



Double Degree Thesis in International Relations and European Union Studies

**From the Economic Crisis to the Rise of Political Populism in Western Europe:
Analysis of middle-class decline, demographic decline, and migration crisis as socio-political
causes of the rise of Right-Wing Populism**

Prof. Paolo Garonna

SUPERVISOR

Vittorio Sgobba

CANDIDATE

Prof. Maria Rita Testa

CO-SUPERVISOR

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Table of Contents

Introduction 5

Chapter 1 1960 to 2008: 'From Baby Boom Society to the Zero Growth Continent' 13

1.1.Europe's society is changing social revolution in Europe, economic boom, urbanization and women's emancipation..... 13

1.2. Countertrend Society
Case Study: The European Bible Belts and localized Demographic Boom 17

1.3. Economic crisis of 2008 and SarsCov19 crisis: the economy and private wealth as paradigms to birthrate and welfare..... 20

Limits and difficulties: The gender gap and the center-periphery clash as limiting factors of socio-economic development..... 25

1.4. Welfare State and Birth: Family Policies in Western Europe and Family Policies in Italy.... 29

1.5. The consequences of SarsCov19 on unemployment, income and consumption: the Italian case, structural problems, advice and future remedies..... 32

Chapter 2 The Economic and Financial Crisis of 2008: Turning Point of the Decline of the European Middle Class 38

2.1. The Financial Crisis of 2008: Collapse of household consumption, rising unemployment and demographic decline 38

2.2. The migrations of the 1990s-2000s in Italy and their impact on welfare and birth rate..... 44

2.3. The second migration crisis of 2011: "impact on demography and Welfare in Western Europe..... 46

2.4. Economic Populism: Immigration and Globalization as Factors in the Reawakening of Economic Sovereignty and Protectionism in Europe..... 49

Chapter 3 The Fear of Economic and Demographic Decline in Europe: How Political Nativism went from being an ultranationalist ideology to a common substratum of right-wing populism..... 51

3.1. Analysis of the concept of "People" in right-wing populism: traditional supporters and new proselytes..... 56

3.2. Right-wing Populism in the Rise: Case Study 1: "Populism on the rise: the 2020 Veneto regional elections" 59

Case Study 2: "Right-wing populism grows where it has never before taken root: 2020 Regional Elections in Tuscany" 60

**3.3. The Bias between Populism and Christian Fundamentalism: the Christian-conservative electorate prefers Christian-social/Conservative Christian parties over right-wing populists
Case Study: Electoral Behavior of Calvinist Dutchmen in the Netherlands..... 64**

Chapter 4 The Political and Propaganda Methods of Right-wing Populism	67
4.1. Social Networks and Populism: A Key Pair for the Success of Right-Wing Populism in Europe.....	71
4.2. The Heterogeneity of Populism: How Populist Themes vary as Countries vary Case Study: <u>Lega and Fratelli d'Italia vs Front National election campaign in France</u>	74
4.3. Germany's 2017 Federal Elections and Italy's 2018 General Elections: limitations and successes of populism	77
4.4. The Heterogeneity of Populism: How Populist themes vary as Countries vary Case Study: Lega electoral campaign vs Front National presidential campaign in France	78
4.5. Right-wing populism and electoral volatility: Where do today's right-wing populist voters come from and where are they headed?	84
Chapter 5 SarsCov19, Multiculturalism and Green Europe: The Irreversible Challenges Facing the European Union to Maintain Social and Political Integrity.....	89
5.1. Projections, Issues and Proposals	91
5.2. The Next Generation EU: An Introduction.....	95
5.3. Conclusions	99
Acknowledgements.....	102
Bibliography.....	103
Abstract.....	106

Introduction

"The old world is dying. The new one is slow to appear. And in this chiaroscuro monsters are born."

Antonio Gramsci

If you think that the economic and social decline that the European Union and the West has been experiencing for some time now is the result of what tragically happened in 2008 with the financial crisis, I think there is a huge margin for error; and as a result of my ongoing studies, research and investigations I have realized that the disease that Europe and the West in general is experiencing today has been showing symptoms since the Second World War.

Following the collapse of the Soviet Union and the manifestation of the phenomenon that Francis Fukuyama¹ called the "End of History", Western civilization decided to deny and ostracize most of the metaphysical foundations that make it up (Christianity, human and civil rights, democratic and Christian socialism) to bow its head completely to the rising Pan-Americanism and embrace exclusively the values of market liberalism and turbo-capitalism.

The human being, the Western one, has been thrown out of the anthropocentric conception of life, i.e., that vision in which the human being, endowed with reason and free will and using his faculties, could reach full personal fulfilment, in order to make room for the two great chimeras that drive today's civilized world forward: technology and economy.

Anyone in our society who does not live according to the canons and axioms that these two sciences dictates are necessarily destined to be discarded from the market game and face economic and social isolation.

¹ The End of History and the Last Man. Fukuyama F. 1992 *"I believe that the European Union more accurately reflects what the world will look at the end of history than the contemporary United States. The EU's attempt to transcend sovereignty and traditional power politics establishing a transnational rule of law is much more in line with a "post-historical" world than the Americans' continuing belief in God, national sovereignty, and their military"*.

And what in the nineteenth century man cried out enthusiastically under the name of "progress", today, freed from the chains of natural limits, seems to turn against its creator, man himself, and the latter now seems to be indirectly aware of having created a machine which he must obey in order not to see recent progress thwarted, even at the cost of limiting much of his freedom².

This is not meant to be a total critique of the capitalist economic system or of the development of technology, but as I will explain later in order to clarify the reasons for the choice of my thesis topic, a natural law is now clear to me: if before man, families, governments and societies decided and then these decisions and actions had an impact on the economy, today I am certain that these groups of people first watch economic and financial fluctuations and only then act accordingly. The economy governs human actions, and technology executes its commands, and today's man suffers the consequences more and more directly due to the process of interconnection and globalization.

The 2008 financial crisis is just the tip of the iceberg.

The speculative bubble generated by a bank of real estate assets in the United States of America not only decreed the outbreak of a global economic crisis, but also ripped apart the local and real economy, reduced essential services in many countries of the world and deteriorated the quality of life of millions if not billions of people.

The Western bourgeoisie and that heterogeneous group that used to define an almost abstract, vast and nuanced concept called the 'middle class' realized, unconsciously, that its economic, political and social dominance in the 20th century was being overtaken by global multinationals, financial marketplaces and the globalized market, the technical refinements of the economy.

The awareness of this heterogeneous class of its inexorable decline has not been and will not be a delicate passage and the first social and political consequences are already being seen.³

And it is here that we come to the second point of my research: the rise of political populism in Western Europe.

² Severino E. The fate of technology *"Technique has turned from a means of human action to achieve results and goals into an end in itself. In a society in which technology becomes an end, it comes into the conflict with justice, and with any dimension that counters its growing power"*.

³ Pew Research Center *"The rising share of adults in the lower- and upper-income tiers is at the farthest points of the income distribution, distant from the vicinity in the middle. The share of American adults in the lowest-income tier rose from 16% in 1971 to 20% in 2015. Over the same period, the share of American adults in lower-middle income household did not change, holding at 9%"*.

History has taught us that when a group of people is threatened and fears losing a socio-economic status or privileges inherited from those, they consider internal or external enemies rather than doing 'mea culpa' or trying to renew themselves and welcome the new and different, they close themselves off and rally behind spiritual leaders, people's captains and short to medium term, often drastic solutions.

And here too we can come to another conclusion that seems clear: Democracy is an extremely fragile and delicate system, and here too it is the economy, depending on its positive or negative trend, that decrees the solidity or otherwise of its institutions and the system of democratic government.⁴

It has been seen historically, and we are still seeing it to some extent today, that when society is forced to face a period of socio-economic crisis, it can come to take drastic decisions and solutions that are often not contemplated in the game and in the democratic system.

When Orban's Hungary decided to barricade part of the country with a barbed wire wall on the border with Serbia to prevent the entry of refugees from Syria, or when Poland decreed the creation of an LGBT free zone in the South East of the country to stop the advance of the satanic forces of the 'globalist world liberal movement' to protect the country's Christian and Catholic roots, I had the impression that not even the deterrence of that house of human rights we call the Human Rights Union, which we call the European Union, could be effective enough.

What we don't know scares us, and this has been true since the beginning of human history, and very often fear is the result of man's decision to reject knowledge; and I believe that in the 21st century the way to be less afraid, or at least to have the keys to understanding a fluid and dynamic world, is to re-engage with society both by studying it from the outside and by actively living it from the inside.

The resurgence of economic populism is the crossroads between the fear of knowing the economic mechanisms of society and the new that is looming and the inability of society to create new sustainable and democratic growth solutions that do not involve the plundering of other continents, the exporting of conflicts and the arrogance of placing one's own nation or community as the one and only to be safeguarded.

A closed society does not prosper. A closed society is doomed to decline.⁵

⁴ Huber E. "The impact of Economic Development on democracy" pp. 71-86. The journal of Economic Perspectives".

⁵ Pellicani L. "From the closed society to the open society". pp. 54-57. Rubbettino

Europe is at a very important crossroads in its history: submit to the fear of what it does not know or what it refuses to know, or start thinking again about new models of life, social cohesion and safeguarding people's rights.

The European Union, which in my view is the only supranational institution to date capable of standing up as a civil power and proposing a new vision, finds itself timid, submissive and crushed by the arrogance, bellicosity and cynicism of entities that bear the names of the USA, Russia, China, Turkey, etc...

Many of us who have always believed and still believe in the potential of the European Union as a house of rights in the world for the world feel frustration and anger at this unsympathetic behavior. Busy keeping inflation stable, recovering from the economic damage caused by the various economic crises and the last major SarsCov19 crisis, and keeping the value of the euro stable, it has stopped looking around so as not to arouse the suspicions of its historical American "ally", and so as not to make imperialist or chauvinist attitudes re-emerge in the eyes of the rest of the world.

Yet the world is racked by wars, climate crises, deforestation, human rights violations and unprecedented migratory exoduses.

Europe, especially Western Europe, will be the geographical, social and political entity I will analyze for my study because of its political, social and economic similarities but at the same time characterized by great contradictions.

As I had already announced, the crisis of 2008 and the recent social crisis due to SarsCov19 is only a late manifestation of symptoms that had been present for decades⁶:

in particular, and this is where the third point of my thesis comes in, which cleverly ties in with the other two previous ones (economic crisis and the rise of populism), we are now witnessing a tragic demographic winter that has transformed the Old Continent from the Baby Boom Continent to the Zero Growth Continent.

Since the beginning of our analysis in the 1960s, a slow but inexorable demographic decline has affected the whole of Europe⁷. The causes are manifold: social, first and foremost, since phenomena such as urbanization, the emancipation of women and the rise of secularism have on the one hand

⁶ Spengler O. *"In antiquity we had rhetoric, in the West we have journalism and, indeed, in the service of that abstract thing that represents the power of civilization, money"*. *The Decline of the West*. p.62. Guanda

⁷ Eurostat (1955-2017) *"Analysis and datas of EU-12 demographic variation"*.

contributed to human and social development and on the other laid the foundations for a drastic reduction in the birth rate.

However, here too, and this thread is always recurring, we have concluded that there is first and foremost an economic reason behind the European demographic crisis.

Whereas in the 1920s or in the 1800s or in previous eras, families needed to produce many children in order to have a workforce or at least to fulfil the canons of Christianity in which the family was at the center of society, today demography follows opposite parameters.

Economic uncertainty, the erosion of private savings and rising prices are inhibiting factors for demographic growth, and a young family with insecure jobs, social assistance harassed by constant spending cuts and economic uncertainty is wary of having children in an economic and social context as difficult as Europe has been since 2008.⁸

Thus, while in 1964 a record of 1 million children were born in Italy⁹, in 2020, due to the outbreak of SarsCov19 and the increase in unemployment caused by economic uncertainty, there were only 440,000 newborns¹⁰. Similar figures can be found throughout Western Europe.

This permanent demographic crisis has been going on in Italy and Europe since the 1970s: instead of finding a remedy by creating family policies and policies to help the birth rate, since they are extremely costly at a time when spending is being cut, governments have opted to open their borders to economic migrants whose need for work and better living conditions would have been the driving force behind the demographic increase thanks to their help.

And here we come to the last point of our research: the impact of migration in Italy on the growth of right-wing populism.

The first waves of migration to Italy in the 1990s were primarily from Eastern Europe and to a lesser extent from North Africa.

The migrants who arrived in Italy were initially viewed favorably by public opinion as the economy and unemployment were, for the time being, the former growing and the latter very low (6.5% in 93').¹¹

⁸ Corriere dell'Economia. Pignatelli A. *"It must be the economic recovery that stops the demographic decline, after the descent was triggered by the population decrease"*. Apr 2021

⁹ ISTAT 1960-1970 *"Baby Boom and the Economic miracle in Italy"*. 1964 ISTAT

¹⁰ Minister of the Interior *"Report on demographic winter and SarsCov19 Crisis"*. March 2021

¹¹ Confindustria – *Report on work and development*. May 1993

However, as immigration into Western Europe increased and as the economic crisis unfolded, the debate on immigration in Europe became heated.

Nevertheless, a crucial date must be reached to explain the winning combination of 'immigration-populism', i.e., the 2011 migration crisis following political instability in the Middle East and Africa.

For the first time in Europe, even countries with little or no immigration were flooded by a torrent of desperate people fleeing civil conflicts in their own countries in search of refuge in Europe. Countries such as Hungary¹², Poland¹³, the Czech Republic, but also Greece, Cyprus, Italy, Spain and Portugal¹⁴ have for the first time in their history seen a mass exodus to their shores and territories.

The problem arises because this migratory phenomenon clashes with the European society, which is harassed by unemployment and the economic crisis, and which is struggling to find remedies to restart the economy.

The social instability generated by the economic and migratory crisis and the popular discontent were quickly perceived by astute and charismatic politicians who gave birth to populist and sovereigntist political parties and groups.

There is no country in Europe that in recent years has not seen the emergence or rise of right-wing populist parties and in some cases even their arrival in government:

Lega and Fratelli d'Italia, Front National in France, Alternative for Germany, Vox in Spain, Chega in Portugal, UKIP in Britain, FPÖ in Austria, True Finns, Swedish Democrats, Danish People's Party, Fidesz in Hungary, PiS in Poland¹⁵ etc...

Different names, but with common political visions: populism, economic sovereignty, fight against illegal immigration, fight against political Islam, protectionism, support to local jobs and aid to native families.

I will try to show the propaganda methods used by these populist right-wing leaders and their very clever use of social networks to break through people's fears and insecurity in order to increase support and especially, since we will be carefully analyzing populism I will analyze what the cone of "People" is for right-wing populism, who it refers to in terms of the community to be saved, who are the enemies they fight, what is their plan and what are their projections and future plans.

¹² Minister of the Interior – 2016 *“the percentage of immigrant people or with a partially or full non-Hungarian descendant reach the percentage of 2.55% on the total population”*. Hungarian Minister of Interior and Public Affairs

¹³ EUROSTAT. *“The main ethnic group in Poland are Poles, who make up 98.3% of the country's population”*. 2017

¹⁴ National Census Bureau. *According to recent census data, we can estimate the composition of the main ethnic group in these countries: Greeks 91.4%, Italians 92.5%, Spaniards 88.9% and Portuguese 87.4%*. 2011-2021

¹⁵ Politico. *“According to the analyses of the most influential political scientists and analysts, the number of right-wing populist movements and groups in Europe has increased from 9 in 2005 to 54 in 2018”*. March 2019.

This closes the circle of my research, which is undoubtedly articulated but which stems primarily from my interest in society and the need to make people understand how very complex problems such as demography, immigration and economics can never be solved by simple and consolatory solutions embodied today by right-wing populism.

Rather, the analysis through case studies, political elections, empirical data, economic data, polls, and projections of which my paper is full will try to give an original, critical, and often provocative slant on the problems of our century.

Essentially, I want to analyze through my paper the veracity of these three variables:

If economic well-being decreases, right-wing populism increases.

If the immigration rate increases, right-wing populism increases where the socio-economic system is weak or in crisis, it does not increase where it is strong and stable.

If the political propaganda of the populist right increases, support for right-wing populism increases where there is social discontent, it does not increase or is limited where there is economic and social solidity.

Finally, I will conclude by attempting to give data- and poll-based predictions about the future of right-wing populist parties, European and global demographic forecasts, and economic growth. Alternative solutions for growth will be proposed, which are environmentally sustainable, inclusive, and real, with a special focus on the environment, youth, integration, and solidarity.

The final appeal to the European Union is on the one hand provocative, but on the other hand also a cry for help from many of us who would like to see the EU playing a leading role in safeguarding rights and eco-sustainable growth.

The Recovery Plan and the Next Generation Europe could be two key instruments to curb the three problems we have analyzed in the paper: sustainable economic growth, migration control and integration, and solidity of democratic institutions.

We are at a crucial point, where each of us is required to contribute by example and practice, and first and foremost the European Union cannot stand by and watch despotic and undemocratic countries dictate the principles and methods of recovery.

The future is undoubtedly uncertain but at the same time exciting, and each one of us, without fear or prejudice, is called upon to play his or her part by always supporting the human being, his or her rights and freedoms.

A further false step would spell the end, or at least the decline, of European and Western values, which are not what the Pan-American model wanted to inculcate in everyone's minds: consumption, arrogance, depredation, unlimited growth and flattening of diversity. On the contrary, we propose and hope for a future of sustainability, celebration of differences, dialogue, and solidarity.

Chapter 1

1960 to 2008: 'From Baby Boom Society to the Zero Growth Continent'

The year 1964 marks a historic year in Europe and, first and foremost, in Italy. In Italy, a record number of births never recorded in the history of the unification of the country was reached: as many as 1 million children were born in this year, a statistic that greatly exceeded France, Germany, and Great Britain, which, however, had a larger population than ours.

The reasons for such an intense demographic boom are to be found in many factors.

Europe's society is changing: Social revolution in Europe, economic boom, urbanization, and women's emancipation

First, the economic one since Italy is in the most prosperous period of the post-war economic boom¹⁶; a period of birth of the mass consumption society and in which a relative well-being was reached even by those classes that until then had never experienced it. The expansion of the Italian middle class coincided with the impending demographic increase, since in such a period of economic prosperity, having children was a guarantee for the future since nothing could foreshadow pessimistic consequences.

Another factor still preponderant is that in the 60's, even if it has been declining for some time now thanks to the attractiveness of the Italian industrial poles, was that a good part of the Italian population lived in rural areas and were sustained by agriculture or breeding.

The necessity of manpower to work the fields and to help in the farm made that the peasant families gave birth to many children. It was not unusual even in the 60's to find families residing in rural areas with 5, 6, 7 or more children.¹⁷

¹⁶ Official rapporteur of the European Council "In the quinquennial 1960-1964 Italy reached the unexpected and extraordinary result of GDP growth of 6.3% average yearly".

