russia's sphere of influence extend? What will the consequences be on countries that escaped from the former Soviet domination less than a generation ago? How will this affect the European Union's already weakened capacity for foreign policy-making?

Over the past decade, Europe has seen states on its eastern, but even more so its southern, borders collapse. When EU leaders offered membership to Poland, the Czech Republic, Hungary and Slovenia – public opinion in Western Europe agreed. The continent's economy was growing strongly and many French and Italian voters viewed this as the reunification of the Christian Europe of yesteryear.

At the same time, many of them were hostile to the European

Union's offer to Turkey to join. Incorporating Eastern European countries to maintain a stable post-war European order was a policy promoted by the political establishment in Brussels, London and Paris.

Voters in France and Italy were far more reticent when, after 2003, the European Union strongly backed by the United States and Poland, sought to promote economic cooperation with and reform of Ukraine; future membership in NATO was also on the table. The mood of rebellion against further European integration, viewed as an establishment project, explains the French vote against the Treaty of Maastricht in 2005. French rulers behaved as if nothing had happened.

As the financial crisis of 2008 took its toll of misery across the European Union, interest in further engagement in Ukraine dropped sharply. In 2015, a Pew poll determined that slight majorities in France, Germany and Italy said their countries should not uphold their treaty obligation to defend an eastern NATO ally – already an EU member – should it be attacked by Russia.

Voters, particularly conservative and nationalist ones, had by then come to see terrorism and large flows of immigration from southern rim Mediterranean countries as a far greater threat than Russia's increasingly

aggressive policy. The bloody mayhem that has engulfed the Middle East since 2011 has allowed Russian President Vladimir Putin to morph from a harsh dictator to a visionary euro-sceptic leader who likes to see Orthodox Russia as a bulwark against radical Islam and terrorism.

More and more conservative voters are inclined to agree. Politicians take notice. It bears remembering that Nicolas Sarkozy, that archetype opportunist, ran as a pragmatic pro-American candidate for president in 2007 but as a pro-Russian populist in his failed bid this autumn. François Fillon, who will lead the French right into battle next spring has, for more than a decade, offered to reach out to Russia and he knows French electors are more concerned about immigration and terrorism than about what Russia gets up to in Ukraine.

He is not alone among senior European politicians in saying that Russia's interests must be taken into account. The recently elected presidents of Moldova and Bulgaria share his view as does the Czech head of state, who recently expressed his gratitude to the Russians for having rescued his country from Nazism and criticised EU sanctions as "nonsense".

Hungarian President Viktor Orbán, who resents EU interference in his own affairs, is pushing ahead with plans for a Russian-built nuclear power plant despite

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opposition from Brussels. He constantly rails against Islam and immigrants. Eastern Europe increasingly mirrors Russia's social conservatism and its people are returning to their older identity as Christians and as Slavs. The Kremlin has done a good job of exploiting this wave of pan-Slavic revival.

A cloud appears to hang over the future of NATO as inauguration day approaches in Washington but until Trump's policy towards the European Union, NATO and Russia becomes clearer, it is impossible to speak of a dramatic shift in European policy towards Russia.

The problem faced by many in Eastern Europe is nonetheless acute: Should they continue to meet Russian aggression and intimidation with sanctions and eastward military deployments? Should they flip alliances? More realistically, should they accommodate Russia's rise?

Abandoning sanctions would spell the end of the West's policy of trying to put an end to the war in Ukraine. If European states scrambled individually to cut a deal with the Kremlin, that would spell concessions in Syria and grant Russia greater influence in Eastern Europe. Where Putin's ambitions will stop is anyone's guess.

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Events have allowed Putin to morph to a visionary euro-sceptic leader.