¹⁷ INSTAT "the total fertility rate in 1954 was 3.5 children per woman, but in the countryside and in some provinces of the South the rate reached 4,8 children per woman on average". 1958

In the post-war period, following the horrors experienced during the world conflict and the social uncertainty that could be perceived once the war was over, the Catholic Church and the local parishes had an enormous influence on the daily life of Italian citizens in the 50s and 60s: More incisively in small and medium centers but also in the neighborhoods of large industrial cities, the Catholic Church through its dynamic work had become a stable reference point of Italian society and the Christian paradigms of Family and procreation were widely disseminated and strongly influenced young couples and families.

The disaffection of rural Italian society for militancy in mass parties following the twenty years of fascism had caused people to drift away from active politics and to move closer and closer to the Christian Catholic parish world where priests, nuns and friars had become the new points of reference for a society that in part had the metaphysical need to redeem itself from the atrocities committed during the war years and those before¹⁸.

It is also necessary to analyze the role of women, crucial to explain the reasons for such a powerful demographic boom and to describe the contradictions of a country like Italy at the height of the Economic Boom.

It is redundant and untrue to mark only the North-South distinction when dealing with the theme of gender inequality in post-war Italy.

It is certainly true that the literacy rate of Italian women in the center-north was far higher than that of their southern compatriots¹⁹. However, the real distinction that shows the contradictions of gender inequality in Italy is to be found in the city-rural periphery clash.

While women in urban centers with more than 50,000 inhabitants had more opportunities for instruction and work, in the agricultural regions and provinces throughout Italy, women were anchored to a pre-industrial social role and their level of emancipation was close to zero.

Not only a young woman from inland Sicily, but also a girl who lived in the farmhouses of Milan, far from the fumes and lights of Milan, had little chance of social emancipation.

The Second World War had pushed women by necessity and virtue to enter for the first time in the economic and political fabric of leadership; and the economic boom had required their participation to contribute to the economic take-off of the country.

¹⁸ ANCI (National Association of Italian Catholics) *"In 1955, the attendance rate at church services for those who attended at least once a week was 79%, data peaked 91% for rural zones and peripheries"*. Rapporteur 1956.

¹⁹ *In 1951, the illiteracy rate in Italy was 44%, exceeding 65% in the regions of southern Italy and over 86% in some agricultural districts of Sicily and Sardinia. The female figure in the province of Oristano is 96.7% and in the province of Ragusa 95.5%*. Sample from the 1954 Education Ministry

However, the socio-economic contradictions between Italy of the industrial triangle and the university poles of the major cities and the rural, agricultural, and economically backward areas of the country emerged especially when it came to the question of women.

Italian women in rural and agricultural areas were destined to a telluric and patriarchal vision of life: marrying very young, becoming mothers, and renouncing their social and cultural emancipation.

In such a socio-cultural scenario, population growth was the natural consequence.

Finally, it is necessary to talk about the level of knowledge of contraceptive methods in Italy in the 60s, the deep social stigma against abortion and in general the sexual education of the younger generations.

In the 60s, albeit slowly, the first modern forms of contraceptives for sexual intercourse arrived in Italy from America. Before that time, the deep-rooted taboo of sex was largely seen as a means of procreation.

Young couples who wanted to undergo a sexual intercourse had to wait for marriage as dictated by the strict moral and religious canons of the time; the absence of contraceptives that later will release people from the secular vision of sex for procreation purposes, pushed people of young age to consume sexual intercourse at marriage with a very high probability of getting pregnant and making many children from a young age.

Moreover, we will have to wait until our days to break through the rigid general morality of public opinion towards abortion. If today we see political battles being waged by approximately all political forces to end the stigma of abortion, so it was not in the society of decades past. Not only was it not decriminalized, but abortion in the eyes of multiple institutions such as the church, school, and family, was considered a real crime²⁰.

Sexual misinformation and social pressure on certain issues, such as abortion, made fertile ground for a decisive demographic increase, and this confirms the fact that as economic availability and private education decrease, the birth rate and the number of families increase significantly.

²⁰ *In the Italian legal system, abortion was considered a criminal offence until 1978. We must wait for Law 194 passed in 1978. Dilel.*

The same social construct, albeit with due distinction, was present in France, where, for historical reasons, not only the Church but also politics incentivized French families to be prolific and to produce as many children as possible:

French President De Gaulle (58'-68') praised the French populations of the Colonies, particularly the Pièds Noirs of Algeria, and the French who resided in the rural areas of the Hexagon as being extremely prolific and fertile.

In 1961 the birth rate of Metropolitan France was 3.3 children per woman, rural France 3.7 while urban areas an average of 2.4. The birth rate of the French in Algeria reached in 1962 the impressive number of 4.2 children per woman²¹.

De Gaulle defined these working, religious and very prolific families as the backbone and lifeblood of France.

A large family was a sign of stability and well-being, and a family that followed the canons of religion and the pillars of the French Republic was the future for France's hegemony in the world. It is no coincidence that the families of rural France were also the greatest supporters of the political vision of De Gaulle and were the most important electoral basin of the Gaullist president second only to the families descended from the Jacobins who resided in French Algeria.

In the French department of Drôme, where in 1963 77% of the population of working age was engaged in the primary sector, in the presidential elections of 1965 in the second round De Gaulle obtained 70.6% of the votes (national average: 55.2%); in the same year the birth rate in this department was 3.4 children per woman and the number of baptized was 99.3%.

Also in Germany, especially in the traditionally Catholic South²² as in Bavaria, Baden and Rhineland and with an agricultural vocation an enormous demographic boom that had been going on since the post-war period had taken place. Just as in Great Britain, the areas of northwestern

²¹ *The enormous fertility of the French living in the colony of Algeria can be explained both quantitatively and qualitatively. In 1940, there were 360,000 residents in the colony, a number that would rise to 900,000 in 1961, of whom the age group between 0 and 14 years old accounted for 31% of the population.*

Moreover, most of the original population of the Algerian colony were descendants of post-revolutionary Jacobin exiles: monarchists, conservative Catholics, ultra-reactionaries, nationalists.

²² *Although Germany did not experience a population boom like France and Italy, it is nevertheless interesting to note the geographical and cultural disparities within the country.*

The eastern part, such as the region of Mecklenburg-Vorpommern, has a birth rate of 2.44 children per woman, the region of Bremen 2.67 children per woman and Bavaria 3.81 children per woman in 1959.

economic inequality and religious participation strongly influence the fertility rate. Nationales Amt für Volkszählung und Familienministerium

England from which most of the Pilgrim Fathers set sail and central Spain represented very similar social scenarios, albeit with due distinctions.

Even in other parts of Europe, there were and still are echoes of strongly religious and rural areas: while today sociologists tend to define these exceptional areas with the almost sarcastic term "Bible Belts", at one time in Europe they were the norm almost everywhere.

Countertrend Society

Case Study: The European Bible Belts and Localized Demographic Boom

The term Bible Belt²³ refers to a circumscribed geographical area, usually a region of a country where an economic zone with a strong agricultural and rural vocation merge with a social substratum very attached to religious and moral values and consequently the birth rate of these areas is significantly higher than the rest of the country and the national average.

Today, these socio-cultural zones can be found in every country in Europe: Central Holland where the most fundamentalist Calvinist groups reside, the Vendee in France, Bavaria in Germany, Southern Poland, and Moravia in the Czech Republic.

And again, Yorkshire in England, Western Norway, Central Sweden and Southern Jutland, and some sociologists and political scientists do not hesitate to introduce us to Southern Italy, particularly Calabria²⁴.

²³ The term Bible Belts was first coined by cultural geographer Wilbur Zelinsky in 1961. It referred to the geographical area of the Southwestern United States, i.e., Texas, Alabama, Mississippi, Louisiana, Georgia, Tennessee, Kentucky, Oklahoma, Arkansas, South Carolina and Virginia, where there were predominantly Protestant groups and where there was a very high rate of participation in religious services, a birth rate above the national average and a predisposition to vote for the more conservative Republican Party. The term was then applied by European political scientists to the European continent where geographical areas or regions with the same characteristics were found within some countries. The best known and most studied European Bible Belts both anthropologically and politically is the Dutch belt where fundamentalist Calvinists and Christians have political, social, and cultural practices quite distinct from the general stereotype the world has about the liberalism of the Netherlands.

²⁴ Subsequently, the term spread like wildfire throughout the rest of Europe.

Regarding the 3 basic points for identifying a Bible Belts: religious participation, high birth rate and preference for Christian social and Christian conservative parties, there are cases where only 2 of these points are met. The Vendee in France, for example, has a very high birth rate (2.3 children per woman in 2018) and a very high rate of participation in religious services, but at the political level the French department has historically sided with the Socialist Party. On the contrary, Calabria, a region in the south of Italy, has a very high rate of religious participation, a predisposition to vote for conservative Christian parties, but records a sad demographic figure of 1.31 children per woman.

Small and circumscribed regions characterized by a cohesion between the economy of the primary sector and a strong attachment to Christian and religious values. Areas where time has stood still and modernity struggles to take root and create proselytes.

Today they are exceptions struggling for survival in an increasingly interconnected, secular, and modern world. Their way of life is considered by many as retrograde and contrary to any definition of progress, they are often viewed with derision and compassion by the progressive ruling classes and the urban and postmodern class.

On the contrary, these social contradictions should be strongly protected, and in some cases taken as a cue to find a remedy to the demographic crisis that now affects the entire continent. In these areas, time has literally stood still, and the inhabitants do not follow the modern economic pattern when it comes to birth rates.

A middle-class family determines the number of children to have based on economic and financial availability. This is a fact, and it is the rule that drives our society, as it is necessary to see economic trends and from there decide how to act.

On the other hand, in the areas just described in the European Bible Belts, this mentality does not work, or at least is not perceived as fundamental.

Families are very large because values such as sharing, thrift, sobriety and reuse are the order of the day. In large families, the capitalist pattern of purchase, consumption and destruction does not seem to be very popular. The older children help the younger ones, and everyone is clear about their role and the limits within which they can act.

When they often interview a large family in a rural area with 5 or more children, they are often astonished by the level of organization and calm that reign in the domestic environment, absent in a family with 2 children in any city suburb.

In the eyes of the well-thinking and modern westerners such a scenario is seen with superiority mixed with pity. "Immigrants or bigoted people have many children", this is what the common conscience says as if to say that the gift of life is a spectrum that we carry with us from the past and of which we are ashamed and have difficulty in getting rid of.

A few decades ago, however, all this was normal.

Instead, we believe that there is much to learn, and perhaps rethink about our way of living the family, birthrate, and consumption in general in Westerners. We believe that government birth

policies are useful but not essential. It is right to help those who are planning to start a family but where economic restrictions, accentuated even more by the Coronavirus crisis, have forced them to delay starting families. However, this is not enough; it is necessary to rethink common living, individual and family consumption and the concepts of growth and solidarity. If Europe wants to win the battle against demographic decline, it needs to rethink its common values and abandon or at least leave aside the concept of "American-style living". For decades we have been inculcated by advertising to spend energy and resources for a bigger house, a bigger car, and a bigger phone, but at the same time our families and social relations have become smaller. An enormous expenditure of money and energy to chase after status symbols and consumer goods for social recognition, but then, when all is said and done, have led people to feel lonelier and more unstable.

2020 was the year of negative records, 440 thousand children were born in Italy, never so few since the Unification of Italy where it is good to remember that the population was 32 million, today 60. If economic uncertainty dictates to people how many children they can bring into the world, then the battle against demographic winter is lost.

But if instead the birth rate were to be put back at the center of the political debate as a prime mover and not as an economic consequence, then perhaps there might be hope for Europe.

Economic crisis of 2008 and SarsCov19 crisis: the economy and private wealth as paradigms to birthrate and welfare

As previously stated, the collapse of traditional values and ideologies following the end of the Cold War and the hegemony of capitalist economics, put economic fluctuations as the pivotal influence of human action. Depending on the economic cycles of rise and growth, crisis, stagnation or decline, people direct their consumption, their behavior and consequently also the birth rate of the families themselves.

Periods of economic uncertainty and crisis lead to increased unemployment, wage cuts and cuts in public spending: generating children in a period of economic decline is considered by the collective consciousness as an unsustainable risk and irresponsible behavior.

At the level of correlation between economic well-being and birth rate there are interesting consequences: very rich people who have a high level of wealth and very poor people living in rural areas tend to generate more children than the average²⁵.

Both social groups represent, however, a small percentage. The middle-class group, which represents between 55 and 75% of the total population, depending on geographic distinction, is the one that has been by far the most sensitive to economic changes and the one most inclined to follow trends.

The economic crisis has hit this large social group hard, ranging from public employees, freelancers, general practitioners, small and medium-sized entrepreneurs. Since they are most of the working population, it is to be hoped that as uncertainty and economic difficulties increase, the propensity to want to have children will decrease.

Another figure, disturbing to many, is the ratio between the population over 65 and under 18.

As seen from the recent vaccination campaign, the timing of vaccinations of the over 65 have not been long for inefficiency of the Italian health system, but because the over 65 in Italy are a huge number in relation to other countries of the world and especially in relation to the Under 25²⁶.

²⁵ Italian Consumer Association and Family Care. *Households with an annual income level above 30k euro tend to form larger households. Whereas the average number of members in a middle-income 15-29k euro annual household was 2.4 members, high-income households recorded an average of 2.9 members per household.* 2019

²⁶ *The 0-14 age group in Italy represents 13.5% of the total population; the Over 65 age group represents 21.4% of the total population. Data and projections foresee that the latter figure will reach 25% in 2030 and 30.3% in 2050.* Minister of the Interior and Census Bureau 2019.

The demographic class that ranges from 65 and up is the one born basically between the 40s and 60s of the twentieth century, the period between the post-war period and the economic boom. The pension system holds up because the active workers who contribute to the maintenance of the social pensions of this age group are precisely the generation of the boom from the 60s to the 80s. There is a very pessimistic hypothesis, but with very clear economic and scientific foundations, that when it is time for the Boomer class (60'-70') to retire, i.e. very soon, the reduced number of active workers (80'-90'-2000'), both demographically and due to the high level of unemployment of this demographic class, will not be sufficient to maintain the pension system intact and it could collapse on itself. At best, the current generation will never see the tangible possibility of a decent retirement age.

The collapse of the sex taboo and the liberation of female sex have been on the one hand a great step forward for Western society and on the other hand have led, as an inexorable consequence, to demographic decline, as certain stainless secular values such as sex as procreation have decayed.

Sex as a choice and not as a sociobiological imposition has made possible an alternative to motherhood unprecedented in human history. With the arrival of the first pharmaceutical or non-pharmaceutical contraceptives, not only sex but also motherhood became a conscious choice. The woman, as a subject destined to motherhood, is released for the first time in her life from this secular imposition and acquires an enormous power of life or death, supported only by her will.

At the advent of Italy's economic rise, an enormous demand for labor could no longer be saturated by male supply alone. Starting in the 1950s, the mass entry of women into the world of work was a real economic revolution, especially in areas with strong industrial development. Not only that; the road to emancipation also passed through education.

In 1951 the number of female graduates in Italy was 1.5%, while in 1968 the number rose to a proactive 16.3%. It will be necessary to wait until 2009, the year in which the number of women and men graduates is almost equal.

Entry into the world of work and higher education has decisively shifted the center of gravity of the female scene.

If, up until the 1960s, the role of women was purely domestic and relegated to maternity and family care, suddenly an enormous number of Italian and European women found themselves catapulted into the open market economic system.

It is necessary, however, to point out the great geographical disparity that exists in the Italian territory: if in 1963 women with a university degree in Lombardy were 20.3%, in Sicily they were only 6.5%²⁷. The socio-economic backwardness of the South will be reflected for many decades to follow, even in the race for gender education and the emancipation of female labor.

In general, the presence of an alternative for young women that was not necessarily marriage, procreation and family care had projected what until recently was the so-called "segregated sex" to a new pioneering adventure in the civil, economic, and political field.

Of course, the entry of many women into the world of work has also led to an extension of the age of marriage and a considerable lengthening of the time it takes to conceive the first child.

While in 1953 the average age at which a woman in Italy conceived her first child was 22, in 1967 it had already reached 25.6 years.

Today the average age of the first child per woman in Italy is around 30.2 years; this figure is among the highest in Europe. In France, women conceive their first child at an average age of 27, in Great Britain 28 and in Germany, similarly to Italy, 30.4 years²⁸.

The country in which new mothers have the lowest age from conception of their first child is the Republic of Ireland with 24.6 years and Iceland 24.9.

Reconciling work time and family time is a very difficult task in Italy, due above all to family policies and work support that are rather lacking. While in Scandinavia the generous Welfare guarantees new parents' monthly allowances, family leave and free day-care centers, in Italy and Southern Europe in general there is a very difficult social and economic system for working women who decide to have children.

The transformation of the Italian economy first and foremost, and then in Europe, from a fundamentally agricultural economy set in rural areas with its own folkloric asset of strongly patriarchal social norms and tied to the past, to an industrial, urban, and modern reality, has had significant consequences on the standard of living and conduct of many people.

²⁷ *The gap between women in northern and southern Italy in terms of education levels is still alarming. While in Emilia Romagna the number of women holding a higher diploma is 76.4%, in Calabria this figure drops dramatically to 51%. The number of female graduates in the Piedmont region is 32% overall and 44.6% of women under 40. In Apulia the total number of women graduates is 21% and 31.5% of women under 40. Data from the Ministry of University and Research.*

²⁸ EUROSTAT. *Official Rapporteur on Family* 2018.

Already during the Second World War, when millions of young Italian and European males were engaged at the front and there was not enough manpower to carry on the war effort and industry, many women entered the world of work.

Once the world conflict ended, it was impossible to stop this revolutionary process:

on the one hand, the usefulness of women in industries and farms made the female gender increasingly aware of their importance in the economic and social development of the country; on the other hand, the European economies of both the victorious and defeated countries suffered such copious damage that male personnel alone were not sufficient to restore the national economy and industrial structures.

A huge number of women for the first time were separated from their ancestral role of mothers and wives and a large part of their time was now spent in essential economic activities.

The process of increasing urbanization had consequences and anthropological changes also on the concept of the traditional family.

The large industrial urban agglomerations such as, for example, the industrial triangle Milan-Turin-Genoa attracted many workers and families from the countryside and southern Italy, but not only.

West Germany, the great loser of the world conflict, was however directed towards industrial reconstruction: urban realities such as North Rhine-Westphalia, the ports of Bremen and Hamburg, and other large cities saw a powerful exodus from the countryside, from East Germany and East German refugees who were crammed into these large urban agglomerations in precarious hygienic conditions²⁹.

Great Britain, the first industrialized country in the world, saw an even more pronounced socio-anthropological process that had begun at the end of the 19th century. Apart from London, all the industrial cities of northern Britain saw a surge in the population of those who abandoned the countryside and rural districts to enjoy the opportunities and apparent economic well-being that the city promised.

This process of exodus from the countryside to urban cities caused a depopulation of the surrounding countryside for the benefit of industrial cities.

In 1944 Rome had 1.2 million inhabitants, in 1960 the population reached 2 million.

²⁹ Domenico Losurdo, *Stalin*. "Historians estimate that between 1945 and 1951 the number of ethnic Germans hunted, tortured and killed in Eastern Europe range from 12 to 16 million". *Storia e critica di una leggenda nera*, Carocci Editore, 2008, pag. 38

Milan in the period of the second conflict had a population of 650 thousand inhabitants, 20 years later reached 1.3 million inhabitants, accomplice the mass exodus from Southern Italy.

The London Metropolis in 1941 counted 1.6 million inhabitants to touch the impressive figure of 3.4 million. The cities of Belgium, the Netherlands, West Germany, France and, to a lesser extent, Southern Europe also underwent a similar process, definitively distorting the social fabric of Western Europe.

Limits and difficulties: The gender gap and the center-periphery clash as limiting factors of socio-economic development

While the population of cities grew dramatically, the average birth rate of cities did not. What are the factors that explain such a phenomenon?

First, as mentioned earlier, the time that women previously devoted to family and home in rural areas was now spent working in businesses.

Having less time available for the family had as a natural consequence a reduction in the number of children to be brought into the world, because it was very difficult to take care of a family of 5 or more children if both parents were engaged for a long-time outside home.

In addition, the cost of living in the cities was very different from those of the countryside: if in rural areas the sustenance of families was produced by them (agricultural products) with the help of children, in the city, the capitalist economy required careful control of expenses and family outgoings that were dictated by the salary that the parent or both parents had available.

The presence of educational schools in the cities and changes in the laws prohibiting child labor prevented families from sending their children to work at a very early age, and in many countries compulsory schooling was imposed at least at the age of 14³⁰.

Living in the city also meant definitively abandoning a set of archaic rural values and beliefs, and people came more into contact with urban values and common citizenship, hygiene standards and more secular models of life.

In the 50's, in Western Europe, the first forms of contraceptives were introduced and, even though in many places the Church, both Catholic and Protestant, strongly opposed this Pan-American model of thinking and living the family and sexuality, the separation of sexual pleasure from procreation gave people the possibility to enjoy intercourse without necessarily having the risk of producing children.

³⁰ In Italy, the Casati Law of 1923 made school attendance compulsory until the age of 14. However, the law was not actually implemented until 1962 with the reform of the school system.

Finally, the size of houses in urban areas were very different from those in rural and country areas: the mass exodus to the cities had forced municipal authorities and local administrators to create houses very quickly. Huge, standardized buildings on the outskirts of the cities were erected in record time to house the new migrants from the countryside or poor areas of the countries, in very precarious building and sanitary conditions.

Living in a very small studio apartment did not allow the presence of many people inside the car and having a large family meant giving up the comfort and tranquility of home because of small spaces.

In the decades to follow, the fundamental and substantial change that took place in Western European society is as follows: economic fluctuations determine the standard of living of families, especially those of the middle class, and the consequent decision of how many children to procreate and maintain.

The succession of economic and production crises and the consequent increase in unemployment has shown that the European middle class, the majority in terms of numbers, is the one that suffers most from the negative consequences of economic fluctuations.

While the well-off and those with a wealthy standard of living can afford to have at least two children, even if the trend has been steadily declining since the 1980s, it is the middle-income class that is most affected by the demographic crisis.

In Italy, families with an annual income of 30,000 euros or more have a birth rate of 1.73 children per woman, a figure higher than the national average (1.38) but lower than the natural replacement rate (2.1). On the other hand, middle-class families with incomes between 20 and 30 thousand euros per year have a birth rate of 1.32 children per woman, in line with the national average.

However, the most difficult thing to analyze is the low-middle income families (< 20 thousand euros per year).

The data is very inconsistent because in this economic class there are grouped very heterogeneous families and realities.

In 2019, according to Data from the Ministry of Economic Development, 47.3% of families with at least one foreign member were part of the low-middle income bracket. Among them results a birth rate significantly higher than the average for Italian families, with 2.14 children per woman. The most prolific families of foreign nationality are, in order, those of Moroccan, Albanian and Nigerian nationality.

Another decidedly interesting statistic is the relationship between birth rate, lower middle-class families, and participation in religious services.

In Italy, families that regularly participate in religious services at least once a week have a birth rate of 1.77 children per woman³¹, while those who participate less than once a month or never in religious services have a birth rate of 1.36 children per woman.

Lower-middle class families who attend religious services at least once a week have a surprising birth rate of 2.13 children per woman (a very rare figure above the natural birth rate threshold).

Geographically, the relationship between the lower middle class and religious affiliation appears to be most influential in Southern Italy, with Campania and Calabria considered the driving regions behind the positive birth rate trend.

Similar data can be found in some parts of Western Europe, especially in the areas mentioned above that political scientists and sociologists call the "Bible Belt".

In the Netherlands, municipalities in which people of the Calvinist Protestant denomination are at least 25% have a birth rate significantly higher than the national average (1.81 children per woman).

The city of Urk, a Calvinist stronghold where the Calvinist theocratic party SGP receives at least 55% of the vote has a birth rate of 3.11 children per woman³², a figure more unique than rare in Europe.

What is more, Bavaria, the historic stronghold of Catholicism in Germany where the CSU finds its largest pool of votes, has an average birth rate decidedly higher than that of the other German Länder. Families residing in Bavarian municipalities with fewer than 30 thousand inhabitants have an average birth rate of 1.91 children per woman, compared with the Land of Bavaria (1.69 children per woman) and Germany (1.49 children per woman).

In France, in the Vendee department, household participation in religious services is found to be 35% for those who attend at least once a week, far higher than the national figure (13%). In this department, the birth rate is 1.87 children per woman, and for those who attend religious services at least once a week it is 2.22 children per woman.

The Catholic or Protestant Church, even if in a lesser weight than in past decades, still has a strong influence on families and its cardinal principles on family and birthrate and influence young families in these geopolitical realities that are very rare but still strong today.

³¹ 2014 data from the Italian association of large families

³² Although the figure is positive and against European trends, the birth rate of children per woman was 4.8 in 1981 and 6.4 in 1951. The figure is therefore constantly falling. Provincial Office of the Province of Flevoland, the Netherlands

On the contrary, the countries and regions where religious non-compliance is very high show a marked decline in the general demographic and birth rate.

Still speaking of Germany, the Eastern Länder such as Brandenburg, Pomerania and Saxony Anhalt are the Länder with the lowest birth rate, the lowest average income level in the country and the lowest religious observance.

As a result of the less prosperous economic conditions in the eastern part of the country, the depopulation of small and medium-sized municipalities and a very high rate of people who define themselves as atheist or agnostic, Eastern Germany has one of the highest rates of demographic decline in Europe and the world³³.

³³ *Between 1991 and 2020, the population of the former East Germany declined by 9.9%, partly due to emigration to western and southern regions and partly due to low fertility.*

Welfare State and Birth: Family Policies in Western Europe and Family Policies in Italy

In the light of these considerations, today the families that tend to produce more children in Western Europe are those that are grouped in the following categories: Families with at least one foreign member, families with a high annual income level, and families with high religious observance. On the contrary, the families that have observed the greatest decrease in the average fertility rate are those who have within them: both parents of the country's nationality, average income level, little or no religious observance, at least one parent in the household unemployed.

In Italy, it is good to consider a key fact to explain the demographic decline and the drop in the natural fertility rate: the lengthening of the average age at which families generate their first child. While, for economic, social, and demographic reasons, Central-Northern Europe has a rather low average age at generating the first child, Southern Europe certainly has one of the highest average ages in the world at which couples generate children.

Italy has a decidedly negative record: in 2019 the average age of women when conceiving their first child is 30.8 years. On the contrary, the country with the lowest average age in Europe is Ireland with 25.7 years.

In Italy and Southern Europe in general, the factors are multiple:

First, the economic crisis and the structural limits of the economies of the so-called PIGS that have very high rates of unemployment, especially among young people; in addition, those who have a job very often find themselves with precarious contracts, underpaid and unsuitable to generate children and start a family. In Spain in 2018 unemployment was 46.4%, in Italy 32.3% and in Greece 30.5%.³⁴

The precariousness and the absence of economic and financial independence forces couples and young people in general to delay the time in which they leave the family unit to go live alone. Italy is one of the countries in which young people leave home later in the World (29.8 years)³⁵;

³⁴ EUROSTAT 2016.

³⁵ According to data from the Italian Families and Consumers Association, 41% of people aged between 18 and 32 still live in the household to which they belong, and even more significant is that 56% of them do not have a stable or sufficient form of income and therefore it is the parents who must maintain or erode their children's private savings, given their inability or unwillingness to leave home.

incredible figure if compared to Scandinavia or Germany: in Sweden the average age in which young people leave home is 18.8 years.

Finally, it must be said that the welfare state of many countries in Southern Europe is largely centered on social security and health spending. This is due to the high average age of these countries in which people over 65 exceed 20% of the total population. While the social-democratic countries of Scandinavia with an excellent level of Welfare, and Central Europe have a very good system of support for births and families, in Italy and Southern Europe the State helps families to generate children to a minimal degree, delaying more and more the age at which families generate children.

For example: In Sweden, in the Region of Southern Skåne, any family regardless of its income was entitled to a voucher of the equivalent of 455 euros per child for the first 21 years of the unborn child's life; not only that, preschool, public transportation to kindergarten and elementary schools, medical checkups for the first 6 years of life and schoolbooks are free.

In Germany, in the Land of Hesse, families with at least 3 children are entitled to countless tax and service concessions: free nursery school for the third child, schoolbooks reduced by 50%, free pediatric visits and tax relief on taxes, transport and health insurance.

In Italy and in Southern Europe in general, similar family assistance programs are totally absent and unimaginable.

Timid steps have been taken during the Renzi I government in which the government proposed the Baby Bonus with the disbursement of 80euro per month per child for the first 3 years of life, the Milk Bonus, and other small benefits at the municipal level.

In 2021, the Minister of Equal Opportunities Elena Bonetti (Italia Viva) introduced for the first time the Single-Family Allowance, a real revolution in the field of birth assistance in the country³⁶. This is an allowance provided for each child for the first 18 years of life in which, depending on the level of income received, families receive a monthly allowance for each dependent child.

We believe that it is right that governments, of any political color, encourage young families to generate children, especially in countries where there is a demographic carnage, such as Italy.

³⁶ *The law, which has been approved in both chambers with the favorable consensus of all parties, is part of the Recovery Plan from which it will take most of the resources for implementation. It is part of the big family plan that Italia Viva has decided to undertake since its creation. The plan will come into effect from July 2022 but already this summer it is possible to subscribe and receive a bonus for those expecting a child.*

However, we are equally convinced that the demographic crisis inflicting the country and all Western Europe also has its origins in a cultural and social crisis as well as a political and economic one, and in a decay of the old traditional values that have now been replaced by new ways of living society, the family and individual life in general.

In the next chapter we will deal with a fundamental theme for understanding and analyzing the demographic crisis: how the economic and financial crisis has deeply affected the middle class, the petit bourgeoisie, and how this social class, in the 20th century the true socio-economic protagonist, has fundamentally entered crisis and the values on which it previously rested are no longer valid and in deep decay.

We will then talk about how immigration has impacted on the Italian economy in the first place, on the level of employment, social security and we will analyze the demographic data of the recent wave of immigration, the social perception of this phenomenon and how the Coronavirus has highlighted on the one hand the structural weaknesses of the Italian economic system and on the other hand has revealed new opportunities and new keys to social, economic, and environmental rebirth.

The consequences of SarsCov19 on unemployment, income and consumption: the Italian case, structural problems, advice and future remedies

The arrival of the SarsCov19 pandemic caught governments and institutions totally unprepared to deal with a global pandemic.

However, at the end of the day, it was real people who were the real losers from this phenomenon of such magnitude: individuals, families, small and medium-sized enterprises.

In the case of Italy, the country was in a precarious and extremely delicate social and economic condition: the decade that had passed since the outbreak of the economic crisis had put the economic and social fabric to the test, bringing to the surface those structural problems that the country had been dragging along since the beginning of its republican history.

A slow and cumbersome bureaucratic system, Europe's negative record for tax evasion, undeclared work and the expiry of quality employment contracts, a lack of investment in technology and innovation and an extremely high tax burden.

These are the five factors that irreparably sank the Italian economy at the outbreak of the pandemic; complex problems that would require wide-ranging policies and reforms in order to reap the benefits of a clear improvement. The road to modernization of the country also and above all passes through here, and Italy is now called upon to implement resources and measures to bring about the transition that will take it from being a country with an antiquated economy and a slow bureaucracy full of quibbles to an innovative, sustainable economic system with a fluid bureaucratic system that favors ingenuity and investment.

Italian bureaucracy has always been characterized by the infinitesimal time it takes to complete even simple tasks, slowing down and discouraging free individual initiative, especially economic initiative.

While in some EU countries, such as the Netherlands, the Chambers of Commerce take about four days to issue a business license, in Italy there have been cases of citizens and self-employed professionals having to wait months before starting up their business, resulting in a huge loss for the company and the consequences for employment and welfare.

The judicial and administrative system is also facing the same problem, if not an even greater one: in Italy, according to EUROSTAT data, a civil trial lasts 420 days on average, the European average is 190 days and the positive record is always held by the Netherlands with 111 days. The rituals, mediations, comments and hearings are spread over an extremely long period of time, increasing both the judicial costs borne by the parties and the possibility of arriving at a judgement within a short period of time and with immediate effect.

In recent years, the deterioration of Italy's legal guarantees has exacerbated general discontent, creating a pessimistic view of the Italian justice system and bureaucracy, which is considered extremely slow and hostile to economic freedom and free private initiative.

The attempt to reform and speed up trials in Italy has recently been pursued by the current Minister of Justice with the reform that bears his name.

The Cartabia Law, recently approved by the Italian Chamber of Deputies, aims at reducing by $\frac{1}{4}$ the length of criminal proceedings in Italy also by developing the digitalization of the criminal process. At the same time, attempts to modernize the public administration and the bureaucratic system were carried out by the then Renzi Government with the so-called Madia Law, which however did not receive the OK of both chambers.

The aim of the reform was to implement Title V, which until then had been substantially sidelined, giving more power to decentralized bodies and a sprint to the federalization of administrative decisions, reducing the load and slowness of central offices.

The essential problems of the Italian bureaucratic system were highlighted: slowness, poor digitalization, excessive centralization, lack of clarity, and political and institutional paralysis. During the SarsCov19 pandemic, with staff cutbacks, reduced working time and personnel, and an inadequate IT and digital bureaucratic system, the deep-rooted problems of bureaucracy became even greater, making it even more complex for citizens to arrive at efficient and effective solutions for everyday administrative problems.

As far as tax evasion in Italy is concerned, it is estimated that in 2020 tax evasion will amount to 110 billion a year, with the regions of southern Italy exceeding the 20% gap between declared capital and capital actually paid in.

The main problems are to be found in several factors: first, tax laws are numerous and scattered, resulting in the absence of a single, clear tax code; multiple drafts of tax reforms have been proposed but lie unnoticed and forgotten in the drafts of institutional reforms.

Moreover, the Redditometro, a tool used by the IRS to determine a taxpayer's income, is a totally random instrument that considers a very small and extremely sampled niche of taxpayers. Each year, the revenue agency only submits 300,000 controls; a derisory figure since more than 75% of small taxpayers are not analyzed.

Moreover, while the benefits for taxpayers who declare less than 15 thousand euros gross per year (57% of the total) are often generous and numerous, this is not the case for large taxpayers (14%) who declare more than 35 thousand euros per year and who are cleverly tartassatized by the Inland Revenue because they are the ones on whom the maintenance of Welfare weighs most heavily.

It is, however, true that those who declare higher incomes are also those who stimulate more employment and bring more wealth, and this should not be seen as an opportunity for exploitation but as a resource to be preserved.

While it seems clear that Italian legislation has paved the way for foreign multinationals to destroy goods, making them de facto undisputed leaders in many key sectors, even to the detriment of Italy's supremacy in them, the same is not true of the large Italian-branded companies that are renowned and well-known abroad and are considered an excellence.

A tax reform plan to ease the tax burden on certain key types of companies would be a wise decision to combat tax evasion, but also especially for another bug of the recent Italian economy, namely the relocation of production factors abroad.

In addition, the real great vacuum of the Italian economy and tax system is undeclared work, a problem that was greatly accentuated by the SarsCov19 pandemic when aid was distributed to businesses.

When the Conte II government and the Draghi government activated the decrees to remedy the losses of traders and entrepreneurs, the sums distributed were often insufficient and totally inadequate for those companies that had hired staff without a legal contract during the pre-crisis period.

Enterprises that, for example, declared two legal workers, but then had a total of five employees, three of whom were not legal, meant that the enterprises received aid only on the basis of the legal number of legal workers, in many cases making it impossible to keep the remaining workers, resorting to forced redundancies and in many cases the definitive closure of production activities.

Another serious factor underlining a strong economic contraction of the Italian labour market is the lack of technological and innovative investments in the economic sector.

While many EU countries have invested long-term resources to implement a technological transition in the services market, Italy remains today reluctant to make a radical transformation in the various service sectors.

For example, many local realities in the food and wine sector have faced various problems in the distribution of products online, since they are rooted in the circular economy and strongly linked to the circumscribed territory and daily customers.

The inability of many people to move around freely and make their regular purchases has put local shopkeepers, traders and entrepreneurs in crisis, who have seen a net drop in their income.

Moreover, the reluctance to make a transition to e-commerce was the fuse that caused many businesses to close for good.

While it has been evident that companies already established in the e-commerce sector have significantly increased their profits or at least managed to stem the hemorrhage of losses, companies rooted in the real world have been cut off and are those who have suffered most.

On the one hand, this crisis has seen the disappearance of many local and zero-kilometer businesses which, at least historically, represent the backbone of the Italian economy, characterized in particular by the quality of their products, the value of human relationships and direct contact with customers.

On the other hand, there has been a tendency to create an e-commerce oligopoly: the large multinationals providing services and products, or those already using the Internet to distribute services, have seen their turnover increase exponentially during the Lockdown period, to the detriment of local and limited economic realities that were unsuited to online distribution.

Multinational companies such as Amazon, Google, fast food chains, and large retail chains such as IKEA saw a decisive leap in profits, since even before the pandemic much of their trade took place online.

According to data from the Milan Stock Exchange for the first half of 2021, the multinational Amazon recorded a 56.7% increase in shares compared to the previous year.

The need to begin a technological transition to the e-economy in order to give customers and entrepreneurs more opportunities to see their needs met has become evident.

This does not mean eliminating the conventional method of shopping, which is still the most human and rewarding way of the economic cycle, but it does mean increasing the channels of profit for small entrepreneurs and helping a struggling economic sector.

The Recovery Plan approved by the Draghi government and put in place by European institutions must be used in part to help local businesses make this fundamental economic transition and also

help those who remain most reluctant to use the valuable resources that the internet and e-commerce offer.

The advantage of the technological transition lies not only in increased profits and economic consolidation, but also in safeguarding the Green ecological transition, which is considered an essential paradigm for the future.

The SarsCov19 pandemic underlined the need and opportunity to move towards a branched economy: having the opportunity to buy or obtain services both directly and electronically is a valuable opportunity to enhance business growth, increase employment and expand economically.

Another point that we believe is crucial to analyze was the relationship between the closure of heavy industrial production facilities and the levels of improvement in air quality recorded during the general Lockdown.

During the general lockdown the levels of air and water quality and the repopulation of flora and fauna around the world led many to rethink the economic cycle with a particular interest in the Green economy and ecological protection.

In the Italian economic system, there are industrial and manufacturing realities that use production methods that are highly polluting and harmful to the population and vegetation. Italy has received numerous warnings of infringement procedures from the Court of Justice of the European Union for failing to comply with the limits imposed on emissions of CO₂ or other polluting gases, and unlike other countries, Italy still has many industries in strategic sectors that use highly polluting production methods.

Suffice it to say that in 2018, i.e. before the SarsCov19 pandemic, the percentage of Italian beaches that had been awarded the "Blue Flag" for water quality was 72% of the total.

In 2021 this percentage will exceed 90%, underlining among other things the return of marine species, small mammals and vegetation that had been absent from the area for some time.

Safeguarding biodiversity must be a focal point on which to restart and reverting to previous production methods is not a questionable solution at a time when technological and ecological innovation can make a difference.

It is no coincidence that the European Commission has approved a set of programmed documents and ambitious policies to revolutionize Europe's economic and productive structure by making a strong ecological turn: the European Green Deal.

European Commission President Ursula Von der Leyen declared that the Green Deal would be "a new landing on the moon" for Europeans.

The essential aim of the Green Deal is to achieve climate neutrality by 2050, totally de-carbonizing the European economic system to achieve zero CO2 emissions by 2050 through "the development of an energy sector based largely on renewable resources".

The point on Sustainable Industry especially emphasizes the cement and steel production sectors, considered real thorns in the side of the green transition pathway, which will be required to make a greater effort to de-carbonize the industry and achieve zero emissions.

Another key point of the European Green Deal concerns the building industry: according to most experts, the materials used to construct buildings in Europe and around the world are non-renewable. The idea is to use renewable synthetic materials for future constructions with an eye to the climate and in such a way as to be able to reduce the future cost of bills and make the purchase of houses more accessible to all, especially to young people and new families.

Also important is the project called "Single European Sky", which is part of the "sustainable mobility" heading with the aim of optimizing air transport and increasing the safety and efficiency of flying and encouraging environmentally friendly conditions.

Finally, the point on "biodiversity" is very ambitious, including the strengthening of organic farming methods, the promotion of the pollination process and the restoration of 25,000 km of free-flowing rivers, as well as the elimination of toxic pesticides from the market.

The Recovery Plan, together with the European Green Deal, may be the best opportunity to implement the long-awaited economic transition in Italy and other parts of the European continent that still have a backward, archaic and inefficient ecological and productive economic system. However, there is also a need for awareness among individual citizens. At such a delicate moment in history, each of us is called upon to do our part to implement civilized and responsible behavior.

The project should not be vertical in nature, starting from the institutions and reaching the citizens, but also and above all horizontal. We believe that rethinking the way we live together and sharing spaces and resources with the community is useful to recreate new values of community and solidarity that have been deteriorated and challenged during the Pandemic.

CHAPTER 2

The 2008 financial and economic crisis: Turning point of the decline of the European middle class

The Financial Crisis of 2008: Collapse of household consumption, rising unemployment and demographic decline

Although 2008 was the year in which the European middle class became aware of a slow but inexorable decline that had already been felt for some time, it is interesting to note that crises from distant parts of the world had already in the past directly affected the European economy and consumers, with serious consequences for wages, work, and consumption.

In both 1973 and 1979, the energy crises caused by instability in the Middle East had very serious economic and social consequences in Western Europe, effectively ending a long period of economic growth and development that had begun in the 1950s.

For the first time, governments had to resort to drastic measures to limit the very high cost of energy goods and to restrict people from travelling by car, hence the term 'Austerity'³⁷, which was to have great success in the terminology of fiscal and financial policy in the 2000s.

The energy crises of the 1970s had a serious impact on consumers' direct consumption of goods and their purchasing power. It also became evident that although the transition to a globalized economy was praised by many governments as indispensable and wealth-creating, the introduction of tariffs

³⁷ In 1973, following soaring oil prices, the Rumor government introduced the first austerity measures to tackle the energy crisis. The first 'Walking Sunday' was introduced, banning petrol-powered vehicles of all kinds and introducing alternating number plates. The result is better air quality and a general reduction in urban stress and noise pollution.

or embargoes by commodity-exporting countries had devastating consequences for the economies of developed countries.

Not only that; the economic emergency that led to a sharp rise in unemployment and a drop in consumption forced the government to sacrifice for the first time the social safety nets that characterized the reputation of the Western Welfare State, and which, through massive cuts in public spending and heavy privatization, exposed the first flaws in the Keynesian economic system.

Then, despite the general optimism due to the successes of European economic and political integration and the signing of the Lisbon Treaty, the economic and financial uncertainties due to the ever-closer interconnections of the world's economies worried Western governments, who lived in perpetual fear of new energy, production, or financial crises.

This is how we arrive at the pivotal moment we are interested in analyzing: the economic and financial crisis of 2008. The sub-prime mortgage crisis in the United States had generated an unprecedented speculative bubble, and toxic derivative securities had led to home loan borrowers being unable to make their payments and banks becoming seriously insolvent. The paralysis of the US real estate sector first affected Wall Street's financial markets and then had a domino effect on other world markets, to the point of significantly affecting the real economies of countries, especially Western ones, which are heavily dependent on the US economy and stability.

Until 2007, Italy had recorded continuous GDP growth on an annual basis, the unemployment rate was lower than in Germany (5.2% against 5.5% in the Federal Republic of Germany) and imports were also higher.

The Italian economy, which has always been characterized by small and medium-sized local family businesses, had to deal with an apocalyptic scenario caused by the 2008 financial crisis.

First, banks, given the general uncertainty and having seen the difficulty of American borrowers on mortgages and loans, raised the requirements for lending to families and businesses by a large margin, creating a strong disincentive to expand businesses, to develop and to hire.

Banking institutions demanded extremely demanding guarantees from small and medium-sized entrepreneurs, making it very difficult to access a loan to expand a business³⁸.

This led to a general slump in household consumption, a nationwide rise in unemployment³⁹, and the closure of many local and family businesses.

³⁸ Treasury data show a 48.8% contraction of loans to businesses in 2009-2011 and the closure and bankruptcy of 5,433 small and medium-sized enterprises in the same period. Ministry of Economy and Finance

³⁹ the unemployment rate in 2011 reached 9.64% nationwide, a negative record in Italian Republican history. INSTAT

In the second half of 2009, unemployment rose to 8.3% and 9,300 companies were forced to close their doors within a year and a half of the start of the financial crisis; this will rise to 82,000 in 2014 and 114,000 in 2017, until 2020, when a total of 1 million jobs will be lost in 12 years.

As was to be expected, it was mainly people born between the 1970s and 1990s who were entering the labor market for the first time or had recently entered it. Economic uncertainty and general difficulties led to a reduction in general recruitment, or at least to recruitment through part-time contracts, cocopros, on-call contracts or one-year internships. Many of those who already had an open-ended contract found themselves having to accept redundancy or in the worst cases losing their jobs permanently.

There is not only the labor and unemployment variant: the high level of public debt in the Italian state led to the creation of technical governments in Italy whose main purpose was to control the budget and put limits on the country's rampant debt⁴⁰.

In a period of restrictive fiscal policy, in which the government is forced by cutting public spending and balancing the budget to be unable to provide fiscal and propulsive shocks to the economy, the socio-economic situation deteriorates further.

The year 2011 is certainly the worst year since the beginning of the economic crisis: the European policy strongly focused on cutting spending and balancing the budget had generated the opposite effect to the one hoped for. A cut in public spending and bank lending had further reduced business and household consumption and led to a further rise in unemployment to well over 10% in Italy. And although Italy had agreed to a balanced budget, debt was inevitable to repair the damage done by the budget's restriction.

In the rest of Europe, the situation does not seem to be any better, especially the Europe of the PIGS countries (Portugal, Italy, Greece and Spain).

Greece⁴¹, extremely affected by the financial crisis, became the country that symbolized the rebellion against the Austerity policies imposed on the Greek country by the Troika.

The peculiarity of Greece, besides the very high and now unsustainable public debt, is the huge percentage of the working population employed in the public sector. The enormous public administrative and bureaucratic expenditure to cover the expenses of all these public offices had

⁴⁰ *The peak of the so-called Southern European public debt crisis occurred in the second quarter of 2012 when Italy's debt reached 1.9 billion and 123% of the debt-to-GDP ratio. Minister of Treasury and Finance 2012.*

⁴¹ *In 2012, Greece's debt-to-GDP ratio exceeded 200%, plunging it into an unprecedented financial crisis and triggering the European Union's bailout mechanism, the so-called Troika. This was the beginning of the hardest period in the history of the Greek economy, which would end with the referendum on submission to the Troika's bailout mechanism, given the enormous difficulty in meeting European parameters and the surge in popular discontent.*

become unsustainable, leading the Greek government to reform local authorities through the Callicrate Plan. Under the plan, prefectures were reduced from 51 to 13 and the number of municipalities was reduced from 914 to 325, about one third.

About 25,000 Greek civil servants lost their jobs, as local offices were instantly abolished because of the reform⁴².

Similarly, Spain is experiencing a similar scenario: the massive increase in unemployment, especially youth unemployment, which reached 49.7% in 2013, leads many people living in peripheral and more rural regions to leave their country of origin for good and go either to the urban areas of Spain or to emigrate abroad.

Galicia, a north-western region of Spain, with 48.8% of its population living in towns with fewer than 30,000 inhabitants, lost 7.7% of its population between 2009 and 2019⁴³. The same happened in those central or northern Spanish regions characterized by a rather agricultural or industrial economy: Castilla y Leon, Aragon, Castilla la Mancha, and Extremadura.

On the other hand, the Autonomous Communities in the south and especially the urban districts such as Madrid, Barcelona, Valencia, Seville, and the islands, which are real hotspots for tourism and the tertiary sector, have gained population and recorded a strong demographic increase.

Alongside this figure, which could almost indicate a second Spanish urbanization, there is however the worrying number of Spanish citizens who have left the country to seek work or training abroad. From 2009 to 2020, some 288,000 citizens have left Spain, of whom 69.4% are under 35 years old⁴⁴.

In Italy, the socio-economic class that has suffered most from the consequences of the economic crisis is the so-called middle class. This broadly generic term refers to households with an average annual income of between EUR 17,000 and EUR 25,000. Within this group, however, there are important distinctions.

The middle class living in residential areas, suburbs, or municipalities with a low average number of inhabitants has felt the effects of the crisis more strongly. This can be explained by the fact that areas with an average number of inhabitants have a higher density of family businesses, especially

⁴² *The astonishing fact about the Greek public system and the enormous waste of resources can be translated by this figure from the Greek Ministry of Labor. The Greek regions of Attica, Central Macedonia and Thrace had more forest rangers than the entire Commonwealth of Canada. 1,418 against 1,088.*

⁴³ *Data from the Ministry of the Interior of the Kingdom of Spain.*

⁴⁴ *In order, Germany, Great Britain, France, the United States and Argentina were the main destinations for young Spanish exiles seeking better working conditions or a better education. European Council*

those with no more than 3-4 employees, and that metropolitan cities offer more job opportunities, easier contracts, and greater economic and income possibilities than peripheral areas.

It is enough to think of the difficulties of the industrial and entrepreneurial districts of Emilia-Romagna and Veneto, which for decades have been the real driving force behind Italy's small and medium-sized business economy. In these areas, such as the province of Ferrara, Modena, the Vicenza area or the Rovigo and Padua suburbs have suffered a real carnage of small and medium-sized enterprises that have been forced to close temporarily and, in many cases, permanently.

From 2009 to 2019, Veneto⁴⁵ has seen the closure of 7 thousand companies, about 11.9% of the total number of bankruptcies at national level, even though Veneto accounts for only 8% of the total population.

The province with the highest number of bankruptcies is the province of Rovigo, with around 663 companies going bankrupt over the course of a decade; the Coronavirus pandemic may have greatly increased the average data across the Region and beyond.

Not only has there been a halt in bank lending for businesses and families who, due to economic difficulties and tax pressure, were in many cases unable to continue their activities, but there has also been a real collapse in private consumption.

The first natural consequence of the collapse in consumption is a decline in consumer optimism and a general tendency to increase private savings in anticipation of better times or at least to safeguard against the approach of further economic hardship.

The increase in private savings leads to a lowering of the consumption cart with a consequent decrease in demand and an increase in unemployment.

The Coronavirus crisis has further underlined this trend: according to the latest ISTAT report on household consumption in 2020 there was a drop of 9.2% in total consumption and a consequent loss of 126 billion in turnover.

In Italy, the decline was even more marked than in other countries, partly due to the technological and IT backwardness of some local companies, which remain reluctant to take part in IT development.

In fact, it has been noted that while local companies in wholesale goods and small businesses have suffered very serious damage, this has not been the case, or at least has been less the case for companies with e-commerce services or websites for buying and selling online.

One notable example, which is interesting to note, is the centuries-old winery Cantine Antinori, Tuscan excellence in fine wine production. Aided by the increase in people's free time, the

⁴⁵ Although the Veneto region represents 8.8% of the Italian population, it produces 13.2% of the national GDP. It has always been a region with a vocation for industry and tourism, but the economic crisis in the decade 2009-2019 has seen the closure of more than 20,000 family businesses in Veneto. Data from Confcommercio Vicenza

company's branding and online marketing strategies, they recorded a 7.7% increase in annual turnover despite the Lockdown and the economic crisis due to the Pandemic.

In the same way, food and beverage companies that used IT platforms to sell their products also recorded an increase in turnover despite the restrictions.

In addition, clothing shops, electronics shops, bookshops, and many others with e-commerce services were able to avoid the adverse effects of the Lockdown.

On the contrary, the most devastating effects were felt by small, family-run businesses that were reluctant to make technological progress and enter e-commerce. Especially businesses run by people over 50 years of age and therefore semi-illiterate or people without access to the internet have found themselves deprived of customers due to restrictions and closures resulting in huge losses and in worst cases the closure of their business.

The Lockdown underlined the economic shortcomings of certain economic activities that are struggling to enter technological development, especially local businesses that live off their usual, everyday customers without wanting to expand their customer base.

Even though it is precisely these local, zero-mileage businesses that represent the beauty of our Italian economy and the authenticity of our products, the Pandemic's restrictions have sent a huge number of these types of business into the abyss.

It also did not help the competition of multinationals in the distribution of goods such as Apple, Amazon, Ikea, McDonalds' and many others, which already had a technological and IT system for e-commerce by nature and started out with a total advantage.

Despite the very negative numbers, the SarsCov19 Pandemic has underlined the importance and opportunity of renewing the technological set-up of family-owned businesses and creating a technology and IT transition that benefits businesses. We hope that the Recovery Plan and Next Generation Europe funds will also and especially be used for a green and technological renewal for many backward and unproductive companies that nevertheless produce goods of excellence and quality.

The migrations of the 1990s-2000s in Italy and their impact on welfare and birth rates

Much more worrying was the impending demographic decline, which across Europe, and in Italy in particular, recorded the worst number of births since the year of Italian unification.

As mentioned in the previous chapter, Western society, especially the more educated, secular, and urban class, observes economic fluctuations to decide how many children to create. This is a fact for us.

Since the beginning of the years there has been a slow but lasting decline in the birth rate in Western Europe:

Italy fell below the natural growth threshold set at 2.1 children per woman in 1977, as did France, and Germany as early as 1971. This leads to the negative record of 1995 when the Italian birth rate is 1.19 children per woman, one of the lowest rates in Europe and the world. From then on, also thanks to the arrival of large migratory flows from Albania, Romania and the Balkan area, there is a timid but continuous recovery in the birth rate, reaching 1.46 children per woman in 2008, at the gates of the economic and financial crisis.

Initially, the welcoming migration policies launched by the successive Berlusconi and Prodi governments seemed to provide a positive boost to lift the country out of its demographic winter⁴⁶. Nevertheless, because of the economic difficulties generated by the economic crisis, the increase in the unemployment rate and the rather poor family assistance policies, the fertility rate of foreign women has also been falling sharply for decades.

In 1998, the fertility rate of foreign women in Italy was 2.36 children per woman, thus an excellent figure for demographic growth, given that the fertility rate of Italian women was 1.21 children per woman. However, in 2016 there is a rather negative figure: the fertility rate of foreign women according to ISTAT fell for the first time below the natural threshold of 2.1 or 1.97.

One of the key reasons could be the precarious level of employment contracts that affect many foreign families in Italy: workers in companies that have had to close or dismiss, undeclared or

⁴⁶ Between 1991 and 2006, the Italian Republic welcomed 155,000 Albanian, 366,000 Romanian, 72,000 Polish and 48,000 Ukrainian citizens on its territory. Ministry of the Interior
The reasons for this geographic origin are to be found solely in the economic difficulties and the social and civil crises in the eastern countries following the collapse of the Soviet Union.

underpaid contracts, jobs as domestic helpers or caregivers that are not always remunerated by a real contract; these are factors that have generated economic instability in foreigners present in Italy and that have led them to also reduce the number of births.

The same thing is happening in other EU countries.

Germany has witnessed a rather counter-current figure compared to other Western European countries: the decline in the birth rate of foreign women but at the same time a slow but sustained increase in native women. Women of Turkish origin or nationality had in 1981 a fertility rate of 3.3 children per woman, native women 1.83. In 1995, women of Turkish origin or nationality had a birth rate of 2.6 children per woman, while native women had 1.33. Finally, we come to 2008 where women of Turkish origin or nationality had a steadily declining birth rate of 2.2, while native women had experienced an overall increase, bringing the birth rate to 1.55 children per woman. France, which together with Ireland has always held the record as the most prolific country in Europe, appears to have experienced a steady decline but remains at a negative but still remarkable birth rate of 1.84 children per woman in 2019.

The foreign component, whether naturalized French or French-born in France, greatly influences the transalpine country's total birth rate. French, Italian, and German immigration differ strongly. While Italy, at least until recent years, has been affected by migration mainly from Eastern Europe, as has Germany from the countries of former Yugoslavia and Turkey, France's migratory composition is different because of its historical, political, and colonial past.

French people of North African, Sub-Saharan African and French Overseas Departments origin have a much higher birth rate than other foreign nationalities in Italy and France⁴⁷. As a result of religion, family ties, the low level of schooling of foreign women or women of foreign origin and an integration that is not always exemplary, foreign women in France are much more prolific.

⁴⁷ *Senegal, Burkina Faso, and Ivory Coast are the main origins of French nationals from former French West Africa. these low-middle-income, religiously oriented communities have contributed to the maintenance of a good fertility rate in metropolitan France.* Ministère des affaires Intérieures de la République Française.

The second migration crisis of 2011: 'impact on demography and Welfare in Western Europe

Overlapping with the difficulties of the economic and financial crisis in Western Europe was the migratory crisis generated by the Syrian Civil War and the political chaos of the Arab Springs, which led to the fall of Colonel Gaddafi's dictatorship in Libya⁴⁸. As for the situation in Syria, millions of Syrian citizens have had to leave the country due to the risk of persecution, war, humanitarian emergency and genocide, in most cases obtaining refugee status.

On the contrary, the fall of Colonel Gaddafi's regime has led Libya to very serious political, economic, and social instability. The country's rift between the government in Tobruk, the government in Tripoli and the militias in the south of the country has made Libya's land and sea borders a real sieve for neighboring countries.

A huge mass of people coming mainly from sub-Saharan African countries or from other North African countries such as Morocco and Tunisia have taken the Mediterranean route to reach the EU, in this case as economic migrants.

The difficulties of the European Union in creating a common policy to manage the flows, the precariousness of the boats and the lack of documents of this huge number of individuals have strongly split public opinion in Europe, especially in the Southern countries, which have experienced the continuous landings and the strong pressure on the Southern shore of Europe.

One would think that a new wave of migrants heading for Europe could lead to a new impulse towards the European demographic rate and its benefits; however, this is not happening due to several factors.

If we look at Italy it is good to analyze the migratory component that has arrived in the country since 2011: most of these individuals turn out to be people of childbearing age, i.e., between 18 and 35 years old, but it is also true that 90.4% of them turn out to be male. The huge gender gap that exists among those who land in the country is inhibiting for those who have the intention to create a family; moreover, it has been noticed that these people instead of applying for family reunification,

⁴⁸ Following a bombing by the western military coalition led by the French President Nicolas Sarkozy, on October 20 General Muammar Gaddafi is declared dead by the Libyan rebel militias. From then on, Libyan political and military instability, until then a stable blockade for migrants from Sub-Saharan Africa, fell into total anarchy, transforming Southern Europe into the center of gravity of the migratory crisis.

a rather spiky practice, prefer to work in Italy and send money directly to the families left in the countries of origin.

Moreover, the young age of these people and the institutional and economic precariousness of their countries of origin do not allow them to have the cultural background and practical skills to be introduced into the labor market, which in Italy is already sufficiently saturated and has serious problems in finding a job.

Unfortunately, many of these people have been recruited by Italian and foreign organized crime groups present on Italian territory.

Suffice it to say that in the areas of Foggia, Naples and Caserta, farms use these people to harvest agricultural produce, without giving them a regular contract and subjecting them to unbearable living and working conditions.

In Apulia, a farm worker should not work more than 34 hours a week by regional decree, but some farmers work 44 hours. Wages are severely reduced so that the 'caporalato' can profit from surplus labor and the absence of trade unions or associations to protect labor rights does not allow them a decent standard of living.

One could speak of a failed immigration policy, since given the difficulty in integrating this number of people into the Italian labor market and in moving towards a decent integration process, immigration in the last decade seems to show more costs than benefits.

On the contrary, if we look at Germany's immigration and integration policy under the Merkel government, there have been positive results from which Italy could take an example and improve its political decisions on immigration, welfare, and integration.

Germany had been suffering from an industrial production crisis for some time due to a lack of skilled labor, in a country that makes exports a major part of its GDP and wealth. Although Germany's GDP has been growing steadily since 2012 and the unemployment rate has reached pre-crisis levels, the German industrial system, especially the automotive, petrochemical and steel industries, has long suffered from a lack of labor in its factories.

Moreover, Germany, like Italy and other EU countries, has long suffered from a steadily declining birth rate, and the Merkel government saw in the migratory flows from the Middle East rather than from North and Sub-Saharan Africa, a chance to solve some structural problems of its economy. From 2011 to 2017, Germany took in some 900,000 refugees, mostly from Syria and Iraq. The anthropological component that has landed in the Federal Republic is diametrically opposed to that which has affected Italy and the countries of Southern Europe.

Syrian and Iraqi refugees, prior to the Syrian civil war, enjoyed a high standard of living; Syria, despite political and civil rights concerns, was an economically dynamic country, with a growing GDP and a lower unemployment rate than other countries in the Middle East region.

Many Syrians who arrived in Germany already had a technical diploma or degree from their country of origin, so they already had exponentially more skills and soft skills than migrants from Africa.

Introducing this type of person into the German labor market would not have been a long and complicated process. Instead, through a few months of job training accompanied by a course on the rudiments of the German language, Germany found itself with a potential number of people that could be introduced into its industries to curb the industrial decline and the difficulty in finding labor.

Furthermore, unlike the immigration from Southern Europe, where most migrants were young single men between the ages of 16 and 30, the immigration from Syria is mainly composed of families and households that have chosen to undertake the Balkan Route in a cohesive manner⁴⁹. These young families with dependent children have arrived in Germany, and data show that in the last four years, Germany's birth rate, also thanks to the contribution of these families, has been recovering. German Welfare and family and birth support policies at the institutional level have met the desire of these people to start a family in Germany and to give newborns the chance to have a higher standard of living than their parents.

Recent migration flows have put a strain on the political stability of individual European governments and the European Union as a whole. Despite the missions deployed by the European Commission in the Mediterranean and the migrant quotas to help Southern European countries from the constant pressure of migratory flows, European public opinion has been sharply divided on migration issues, aggravated by the precarious and sensitive economic situation in which many European economies find themselves.

The lower middle class has been most affected by recent migration flows, finding in these people potential competitors in work and in their already precarious economic conditions. Many of them have found comfort and support in the recent right-wing populist movements that, albeit with differences and divergences, have emerged homogeneously throughout Europe.

⁴⁹ *Of the 1.2 million refugees that the Federal Republic of Germany has taken in, more than 54% are established families. On the contrary, of the economic migrants who arrived in Italy, only 3.4% are families. Ministry of the Interior of the Federal Republic of Germany 2019. Ministry of Interior of the Italian Republic.*

Economic Populism: Immigration and Globalization as Factors in the Reawakening of Economic Sovereignty and Protectionism in Europe

The idea that newly arrived immigrants come to 'steal' jobs from the natives has been, and still is, the recurring leitmotif of the political campaigns of Eurosceptic right-wing populist parties.

We are talking about economic populism, i.e., the economic current of right-wing populist parties that has as its cornerstone the valorization of work and national production against unfair foreign competition and the encouragement of the hiring of native workers rather than foreign ones.

The European lower middle class has expressed its resentment and concerns about recent migration through political voting, bringing right-wing populist parties into parliament and in some cases into government for the first time in European history since the Second World War.

There is no country in the European Union that in the last decade has not seen the emergence of Eurosceptic right-wing movements, and above all in each of these countries these movements have obtained results and electoral victories that were unthinkable a few years ago.

In Italy the populist and Eurosceptic front is mainly formed by the Lega and Fratelli d'Italia parties, currently with 40.3% of the total electoral preferences, according to the latest Tecne poll of July 2021.

The Lega's brief governmental interlude was notable for a very strict migration policy, with a 90% reduction in landings compared to the previous government and the approval of strict laws on illegal immigration such as the "Decreto Sicurezza"⁵⁰.

In France, the ultra-nationalist and Eurosceptic Front National party led by leader Marine Le Pen succeeded in the feat of reaching the final runoff of the 2017 Presidential Elections by pivoting on the discontents of the French middle and working classes highly shaken by the series of Islamic terrorist attacks, the continuous entries of immigrants into France and the street demonstrations against large multinationals led by the Gilets-Jaunes.

The same phenomenon occurred in Germany, where the xenophobic and Eurosceptic Alternative for Germany party entered the Bundestag for the first time.⁵¹

⁵⁰ The Security Decree and the subsequent Security Bis Decree are two decrees proposed by the then Interior Minister Matteo Salvini in November 2020.

Approved by the Chamber of Deputies with 298 Yes and 224 No, and subsequently by the Senate, the decree places very strict limitations on illegal immigration, increasing the fight against terrorism, sanctions on NGOs and giving law enforcement agencies more resources and more freedom of action.

It would later be abolished by the subsequent Minister of Internal Affairs Luciana Lamorgese.

⁵¹ In the 2017 federal elections, with 12.6% and the election of 94 representatives to the Bundestag, Alternative for Germany became the first radical right-wing party to enter the German parliament since the country's unification. National Polls 2017

These, however, are all countries where immigration is a recent phenomenon; even in countries where immigration is non-existent, the rise of right-wing populist movements has been witnessed. Eastern Europe, especially the Visegrad group consisting of Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, and Hungary, has seen an exploit of right-wing populist parties.

In Hungary, where the percentage of immigrants in the country is 1.6%, the unprecedented flows that have hit the Balkan Route and made Budapest a transit area have alarmed the rural and conservative population, in a country that has never in its history witnessed any migratory phenomena other than those leaving the country after the collapse of the Soviet Union.

Even in Poland, where the percentage of foreigners is 1.1%, the national conservative party "PiS" Law and Justice, won both the parliamentary and presidential elections, pursuing policies hostile to migratory flows and reception policies as well as repression of civil rights and the LGBTQI+ movement⁵².

Europe is being shaken by the rise of right-wing populist movements and the social fabric is being severely torn apart, not least because of the economic decline of much of the population and the deterioration of social safety nets. The European institutions are slow to find far-sighted or medium-term policies to address the discontent of citizens, and they often demonstrate the inertia to react or the selfishness of the governments of individual European countries, which are reluctant to create common policies and decisions for the good of the European community.

Exacerbating the very sensitive socio-economic situation is the SARSCov19 pandemic, which has hit the whole world hard and Western Europe in particular.

Not only from a medical point of view, but also and above all from an economic one.

We are witnessing the closure of many family businesses, rising unemployment rates, falling GDP and an erosion of household purchasing power.

A climate of general pessimism has characterized both consumer markets and financial exchanges around the world, and drastic measures such as the Recovery Fund and Next Generation Europe have come to life to help the European Union react from this dramatic scenario.

In the next chapter we will discuss how the SARSCov19 pandemic has negatively impacted the health and economy of European countries first and foremost and the world at large; how this phenomenon will negatively affect the European birth rate and demography in the short term; and how the restrictive measures have given oxygen to right-wing populist movements to broaden the consensus of those who have seen much wealth lost by these restrictions.

⁵² The LGBT Free zone declared by a council of regions, provinces and cities in south-eastern Poland has been strongly criticized by European civil society, governments and institutions. The European Commission declared sanctions following the decision of Polish politicians and the Court of Justice of the European Union found the grounds to start infringement proceedings against Poland.

Chapter 3

The Fear of Demographic decline in Europe: How Nativism went from an ideology of Ultranationalist movements to a crucial topic in all Right-Wing populist parties' agenda

The economic consequences of the 2008 financial crisis and the recent migratory crisis that has hit the European continent have strongly shaken public opinion.

There has been no shortage of political reaction from both sides and a political and electoral polarization of this magnitude in Europe has not been seen since the Cold War when those in favor of economic liberalism clashed against those who supported socialism and social democratic ideas. The recent populist right-wing movements that have emerged in Europe in the last decade have been able to create proselytes and increase their electoral support also thanks to the creation of a narrative scheme with almost "fairy-tale" traits: the hero who saves a community, the antagonists, the community to be saved.

In all the countries of the European Union where right-wing populist parties have achieved unprecedented electoral exploits, the same path is followed.

I would like to focus on who has been identified as the enemy or enemies of the Nation; then analyze by whom this heterogeneous group that right-wing populism defines as "People" is composed.

We will analyze the most striking electoral successes of right-wing populism in Europe, focusing on a recent political event worthy of attention: the transition of Bossi's Northern League to Matteo Salvini's League and how the anti-immigration campaign succeeded for the first time in making the League no longer a regionalist party but a national one and well established in the South.

Finally, in recognition of what the Leaders of the Populist Right call "Enemies of the People," we will analyze the electoral campaign of Hungarian Premier Viktor Orbán, in which it is evident in his statements and election campaigns who are responsible for European demographic decline and those who threaten Hungarian and Christian society.

The Transformation of Political Nativism

"From a far-right ideology to a common substratum of populist movements of the European right"

According to Max J. Castro's definition, the term Nativism means:

"The policy or practice of preserving or reviving an indigenous culture". Other meaning is to indicate a right-wing policy aimed at protecting the interests of native inhabitants against those of immigrants, including support of measures to restrict immigration."

There is no real date that coincides with the birth of political Nativism; already in the 30's the German national socialist ideology considered as natives all those citizens of German ethnicity who were scattered throughout the European continent outside the borders of Germany and who were united by the factors of language, religion, culture, and ethnicity.

The harassment, persecution, and abuse that they suffered in countries where ethnic Germans were a conspicuous minority were the driving force to find in these people a strong electoral consensus for the expansionist aims of the Führer Adolf Hitler: to expand the borders of the Reich towards the East, to ensure that these native people, but residing outside Germany, could live within the same nation.

In the 30's and 40's the term nativism was also permeated by a certain romantic and nostalgic culture; the Nazi paganism introduced in its rituals also the Germanic pagan religions, to remind that before the Christianization of Europe the Germans already had a common substratum and culture; so also many Scandinavian populations and of the Baltic area relive the folklore of the first native peoples intact from the external contaminations aimed to underline the purity of their own people and the aversion to allochthonous elements.

With the beginning of the first migrations to Europe from the 60s of people from former European colonies, nativism takes on strong economic and social connotations.

Unskilled migrants who came to Europe to find work found themselves competing with the labor force of nationals, and since they needed more work and money to survive and support their families, they were initially willing to work in conditions not always suited to the working environment, underpaid, and often exploited.

As a result, hiring immigrants in European industries and factories was more advantageous than hiring locals who required more stable working conditions, higher wages, and union rights.

The first popular discontents were brilliantly exploited by far-right movements of neo-Nazi and neo-fascist inspiration that pushed for the protection and preservation of local labor and strongly opposed immigration from non-European countries.

However, in the 60's, 70's and 80's this ideology was relegated and marginalized to the political circles of the extreme right, because given the strong economic growth that was affecting the European continent, the high percentage of employment and relative prosperity, the immigration of foreign workers was seen in a positive light, necessary and not opposed by most of the electorate⁵³.

With the development and consolidation of the capitalist economy from the 90s onwards and with the deterioration of working conditions due to an increasingly aggressive liberalization of the labor market around the world, the issue of the labor market and foreign workers becomes a very sensitive topic and increasingly considered by the policy.

Many companies on the European continent have opted for the relocation of both fiscal and production sites to countries where labor was more advantageous and less expensive, all to the detriment of local labor in which many workers and employees are dismissed to allow the company to migrate abroad to implement profits.

In addition, foreign competition from countries where labor is very cheap has caused many of these countries to start producing the same goods at a much cheaper cost but with a very bad quality. China, Bangladesh, Pakistan, Vietnam are some of the countries from which huge quantities of products like the originals are exported with poor quality and bad working conditions.

The European Union and national legislations have been very clever in creating national and European certification marks to guarantee the quality, traceability, and origin of products and to put a brake on unfair competition⁵⁴.

⁵³ Despite the initial impact of non-European migration to Western Europe in the 1960s-70s-80s and the discontents that followed, the European economy performed well. Between 1961 and 1981 the Western European economy grew at a rate of 2.5% per year. In addition, the success of European integration promises Europe a long period of political stability, peace and progress.

⁵⁴ *The European Union Patent Office with its headquarters in Munich and the Intellectual Property Office with its headquarters in Alicante are fundamental bodies for the traceability, development and ingenuity of European workers and key partners in European anti-trust.*

Even multinationals, once a symbol of economic growth and promoters of mass consumption, have suffered an increasing deterioration of reputation especially in European and Western society: very rich companies, often richer than individual nation states, which aim at profit to the detriment of people, environment, and rights of all.

In the light of this, one can understand the political propaganda of right-wing populist movements in the economic field, which set themselves up as protectors of local workers and national production, almost always synonymous with quality and excellence, against greedy global multinationals of squalid quality.

The promotion of local work, the celebration of small and medium-sized family-run businesses and the strenuous defense of national Made In has always been and still is a cornerstone of the propaganda and electoral program of right-wing populist parties.

In some cases, not only unfair competition from abroad is viewed with hostility by right-wing populist politicians, in many cases even European legislation in the field of recognition of quality marks and production limits of the agro-food industry has been strongly criticized by many European right-wing parties.

The Nutriscore, for example, is a European Union measure approved in 2018 by the European Commission that is based on a method of labeling and evaluating the quality of products in which grades from A (maximum) to E (minimum) on the quality of the products are applied on the packaging of agri-food products.

What caused a lot of discussion and ignited the debate in Italy was that for example Parmigiano Reggiano with PGI mark and PDO recognition found in supermarkets in France was given a medium/low rating (D), but artificial milk powder created by the multinational dairy industry Nestlé was given a very high rating (A). According to some members of the populist right, European policies on consumption aim to increase the profits of global multinationals to the detriment of the local economy and national excellence, also serve to discredit national products Made in Italy because other European countries are "jealous" and "unable" to produce similar excellence⁵⁵.

⁵⁵ *Noteworthy was the intervention of the right-wing populist leader Matteo Salvini, on the European Commission's decision to reduce the production of oranges from Sicily to be introduced in orange juice. In the central square in Brescia, the Lega leader made the following statements: 'do you realize? They told us to reduce the number of Sicilian oranges in orange juice and to replace them with chemical products or oranges from Tunisia... Tunisia! Let them tell it to someone else, our oranges are the best in the world and Sicilians are envied by all for the goodness of their oranges. The politicians in Brussels should stop using strange substances and instead come and taste this wonder'.*

Noteworthy was in this regard the intervention of the Leader of the right-wing party Fratelli d'Italia Giorgia Meloni during a TV show very famous in Italy in which she criticized the Nutriscore and the damage to Made in Italy:

"They want to offer us oranges from Tunisia, hazelnuts from Turkey, powdered milk from Hong Kong and fruit from Colombia; however, Parmigiano Reggiano, a millennial quality product on which scientific and dietary benefits have also been recognized, is not.

So, gentlemen, what are we talking about? Let's be clear: Europe has always been envious of Italian excellence and products and does everything to create ad hoc laws and bureaucratic obstacles to avoid the Italian hegemony in the food sector.

At the base of contemporary nativism, therefore, we can also identify the variant of nativism understood as national production and defense of the local economy against unfair competition from multinationals⁵⁶ and exporting countries with cheap labor; the idea that Italy and other European countries are lands of production of excellence and that these need special protection even at the cost of introducing duties and triggering a trade war and a race to protectionism.

⁵⁶ For more information, follow the case of the 2015 protest in Florence against the construction of a McDonalds chain in Piazza della Signoria, a UNESCO World Heritage Site.

Analysis of the "People" concept of right-wing populist parties in Europe: traditional supporters of right-wing populism and new proselytes

During the various street demonstrations, political rallies, and television programs in which exponents of right-wing populist parties are present, one notices almost mechanically the repetition of terminologies that indicate or try to circumscribe a group of people linked by common roots and values to whom they want to address their political message.

Terms like "We," "People," and "our people" are very recurrent in the words and election campaigns of populist exponents, as if their statements and enunciations identify the will of a very large number of people.

Exactly who are the biggest supporters of right-wing populist parties today?

It can be said that the most important supporters of these movements can be divided into two large macro-groups: traditional supporters and recent voters.

Regarding traditional supporters, because of eminent studies and recurring electoral polls over the past decades, it can be said with certainty that the standard followers of right-wing populism are mainly men rather than women, wage earners rather than freelancers, rural rather than urban dwellers, and religious and practicing people rather than secular or non-religious people.

These four categories are key to understanding the electoral base of right-wing populism, and for each it is necessary to analyze socioeconomic conditions, the values they refer to, electoral behavior, and contingent and future fears.

Men tend to be more likely to support right-wing populist parties than women, although recently this gap has been narrowing over time:

In the 2017 French Presidential Election among those who supported Marine Le Pen's Front National, 56.7% were men while 43.3% were women; the figure of women supporters is strongly up from the previous election where the FN was chosen by 62% men. Most likely this increase of women supporters is to be found in the Front National candidate Marine Le Pen: a woman, mother of a family, mother of 3 children. This character has succeeded in gaining the sympathy of French

women belonging to the middle class, freelancers, and young women with conservative and feminist sympathies on the one hand⁵⁷.

However, it is found that men are more likely to vote for populist right-wing movements rather than liberal conservative or more moderate parties.

In the 2019 European Elections, the Fratelli d'Italia party gets 6.5% of the votes, of which 7.1% are men and 5.8% are women.

Again, in Spain the xenophobic populist party Vox in the April 2019 General Election gets an astonishing 10.2% and the election of 24 deputies in parliament.

In this electoral round we can see how gender strongly influences the choice of vote: 59.3% of Vox voters are precisely men.

The Vox party differs slightly from other right-wing populist parties for the often violent and very aggressive tones of its exponents: the use of weapons, the legitimization of violence at the land and sea borders of the Kingdom, ethnic clashes, mass deportations; these are some of the themes and nuances with which Santiago Abascal and the exponents of his movement tend to express themselves during street rallies.

This use of strongly machismo and violent language is by far preferred by the male gender and, on the contrary, the female gender does not seem to recognize itself in such heated and aggressive tones.

As mentioned earlier though, should the right-wing populist candidate be of the female gender, support from the female gender seems to increase and at the same time the male gender decreases. For exploits of the xenophobic German populist party Alternative for Germany in the 2017 federal election, the contribution of the female electorate was crucial.

The candidate Frauke Petry, mother of 6 children, entrepreneur before being a politician and a woman with strong ambitions, has been a key figure in gaining support from the female gender towards German populism; according to a poll, 49.3% of AfD voters were women, a figure therefore equal to the male gender⁵⁸.

A great deal of support for right-wing populism traditionally comes from rural areas and peripheral and agricultural districts in roughly every Western European country and in the West in general. Small towns with a population of between 2,000 and 20,000 are the main source and substratum of votes that flow into the successes of right-wing populist parties.

⁵⁷ *Politico* 2018 'Behind electoral exploits of Madame Le Pen'.

⁵⁸ *Deutsche Welle*. Nov 2017.

Rural dwellers are most often lower-middle class families where both or only one parent earns average wages or holds jobs rooted in the local economy, farming, or owning small and medium-sized businesses.

The ratio of right-wing populist voters who reside in urban centers is far lower than those who live in rural areas and districts.

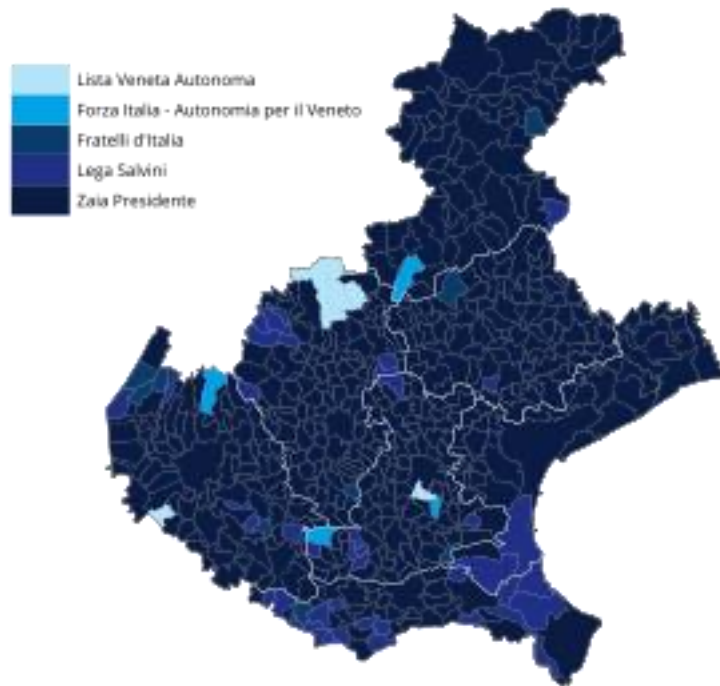
There tends to be unconsciously more conservative views of the world and society living in these areas, there is a much higher rate of participation in religious services than in urban areas, the rate of immigration is much lower, and social mobility and economic dynamism is struggling to take shape.

The modernity and social progressivism that prevails in urban areas is frowned upon by the rural population who instead remain anchored to traditional values and customs or at least strongly reject the new progressive and liberal ideologies.⁵⁹

Concepts such as Green Economy, Gender theory, LGBTQ rights, refugee welcoming and feminism are viewed if not with hostility, at least with great distrust, since according to many conservative voters they aim at social disintegration and the overturning of traditional common living.

⁵⁹ *Disentangling how Populism and radical host ideologies shape Citizens pp. 14-48.*

Let's take as an example two data coming from the Regional Elections in Italy that took place in 2020 respectively in the Veneto Region (stronghold of the League in Italy) and Tuscany (stronghold of the center-left but where the League quadrupled its consensus compared to 2014).



Results of the League at the majority level in the Veneto Region in the regional elections of 2020

As you can see from the map, the center-right coalition has totaled 77% of the total consensus, therefore an overwhelming result far greater than the polls that devote the victory of Governor Luca Zaia reconfirmed between 65-70% of the consensus.

However, it is possible to notice the difference in votes between the capital cities and the small neighboring and peripheral municipalities.

In the province of Padua, where the center-right coalition has received 75.5% of the consensus, it can be noticed that in the city of Padua (207 thousand inhabitants) the center-right coalition has received 56.6% of the consensus, but in the municipalities of Cittadella (21 thousand inhabitants) and Monselice (17 thousand inhabitants) the same coalition has obtained respectively 78.8% and 80.3% of the total consensus⁶⁰.

⁶⁰ Home Office 2020. Regional election results live and by constituency.

Usually, what emerges from the contrast between the center and the periphery in electoral results is that urban cities tend to prefer parties and movements with liberal, progressive and Europeanist tendencies, while rural and peripheral areas prefer conservative parties with more populist tendencies⁶¹.

This may not be valid for those regions or areas where society is traditionally aligned and uses to vote in a certain way.

Tuscany is a traditionally center-left region⁶², with socialist and social democratic sympathies. Here even the small peripheral and provincial municipalities have always largely voted for left or center-left coalitions, however, in recent years, thanks to the success of right-wing populism led by the revolution of Matteo Salvini and the League and later Fratelli d'Italia, even here things are changing⁶³.

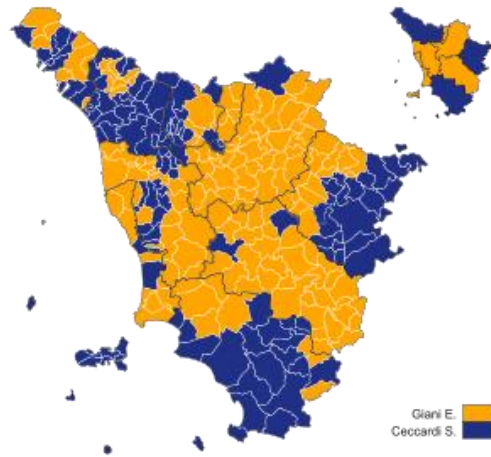


District Results of the 2015 Regional Election (Center left 48% - center right 20.2%)

⁶¹ Huntington. *The center-periphery fault to explain the clash of civilizations*.

⁶² From 1946 to the present day 2021, Tuscany has always been led by left-wing or center-left governments.

⁶³ In the 2020 regional elections, the center-right coalition doubled its support compared to the 2015 elections, touching a record. Interior Ministry 2020. *Regional election results live and by constituency*.



District results of the 2020 Regional Elections (Center left 48.2% - Center right 40.5%)

How was it possible that the region historically more oriented to the Left of Italy, where since the beginning of the Republican history has always been governed by the center-left, today things have changed so substantially that many political scientists call it "the Ohio of Italy"?

Even though in Tuscany a philo-socialist sentiment is still strongly rooted and that many social problems such as migration, integration and aid to poverty have been placated in part by humanitarian associations, by the Catholic Church and by center-left governments, even here the political perception is changing.

The very clever political strategy implemented by Matteo Salvini to transform the Northern League from a regionalist to a national party has also involved the Tuscan red stronghold.

The migratory crisis that has involved Italy from 2011 to today has generated discontent even among the most progressive and initially welcoming population; the mismanagement of regional governments with regards to migratory flows has meant that the coexistence between migrants from Africa and the poor sectors of the Italian population has not been able to find a peaceful coexistence, also due to the continual cutting of social security benefits and the absence of adequate integration policies.

In the very recent 2020 regional elections, the Lega's candidate, Susanna Ceccardi, pivoted on themes such as blocking immigration, the legitimate possession of weapons, zero tolerance towards mafia activities and tax evasion and the fight against the proposed Ius Soli law. The center-right coalition has doubled its votes compared to 5 years earlier and 1 month before the elections the Tecne and YouTrend polls were showing a head-to-head between the center-left coalition led by

Eugenio Giani (44-46%) and the center-right coalition led by the first mayor of the League in Tuscany Susanna Ceccardi (42-44%).

However, the uncontested rise was quelled by a resounding political suicide of the right-wing candidate Ceccardi, when a few weeks before the vote she left herself open to statements aimed at the privatization of Tuscany's public health care⁶⁴.

The public health of the Region of Tuscany boasts awards of excellence in Italy and in Europe, and the regional governments, since health care in Italy is the competence of the Regions, have always invested large amounts of resources in public health care and in the regional hospital system, guaranteeing adequate and timely care to all.

Here is the first limitation of right-wing populism: if they criticize and actively proselytize problems of a recent nature or where there are social problems, they succeed in increasing their consensus, but as soon as they propose to modify previously satisfactory policies and change policies in the medium to long term, consensus rapidly declines with all the consequent electoral damage.

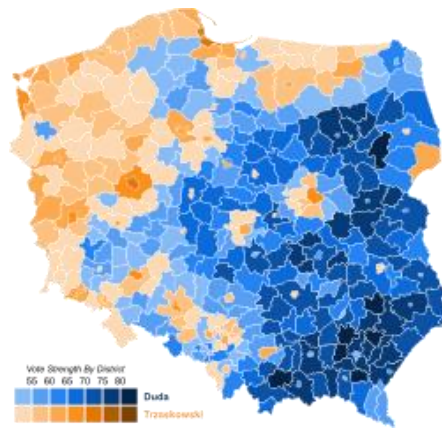
Right-wing populism seems to be for many a quick solution to the discontent of the contingency and the criticality of the moment especially in the economic and social field, but when it comes to long-term policies on more complicated and delicate issues the electorate has more confidence in moderate and traditional parties.

To go beyond the regional level to see the divergences between the center and the periphery in the choice of right-wing populist parties, we can go up to the national level by considering the legislative and presidential elections in the Republic of Poland.

Poland is a country that tends to be social-conservative and profoundly Catholic, that is witnessing strong industrial and economic growth and that alternates between pro-European tendencies on the one hand and national conservative-sovereignists tendencies on the other.

If we look at the electoral results of the recent presidential elections which saw the right-wing candidate of the Law and Justice party Andrej Duda as the winner, we can see that the country is literally split in two not only politically but also geographically.

⁶⁴ According to a 2014 report by the Ministry of Health, Tuscany's public health system is the best in Italy, on a par with that of Emilia-Romagna.



Polish Presidential Elections 2020

In Blue: Law and Justice

In Yellow: Civic Coalition

Northwestern Poland, as can be seen from the map of the 2020 presidential election, supported the Civic Coalition, a liberal conservative, pro-European and centrist movement that places Poland's crucial role in the European Union, Atlanticism and the guaranteeing of laws.

The South-Eastern part of the country, on the other hand, strongly supports the national-conservative, Eurosceptic and xenophobic Right and Justice party which advocates an illiberal political vision, based on the country's Catholic Christian roots, zero immigration and economic liberalism.

Even in this case, right-wing populism obtains excellent results in the small rural towns of southern and eastern Poland, while they drop drastically in the large port cities, in the large urban centers and in the western area on the border with Germany.

Right-wing populism and high birth rates: Christian parties and movements remain the stronghold of religious families rather than right-wing neo-populism

Still looking at Poland and the recent presidential elections, here, too, the relationship between the success of right-wing populism in areas where people with a high rate of participation in religious services live is strong and well-established.

Southern Poland is the least developed area of the country, or at least where most of the rural population and most of the working class engaged in the country's chemical, petrochemical, and metallurgical industries are concentrated.



The European "Bible Belts"

As can be seen from the map of European "Bible Belts", southern Poland is the area with the highest level of religious participation in the country and the area in which the right-wing populist Right and Justice party has received the most support.

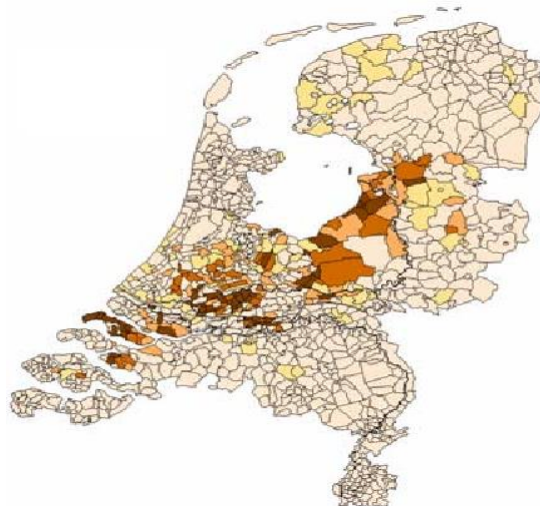
For example, in the Voivodeship of Pre-Carpathia, the southernmost district of the country, the Right and Justice party in the presidential elections received 62.4% (51.03% nationally); at the same time, the percentage of those who perform religious services at least once a week is 58.7% (44.3% nationally).

On the contrary, in the most liberal and economically dynamic district of Poland, i.e., the Western Pomeranian Voivodeship, the liberal and pro-European coalition Civic Breakfast obtained 59.4% and here the figure for participation in religious services is 31.6% (lowest national figure).

We have therefore analyzed how usually in most cases, the social groups that most support right-wing populist movements and parties are mainly men, people living in rural and peripheral areas, people with high participation in religious services and low-middle income earners.

At this point, we only need to observe whether large households with a high number of children are likely to vote for right-wing populist parties, thus whether there is a direct relationship between high household birth rate and propensity to vote for right-wing populism.

We will use the European Bible Belts, in this case from the rural Netherlands and in that area where the percentage of people adhering to the Calvinist Reformed Church⁶⁵, thus a very rigid and conservative branch of Protestantism, is very high; and then we will observe the electoral behavior of the population in these areas.



Municipalities in the Netherlands: gradations from light yellow to dark red indicate increasing percentages of adherents to Reformed Calvinism

⁶⁵ *The Dutch Reformed Church, a fundamentalist branch of Calvinist Protestantism, is the religion professed by 10.6% of Dutch people. It is characterized as a very conservative branch, opposed to abortion, same-sex marriages and issues such as euthanasia and the legalization of drugs. Its followers make the Bible their primary source of reference in behavior and conduct. Reuters*

As can be seen from the map, the areas of high density of professing Calvinists in the Netherlands, turns out to be a curved line running from the coast of Zeeland, through the Southern Netherlands to Gelderland and north into Drenthe.

Rather than voting for or supporting right-wing populist parties such as Geert Wilders' Party for Freedom or Thierry Baudet's Forum for Democracy, Calvinist Protestants, who have a much higher birth rate than other Christians or non-religious people, seem to prefer Christian social or Christian conservative parties⁶⁶.

The parties most preferred by Dutch Calvinists are the Christian Social Union and the Reformed Political Party.

The first is a conservative Christian party but inspired by socialist visions and Protestant inspiration, the second is a very old party in the Dutch political scene which aims at a vision of society inspired by the Bible and its dictates with very critical views on abortion, euthanasia, legalization of drugs and homosexual marriages⁶⁷.

The Christian Social Union and the Reformed Political Party have reached 5.1% nationally.

However, in the town of Urk, one of the major centers of Dutch Protestant Calvinism, the Reformed Political Party (SGP), in the very recent legislative elections of 2021, obtained 54.4% of the total votes, an absolute majority.

In contrast, Wilders' Freedom Party received a modest 13.8%.

The Netherlands' total birth rate stands at 1.86 children per woman, but in districts where Reformed Calvinists are at least 30% of the population, the birth rate soars.

In the municipality of Ouddorp, stronghold of the SGP (Reformed Political Party), the birth rate is 3.13 children per woman, as well as Dorpskerk, a small municipality of 4,500 inhabitants, the birth rate reaches the impressive figure of 3.44 children per woman.

It would seem, therefore, that where the birth rate increases exponentially, people prefer parties with a Christian social or conservative Christian vocation, rather than right-wing populist parties

⁶⁶ Historically, it is the Reformed Political Party (SGP) and to a lesser extent the Christian Social Union that have been the parties of reference for Dutch Calvinists from 1907 to the present day.

⁶⁷ *The real essence of this party and which many people miss is the vision of society as "Pillarization": Pillarization is the vision of society according to which the various social groups should be divided and segregated according to their religious affiliation, so if you belong to the Calvinist faith you should attend schools, read newspapers, create sports associations, listen to the radio and hang out only with Calvinist people.*

Former US Secretary of Education Betsy DeVos, a member of the American Republican Party, was also a strong advocate of this view.

DeVos characterized her tenure by generously funding and building private religious schools, especially Protestant ones.

As her surname may help us understand, DeVos, who hails from Michigan, is of Dutch origin and descent, and her ancestors all professed Calvinist Reformed beliefs.

Chapter 4

The political and propaganda methods of right-wing populism

To explain the success and rise of right-wing populism in Western Europe in the last decade, it is necessary to analyze the social, economic, and political context on several fronts.

Among the various European countries and the heterogeneity that make up the societies of each, it is not possible to identify a genesis of populism identical in each reality, but there are factors and "rouge files" that unite the genesis of this phenomenon.

First, independent of the various political positions of each and the aversion or not to the revival of the phenomenon in Europe, the populist right-wing politicians must be given credit for two important achievements in the political landscape and in the perception of popular participation in politics:

on the one hand the restoration of traditional political venues (squares, conventions, rallies), on the other hand the new and revolutionary use of a new milieu of doing politics: social networks.

Right-wing populism is not a univocal and homogeneous current, however, in any political reality in which it has appeared, it owes much of its success to the contribution that the new means of communication, social networks, have allowed it to have a direct and vital channel with its followers or to broaden its support.

From the 80s onwards, in a differentiated but constant way, Western Europe has witnessed a continuous disaffection to politics with a consequent decline in participation in politics, both active and especially passive.

Accomplice to this mass abandonment of the ballot box has been the change in people's perception of the effectiveness of the work of governments in real life and a tendency to lose esteem for the once charismatic figure of the professional politician.

With the occurrence of the domination of economics over politics, the professional politician has been transformed from a person close to and in contact with the electorate into an apparatus member of ministries and cabinet offices, creating a considerable gap between him and his electorate.

The barricading of professional politicians in offices, meetings, committees and parliamentary assemblies and the removal from the public square has generated in the eyes of the voters a

tendency to distrust politicians, now considered cold and detached and totally unaware of the gap that exists between the legal country and the real country.

The ability and the success of the politicians of the neo-populism has been just this: to recognize the discontent and the disaffection of the public opinion on the figure of the politician, re-proposing the figure of the charismatic leader close to the people, always present in the squares of the cities and that stands in defense of a large slice of population forgotten by the institutions⁶⁸.

And since the traditional places of political encounter were now empty and deserted, where did the millions of voters who had long deserted the squares and rallies go to shelter?

Exactly in the social networks, where without the commitment of having to leave the house and put on a coat, anyone with a click could find themselves and read, comment, and share the thoughts, words, and content of anyone else.

Not only that, to win back the trust of those who had lost curiosity in traditional politics required the use of a short, simple, direct, and often unorthodox language.

If on the one hand Social Networks have had the great merit of interconnecting people from all over the world, on the other hand it has greatly reduced the attention and critical sense of users who only through a quick scrolling of phalanx can dismiss in record time the contents considered too long, boring, or otherwise not engaging.

Even traditional politicians and those belonging to moderate parties have tried to take cover and appear on the new media in order not to leave the right-wing populist politicians the monopoly of the use of social media, without however obtaining the same positive results.

Accomplice to the use of too long phrases, with complicated and enigmatic terms or content that is not captivating and provocative, the number of followers that politicians like Matteo Renzi, Enrico Letta, Silvio Berlusconi etc. is not remotely comparable to the millionaire numbers of followers of Matteo Salvini and Giorgia Meloni, omnipresent on social screens.

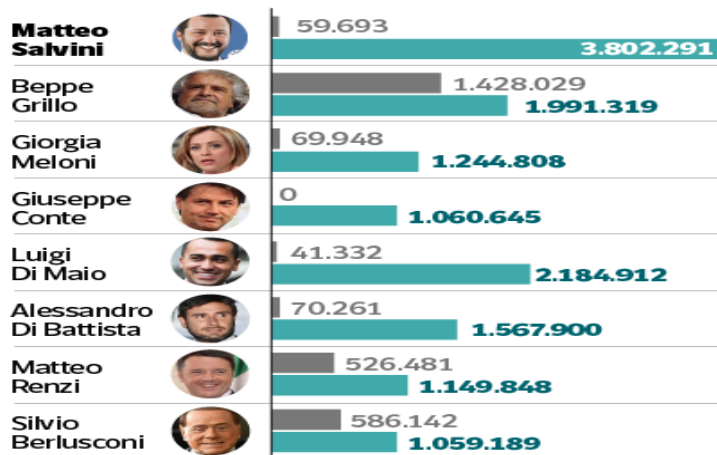
⁶⁸ In Italy, for example, political participation has been slowly but steadily declining: in the 1976 general election 93.4% of the population entitled to vote voted.

At the last general election in 2018, 72.5% of the eligible population voted.

⁶⁸ The electoral explosion of the Partito Fratello d'Italia can also be explained by the fact that since the formation of the Draghi government, formed by all the parties present in parliament except for the FdI, it has remained the only party in opposition, and therefore also a symbol for those who are not in the current government.

Il confronto con i politici italiani su Fb

■ Gennaio 2014 ■ Ottobre 2019



Fonte: Report di Luca Morisi presentato a Torino sabato 12 ottobre 2019

Social Networks and Numbers: The top 5 politicians by number of initial social networks all belong to right-wing populist or populist movements (Source: La Repubblica)

Short and repetitive slogans, phrases of just 20-30 words at most, photos with sharp and garish colors, images in which political enemies are portrayed with comic, funny or pouty faces, managing to attract attention and often that cascade of insults and mockery by users that Anglo-Saxon analysts ironically define "shit storming".

We have referred to the most influential and well-known personalities of Italian politics, but looking at the rest of Europe and beyond, we can see that this modus operandi is the same in many political realities.

The former President of the United States of America Donald Trump is certainly the emblem of the shift of the center of gravity of political participation in Social Networks. The POTUS of the Republican Party counts on Facebook about 32 million followers, the Democratic successor Joe Biden only 9 million.

However, it is not only social networks that have put under the spotlight the harsh and unusual tones of right-wing populist politicians, even the methods of traditional political participation, such as television, radio, and street rallies, have been distorted in their content, becoming the privileged places where right-wing populism has found more proselytes.

In this chapter, in addition to analyzing the methods of propaganda and political activity of right-wing populism through social and new media, we will also observe the heterogeneity of this political movement among the various countries of Western Europe, noting that as the issues and problems of each country vary, so do the targets and the method of making policy of the various

leaders of right-wing populism. To do so, we will compare Matteo Salvini's campaign for the 2019 European Elections and Marine Le Pen of the Front National for the 2017 French Presidential Elections.

Next, we will analyze the electoral volatility of the supporters of right-wing populism, where the new supporters of right-wing populism come from, which parties and movements have disappointed voters' expectations, the internal and external factors of the abandonment of moderate and traditional parties, and we will see who are the challengers of right-wing populism, i.e. that set of civic groups, prominent people and other political movements that often and willingly manage to curb the advance of right-wing populism.

For this last point you will be surprised by a very interesting factor: if in most cases to limit the rise of a right-wing populist party is an expanded coalition of moderate parties as in the case of Germany to inhibit AfD's run, there are cases like the Italian one where to limit and decrease the support of a populist party is another populist party: it is the case of

Lega and Fratelli d'Italia, where in 2019 the former counted 33.6% of consensus and the latter 9.2% while today, we find ourselves with Salvini's movement at 20.4% and Meloni's at 21%⁶⁹.

Social Networks and Populism: key combination for the success of right-wing populism in Europe

"Social media gives the right to speak to legions of imbeciles who used to speak only at the bar after a glass of wine, without harming the community. They were immediately silenced, whereas now they have the same right to speak as a Nobel Prize winner. It's the invasion of imbeciles."

Umberto Eco

The quote from Umberto Eco used at the beginning of this paragraph is purely provocative; what we are interested in analyzing is the revolution that social networks have introduced in our society: the speed with which a message can reach in record time and at distances of kilometers millions of connected users.

Before the advent of social media, political communication was essentially vertical.

The revolution of social media is first a concept of quantity and length: when you want to share a content, the social platform imposes a limit of lines; it is not possible to go on in rivers of words without limit, once the threshold of 500 lines is exceeded, the post is blocked forcing you to reduce the length of the content.

The lightning speed of the posts in social networks has been cleverly studied and analyzed by the leaders of right-wing populism; the content that you publish must follow the same marketing strategies of a product to be placed on the market:

the post must be short, catchy, provocative, understandable to the multitude, shareable and have a targeted and precise target.

Spending time on social media is a relaxing activity, in which people enjoy in their free time, on weekends or in daily breaks to unplug from the hectic or boring life of everyday life, so long and boring content is quickly dismissed with a quick scrolling of phalanx directed to the next post or content.

Right-wing populist politicians have well understood that the goal is not to explain an articulate concept or analyze a piece of data, but to grab the attention of the online audience.



Post by the Leader of Italia Viva Matteo Renzi



Post by U.S. President Donald Trump: note the brevity, use of bold words, and simplicity of language.

Another aspect to consider in addition to the content in social networks is the language used. In addition to brevity, which, as we have said, makes content appealing and easily readable and understandable, the tone with which it is written is also fundamental to the attention of the multitude.

We have noticed that unlike moderate politicians or traditional parties, who use forbidding, specific and conciliatory language, the leaders of right-wing populism easily indulge in content with strong, bellicose, provocative, ridiculing and often aggressive language.

What jumps out at the analysis of the social content of populist politicians and leaders is the clear identification of a target or enemy against whom to hurl their mass of followers:

Political opponents, journalists, groups of people such as foreigners or minorities, leaders of moderate parties, international institutions, international finance, multinational corporations are some of the subjects that are subjected to the media pillory put in place by the IT team that curates the pages of populist leaders⁷⁰.

The attribution of blame to a political antagonist is fundamental to create audience and increase proselytes: the limit and the real problem of social networks is the possibility of everyone to create anonymous profiles without true credentials or traceability, this leads many people to vent their anger and frustration towards other subjects without facing consequences such as profile closure, fines for defamation or even worse legal proceedings.

Many prominent figures in the world of politics, business, or journalism report to have been invaded in their profiles by thousands of negative and offensive comments from supporters of populist leaders who hurled their followers against the unfortunate.

Another very important aspect of social use by populist leaders is the social live.

The most well-known social directs are those that can be used with Instagram and Facebook. Right-wing populist leaders have a real desire to maintain a direct channel with the electorate, and live social feeds allow them to communicate in real time and even be able to send messages and answer questions that any user can ask them.

This method is a very clever way to create horizontal political communication: the possibility to communicate in real time with their political favorites and even receive a personal response from them, reduces the abysmal distance that occurs between user and politician; political leaders who are preparing to launch direct to communicate with their fans and users give the latter the feeling of being like them, ordinary people who after dinner, putting on the couch, open their electronic gadget in order to communicate.

The idea of the populist leader as "one of Us" or "One of the People" is a key concept to explain their success in social media⁷¹.

⁷⁰ For more information, one can consult various bibliographic sources that speak and deal with the subject of the so-called "La Bestia", i.e the League's media and social campaign formed by the team of social media managers who look after the social pages of the League leader Matteo Salvini

⁷¹ Not Sir, Not Honorable, Not President. The vast majority of Salvini's supporters on his social pages address him with the much more colloquial and confidential appellation "Matteo". Il Tirreno.

The archaic image of the austere professional politician, busy in the office or in parliament, using complex words and standing with an elitist language and attitude is seen in a hostile and distant way by disaffected politicians.

On the contrary, a charismatic, concise, sneering leader who communicates and jokes with users is perceived positively by voters, as he conveys security, closeness, and the feeling of being considered and not just called upon when it comes to asking for their vote.

The Heterogeneity of Populism: How Populist themes, propaganda methods, and electoral targets vary as the country involved varies

As we have previously announced, right-wing populism is not a homogeneous and uniform phenomenon; scientific literature, political events and qualitative electoral analysis show us how this recent phenomenon is characterized by various facets and differences depending on the country and the social and geographical reality in which one finds oneself.

What certainly unites the various currents of right-wing populism is the dialectical clash that places the political and social clash of "Us versus Them" on a symmetrical and equidistant axis.

The community in danger, harassed and worried about its future gathers around a charismatic leadership, not always monocephalous but in the case also bicephalous or "pluricephalous" as in the Italian case⁷².

We have discussed the concept of "People" and therefore of the "We" in populism, but now it is necessary to investigate who the "They" are and how this variable manages to strongly influence and intrinsically modify the various forms and nuances of right-wing populism.

We have ascertained that as contingency changes, i.e., the spatial-temporal reality in which the individual citizen moves, there are different and diverse challenges, insecurities and threats that can occur and cause concern in each group of people.

Let's take geographical location as an example: it is relevant to be geographically far from a country or a group of countries that define themselves as illiberal or authoritarian; being in the proximity of them, therefore living with the daily anxiety of suffering an invasion, a military attack or an attack of various matrices could determine the rise of a charismatic and authoritarian leadership that presses on this tangible threat or not to increase consensus.

Or, and this is what we have observed in recent years in Europe, it could be a frontier in a process of migratory exodus between the area of departure and the area of arrival, the so-called zones of friction.

⁷² *The political and programmatic vision of European right-wing populism follows hand in hand the composition of the nineteenth-century fairy tales of the Brothers Grimm.*

The plot formed by the protagonist, the antagonist, the challenge and the community to be saved is taken up in full. The figure of the magic medium is also taken up, which in this case is embodied by social networks.

Southern Europe, Italy, Spain, Greece, and the Balkans have been and still are the friction zones par excellence, the point where the migratory undertow comes to life with all the social and security consequences.

Let's imagine the Republic of Hungary, a country where the percentage of foreign population is 1.4%, finding itself in May 2011 with 300,000 refugees from the Middle East at the railway station in Budapest. Although it was a purely transitory phenomenon, since there were few economic and work opportunities that Hungary could offer to these people, the Hungarian citizens remained branded by those images; in a country, like Hungary, where migratory phenomena have never existed in its history.

The danger of migration, the threat of invasion and concepts such as ethnic replacement is the first major point that represents the great nuance of the negative "Them" that populism has used during its political rise.

Germany's 2017 Federal Elections and Italy's 2018 General Elections: limitations and successes of populism

Here we can answer a fundamental question: as non-European immigration has increased, has the rise of populism occurred, therefore? Yes, certainly, but with variable results.

Let's take for example the Federal Republic of Germany, the driving force behind the European Union, where economic and work opportunities have been the driving force behind the departure of 1 million Syrians to that country.

Although the discontent of an important segment of the German population, especially the middle class, pensioners and unemployed has strongly opposed the migration choices of the Merkel government, the rise of the xenophobic and populist right-wing Alternative for Germany party has been curbed.

Even though in the last federal elections in 2017 the party managed for the first time since German unity to enter the Bundestag with 12.6% of the vote and to elect 94 deputies, a grand coalition led by the pivotal parties CDU/CSU and SPD⁷³ managed to stem the phenomenon and eliminate AfD from the governmental structure.

The reason, besides being purely one of political strategy, is also and above all economic and social: Germany is an economically solid country, with an unemployment rate of less than 5% and where social safety nets such as aid to families, businesses and unemployment benefits guarantee a solid social fabric. The general well-being in Germany, which has brilliantly overcome the aftermath of the economic crisis, has avoided the rift and hostility of larger segments of the population, preventing higher percentages and risks of Alternative for Germany entering the government.

The diametrically opposite example was Italy and what happened following the 2018 general elections. The economic and social situation in which the country found itself was certainly different from that of Germany. Here unemployment over 10 percent, a poorly managed migration crisis, cuts in public spending and a growing Eurosceptic sentiment towards the institutions in Brussels provided the lifeblood for the rise of populism in government.

⁷³ *The coalition that in Germany is called Große Koalition is the one formed by the two biggest parties: the SPD and the CDU. Before today, there have been other historical cases in which such a coalition was formed, such as in 1966 with the Kiesinger government.*

The electoral campaign of Lega and Fratelli and the electoral campaign of Front National in France: the nuances and heterogeneity of right-wing populism

Even though the electoral polls had perceived the increase in support for the two populist parties, the League and the 5 Star Movement, few political analysts would have imagined witnessing for the first time in Republican history the formation of an entirely populist government: with a peremptory 50.1% total, Lega and Movimento 5 Stelle were invited by the President of the Republic to create a government to lead the country⁷⁴.

Regarding the concept of "Them" and the rise of the right-wing Populist party Lega, we essentially note the following points that confirm our thesis:

The fight against illegal immigration has been the focal point on which Leader Matteo Salvini has moved his electorate: slogans such as "Ports Closed," "Italians First," and "Let's Clean Up" help us clearly identify the target against which the League has lashed out during its election campaign, at a time of serious tensions between new landings and arrivals and the local population.

Another point that has been focal for the success of the League has been the heated Euroscepticism and the multitude of criticisms hurled against the institutions of Brussels considered oppressive, too rigid, and distant from the Italians. The narrative that the League has used to describe the European Union is that of a group of cold and cynical bureaucrats who spend their time surrounding a table where they try to introduce bureaucratic loopholes, limits to free trade, levy money and encourage unfair competition from Italy's competitors.

A threat to the freedom of Italians, who the League describes instead as a strong, hard-working people who excel in what they do.

The Islamization of Europe and the country was a rather important concept, but not as important as it was for the French presidential elections. The reason why is obvious both because of recent news events and the fact that France has been the nerve center of Islamic terrorism in Europe, and because France unlike Italy is a country of first immigration.

⁷⁴ *In the general election of 2018, Salvini's League overtook Forza Italia as leader of the centre-right and obtained a historic 17.35%.*

Although Matteo Salvini and the League have tried to introduce the debate on Islamophobia in Italy, it has not received the same interest and proselytes as in France.

Except for debates in the streets on whether to build a new mosque in a city in Northern Italy, or criticism of halal food in schools for Muslim children or the removal of the crucifix from classrooms, there have been no major issues to inflame the debate on Islam in Italy during the election campaign.

The numbers also confirm what has been said: in Italy there are 1.4 million Muslims, just over 2% of the population, and despite the continuous landings on Italian shores by migrants coming largely from countries with a Muslim majority, it has been difficult to imprint an electoral campaign on Islamophobia.

Here appears the first real point of distinction between French and Italian populism:

in France, the population adhering to Islam is estimated to oscillate between 5 and 10% and is the fastest growing religion along with the more radical forms of Protestantism, which are experiencing a real surge in France⁷⁵.

In the French capital region, the census recorded that Islam is the religion of the 12% of the inhabitants of Ile-de-France.

Districts with a high index of immigration or in which people of Muslim religion live, such as the department of Seine-Saint-Denis where Islam is the religion of 41.6% of the population, has made itself known to the chronicle for being the fulcrum of international terrorism of Islamic matrix.

French public opinion is literally split in two about Islam and integration: unlike Italy, where there is a policy of intercultural integration that seeks to enhance cultural differences as prescribed by the constitutional code, in France there is an assimilationist model.

The French republican principles, shared by most of the French population regardless of political and religious beliefs, are not negotiable in the face of any ideology or religious proselytism. Being well rooted in the social fabric for historical and political reasons, the republican ideals of equality and freedom have often been attacked by the more conservative communities of French Islam.

In the last decade in France what Huntington called the "Clash of Civilizations" has become even more pronounced, in which the defenders of French republican principles, among whom a radical secularism stands out, and the exponents of French Islam who consider the complete ouster of religious practices from any public and social sphere as suffocating.

⁷⁵ following the expulsions in the 17th century of the French Calvinist Huguenots from France Protestantism in France seemed to have been eradicated for centuries. However, especially in the central and southern departments, there were 300,000 adherents of Protestantism in 2004 and 500,000 in 2018. It is assumed that there will be 1 million Protestants living in France in 2030.

Marine Le Pen and the far-right candidate Nicolas Dupont-Aignan, leader of the "Debout la France" Party pushed during the presidential election campaign on very heated tones against Islam.

The electoral slogan that perhaps most elucidates on the French social reality is the one in which the Front National invites the abstainers from politics to go and vote because the French of Muslim religion are compact to vote and vote to destroy France.



"Immigrants will vote and you abstain ?!!" (Front National election slogan, August 2017)

Unlike Italy, where foreign nationals for the most part take little interest in political events and participation, French Muslims are politically active and tend to group up at election rounds.

In 2015, the Union of French Islamic Democrats (UDIF), an Islamist and conservative party, was born, which obtained a seemingly insignificant 0.6% but in Saint-Denis instead obtained a 4.8% in the presidential elections is just one of the many movements born in the last two decades by young French Muslim citizens who do not find themselves in French values and the democratic system. La France Insoumise, a radical left-wing and Eurosceptic party remains the party of choice for French Muslims, if the neo-Muslim parties gather new proselytes with the aim of entering Parliament for the first time.

Except for President Donald Trump's victory in the 2016 U.S. presidential election, another point of distinction between French and Italian populism would clearly emerge: the heated anti-Americanism that historically characterizes France.

While Italy, a historical and favorite ally of the United States, has always looked favorably on U.S. presidents regardless of their Democratic or Republican background, the same cannot be said for the French perception of American politics.

Since the rise of De Gaulle, France has always felt a strong hostility to American imperialism, especially in Europe:

since the 1950s the multiplication of American and NATO bases on European territory was seen by France as a blatant attempt of military interference in Europe, and European self-determination was strongly opposed and hindered by American expansionist aims⁷⁶.

France has always pushed together with Germany to create a strong European axis to inhibit the penetrating action of the U.S., to push in many political eras to look favorably to the East also undertaking diplomatic relations with Russia.

According to the geopolitical vision of the Front National, Europe runs from "Lisbon to the Urals" and this is the common space where European values of democracy, Christianity and rights first came to life and where we must unite to defend.

America is seen in French public opinion as an unfair competitor in the market in the first place, where France holds the reins of certain agri-food sectors, fashion and elite trade and geopolitics in the second. The French military and geopolitical prestige has often had to limit itself in the face of American supremacy and in the Anglo-Saxon understanding US-UK often generating discontent and frustration of the ruling class beyond the Alps.

Donald Trump with his isolationist, protectionist and conservative policies received applause from the French right as Trump's America stood as a stronghold against unfair competition from China and developing countries against the West.

Le Pen welcomed the election of the Republican candidate, seeing it as the beginning of a populist, sovereigntists, and Eurosceptic wind of change.

However, in general, moderate, or less anti-American sentiment has always characterized French public opinion, while Italian colorblindness and historical indirect submission to Americanism has meant that American influence has never been considered a key point in Italian electoral campaigns, given the vital importance of the country with the stars and stripes for Italian governments.

The last point that strongly characterizes the difference between the genesis of French and Italian populism is the importance of the labor market, wages, and the union struggle.

⁷⁶ *Historians say that De Gaulle's hostility and intransigence against Britain during the 1960s over access to the European Union was nothing more than a covert way for the French president to counteract the privileged relationship between Britain and the United States, France's historic rivals.*

Even though Italy has touched in the last decade the record of unemployment touching 13%, right-wing populism has always carried out a timid policy of employment and support for workers and unions.

Matteo Salvini's party has only proposed among the various points a single economic measure to facilitate work and entrepreneurs: the flat tax⁷⁷.

This tax tool to help businesses stimulate consumption and employment has been seen in a positive light, especially by the middle class and the entrepreneurial class, which is the fundamental fulcrum of the League's electorate.

On the contrary, in France, the protection of labor is an extremely sensitive issue: the slightest variation in wages of the working class and the most at-risk groups has given rise to real protest movements that have burned the French squares for months at a time. The French labor movements have a lot of room for dialogue with the central government but being a satellite reality characterized by myriad groups and subgroups, some of them do not disdain the twentieth-century labor struggle to compromise with the government to protect their rights.

The yellow vests are the pivotal example of what we are analyzing: an often violent, pseudo-union protest group that has strongly opposed the liberalist drifts of the French labor market and the wage cuts enacted by the governments presided over by Presidents Macron and Hollande previously. The French far right in all this chaos has stood up as the champion and defender of French wage earners, Christian unions, and public employees, opening even to a historically moderate or left-wing electorate and expanding sympathies even to those segments that would never previously have voted for the Front National.

Although the 2017 runoff ended with an overwhelming 66.6% for Macron's *Republique En Marche* it should be considered that a third of the French opted for a far-right populist candidate.

Not only that; the most recent polls from August 2021 give the *Ressemblement National* (new name of the former *Front National*) at 27.7% in the first round of the next presidential elections and is given with a swing of 40-45% in a hypothetical second round at the presidential elections.

⁷⁷ *Matteo Salvini's tax reform envisaged a single tax of 13% for companies with a gross annual turnover of between 200 and 500,000 euros, 16% between 500,000 and 1 million euros and 20% over 1 million. The idea was that "if we lower taxes, more people will want to pay them".*

As we have been able to observe, right-wing populism is not a single, uniform, and homogeneous movement, but rather a heterogeneous, variable and extremely multifaceted group.

Nowadays there is no single, rigid plan that characterizes right-wing populist politicians in Europe; the success of this movement has been precisely due to its capacity and ability to shape itself according to the issues and geographical and political differences in which it operates.

However, the time has now come to take a closer look at the real lifeblood of right-wing populism: its electorate; those who have caused the rise in the polls and the support of these heterogeneous movements.

In the next section, we will look at the electoral fluctuations of right-wing populism: where the voters come from, which political parties and ideologies have seen a collapse in favor of right-wing populism, the social ranks of the voters, sources of income, levels of education, etc.

Right-wing populism and electoral volatility: Where today's right-wing populist voters come from and where they are headed

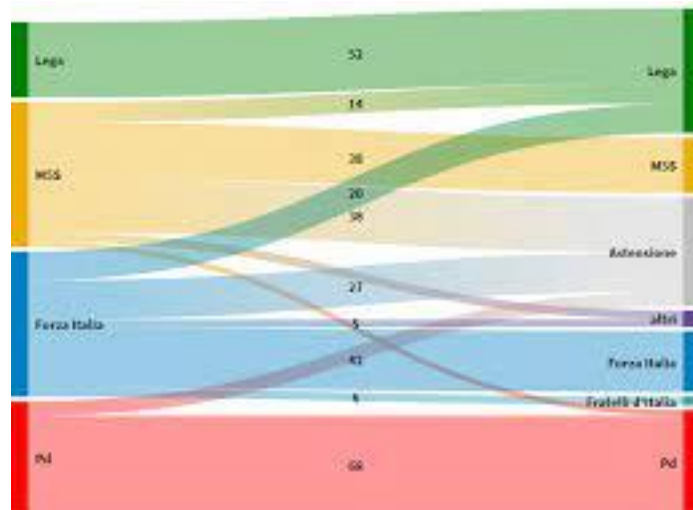
Of one thing political scientists and analysts are certain: the voters of right-wing populism are not a mass of people who previously opted for political abstentionism, but for the most part the populist electorate comes from previously existing parties.

Moreover, there is the certainty of another fact: in no contemporary party is there such electoral volatility as there is within right-wing populist parties.

The political, economic, and social events of the 21st century in Europe have underlined a limitation of liberal-democratic politics: governments formed by traditional and moderate parties, for the most part, have been unable to stem and effectively resolve the problems of various kinds that have arisen in Europe in recent years.

This inertia and inability that for the most part is attributable to force majeure have generated discontent and disaffection among many voters who historically have voted for and supported liberal and moderate parties.

Support for right-wing populism has been analyzed and categorized also and above all as a "protest vote" by important segments of voters who no longer find themselves with the parties previously supported and voted for.



Party support in 2019 in Italy: you can see the strong hemorrhage of votes from Forza Italia to the League

As can be seen from the previous graph, a strong hemorrhage of votes from the liberal, pro-European Forza Italia party has been channeled into the electoral structure of the Lega.

Why this phenomenon?

Forza Italia's traditional electorate is first and foremost found in the commercial middle class, in small entrepreneurs and in public sector employees: the economic crisis, the contraction of spending, the closure of companies and the cuts in spending in various public sectors have led to the growth of discontent among these categories.

Another key factor that unfortunately continues to be a strong vexatious element to Italian economic enterprise is the very high pressure of the tax and fiscal system.

Forza Italia's electorate, therefore, a good part of the peripheral middle class and to a lesser extent the urban one, is the one that has suffered the harshest consequences of austerity policies, and as soon as Salvini's League started its electoral forge to the sound of "tax reduction", "flat tax" and "let's buy/manufacture Italian", a large slice of those disappointed in Berlusconi's liberal conservative movement threw themselves into the League's ranks.

Not only a hemorrhage of votes from the center-right to the populist right, but as surprising as it may seem, political analysts also observe a small but decisive fluctuation of votes from left to right⁷⁸.

⁷⁸ In the 2019 European elections, the case of Rome and the electoral results in the capital were striking: historically working-class neighborhoods with left-wing roots such as Anagnina, Trastevere, San Basilio, Garbatella, Monti and San Giovanni saw victory in each of them for the League and the center-right to the detriment of the left.

The working class, traditionally a supporter of socialist and democratic visions is also one of the great losers of the economic decline that the European Union has been facing in the last decade: reduction of jobs, liberalization and privatization of the labor market and reduction of workers' protections, decrease of wages, inability of trade union groups to protect collective agreements. Moreover, moderate parties of the center-left spectrum are perceived by the historical leftist electorate and by many analysts as undergoing a phase of ontological change:

if before the left was perceived and stood as a movement of the masses, of the dispossessed, of the peripheries and of social discomfort, nowadays, at least in Italy, the idea of a left strongly distant from the people is in vogue.

Suffice it to say that in many municipal elections, especially those of 2016, the Democratic Party in the municipal elections of Rome and Milan won almost exclusively in high-income neighborhoods. Europeanist, liberal, progressive, and green, a center-left that has little of the left and is more reminiscent of a democratic center with social but not socialist tendencies.

Thus, the large number of people disappointed by the leftist party has gone in part to enrich the movements of the populist right, which paradoxically is now perceived as close to ordinary people, workers and the discomfort of the suburbs.

The final great merit of right-wing populism that we want to consider before concluding was the great ability to bring back to the polls a substantial part of people who had definitively distanced themselves from the game of political representation.

The 2018 general elections despite having recorded a slight decrease in terms of the percentage of voters who went to the polls, nevertheless recorded the increase according to the electoral polls of those who returned to the polls after as many as 2, 3 or more general elections.

During the various electoral consultations that have taken place in Italy between regional, political, and European elections, there is always a phrase that political analysts use to say during the first exit polls "if the turnout is high, this will benefit the right".

And so indeed it was.

Today we are witnessing a new phenomenon that is unique in Italy: usually in European center-right coalitions there is a leading party that obtains between 25-35%, very often belonging to a liberal conservative and social Christian area, and around it there are 2 or more minor parties that may represent a more conservative right, or a slightly conservative center.

In Italy, this phenomenon has been totally reversed, so much so that Italian political scientists define the Italian coalition as a "right-of-center" coalition.

Here, the two populist and Eurosceptic right-wing parties share almost 40% of the total, and the remaining liberal and pro-European party is stuck at a consolatory 7-8%⁷⁹.

It must also be said that the success of the League and of populism in Italy has also been decreed by its accentuated regionalism: the regions driven by the League and strongholds of the movement are usually regions in which good government, excellent management of services and a decided standard of living are perceived. Lombardy, Veneto, Piedmont are solid economic and social realities, and regional political figures such as, for example, the Governor of Veneto Luca Zaia have managed to obtain percentages of appreciation close to 75%.

Today we are witnessing a real battle for the leadership of the "right-center coalition" in which the two main parties Lega and Fratelli d'Italia are competing for the scepter for the leadership of the Federation of the Right.

The ousting of Fratelli d'Italia from the formation of the Draghi government and becoming the only opposition party in the Italian political landscape is guaranteeing Leader Meloni's movement continued and lasting growth:

in 2018 Fratelli d'Italia obtained 4.35%, at the European elections 6.44% but nowadays the party oscillates between 20 and 21% according to the latest electoral polls.

So, instead of an enemy or a challenger outside the coalition, populist movements have given birth to an internal competition in Italy, in which until the last one will be decreed which is the most voted party and which will propose at the end a nominee to form a government in case of an eventual victory in the next general elections set in 2023.

Currently, the "right-center" coalition holds 48.8% of the consensus and is very close to an absolute majority, and a future political debacle of those who currently form the heterogeneous and varied Draghi government cannot be excluded.

However, the former president of the European Central Bank today enjoys a very high level of consensus both internally and especially externally.

Having been an active and prominent representative of international political and financial institutions has made him a stable and granite figure in the eyes of foreign leaders and investors. Economists predict an increase in Italian GDP of an extraordinary 6% in 2022 and a return to pre-crisis SarsCov19 levels before the end of 2022.

⁷⁹ According to the last political poll made by Tecne Lega would receive de 20.1% of the votes, Fratelli d'Italia the 21% and Forza Italia 7.7%. Tecne 2021 September

We find ourselves in a very delicate historical moment, in which political and institutional cohesion is required to face the restart, and even though polls show us that right-wing populism is nowadays in Italy firmly the most popular breakfast, it is also true that the confidence that the Draghi government is spreading a general optimism and that many voters are satisfied with the current modus operandi.

The same is true for the rest of the European Union: The Recovery Plan and Next Generation Europe could be invaluable tools as well as deterrents to the rise of right-wing populism in Europe. A cohesive and far-sighted leadership that starts from the European institutions with the vigilant contribution of national governments could be the turning point for the economic, social, and civil recovery of the European continent, which is already recently experiencing exceptional growth rates not seen in decades.

Chapter 5

SarsCov19, Multiculturalism and Green Europe: The European Union's irreversible challenges to maintaining social and political integrity

The challenges facing the world and especially us Europeans in these times are battles that require farsightedness, competence, and solidarity; simple, instinctive, and illiberal solutions would risk plunging our continent and our society into a compound abyss of hatred, closure and decadence. The European Union and Europe has been living a period of uninterrupted peace for seventy-five years, but we realize that today the social balance is seriously challenged by very large challenges that only through international collaboration and a civil ethnic revolution it is possible to find solutions.

The civil system is collapsing: the economic, health and social crisis lacerates the foundations of our common living and those who should be proposing new models of common living are finding it hard and difficult to illuminate the way to new coexistence.

This is on the one hand worrying, but on the other hand it gives everyone the possibility to act freely for and in society with the aim of rethinking the value of living together.

Economic decline, migratory crisis and integration, populism, environmental sustainability, recovery.

These are the points that would require a common agenda and the congregation of efforts; since these are important issues and problems, we must be aware that there are no quick and comfortable solutions. On the contrary, it is likely that the medicine will be bitter and that the patient will have a lot of trouble digesting it and all the consequences it will cause.

However, it is still true that what we are fighting for often requires drastic solutions.

What is the European Dream? There are various formulations and hypotheses, but we are certain of one principle: it is the opposite of the American Dream.

Despite the exaltation of individual freedom, merit and effort, the stars and stripes libertarianism of the other side of the ocean has put down roots for what today we live as a sick society with considerable structural and existential problems.

A society in which values have turned into vices: from well-being to materialism, from individual freedom to individualistic solitude, from economic development to the depredation of resources and ecological carnage.

If the whole world lived like an average American citizen, it seems that, according to the World Health Organization, we would need 12 planet Earths; but as it is evident, we have only one planet Earth.

The European Dream is instead an idea in the making, which is still taking shape in people's minds and that finally after decades of social and cultural flattening, has brought us back the thrill and the shock of rethinking a utopian society, which Thomas Moro launched centuries before.

There are people, more and more and with more means, who are not satisfied with the society in which they live.

These people, instead of living on the margins of society, are slowly deciding to join forces and propose new models of living and being together that do not contemplate the American-centric vision of existence.

Politicians, entrepreneurs, students, artists, people of faith and laity, families, everyone is called upon to do their part today, and this large and wide margin of freedom should make us enthusiastic and eager to get involved.

We live in a historical period in which we are greatly facilitated by the mass media: information and scientific dissemination are no longer an elitist privilege but are accessible to most with a minimum effort of time and resources; those who refuse to comply do so by choice, voluntary or not, but still by choice.

Projections, Issues, and Proposals: The European Dream and the House of Rights

I would like to start from the 3 hypotheses and issues that I have been questioning since the beginning of my thesis: economic and demographic crisis, immigration, and right-wing populism. We have abundantly analyzed the genesis and development of these concepts that have been affecting our society for some time now and on which we are struggling to find effective solutions.

As far as the demographic crisis is concerned, we have come to a conclusion that may not be optimistic on all sides: we doubt that there will be a future demographic surge in Europe in the short to medium term, and if from one point of view this will be an additional economic and social challenge in the future, on the other we must consider it as a positive factor and a starting point. The assumption from which we start is that today there are too many of us, and above all the disparity in the use of the world's resources is alarming: 20% of the world's population lives with 80% of the resources, and 80% of the world's population lives with the remaining 20% of the available resources.

This figure alone should make the right-wing populist group understand the reason for the migratory exodus that has been affecting the West for years.

Increasing exponentially the number of new Westerners, who will live as new Westerners to the detriment of non-Westerners would mean increasing even more the gap between the rich world and the poor world.

Moreover, the demographic decline is also a cultural and social fact: if a century ago having a large family was synonymous with economic stability and security for old age, nowadays the exact opposite is happening.

In the West, families are essentially made up of 3 to 5 members. Given the ever-increasing cost of living, there is a preference to have fewer children and to guarantee this small number of offspring a standard of living as satisfactory as possible.

Satisfactory not only for themselves, but also and above all for the needs of the market. Here, we will take up our hypothesis that it is the economy today that dictates most of the choices made by families:

in an increasingly competitive world, where countries such as China, the BRICS and the rich Arab countries are increasing competition, in order not to be crushed by the race for progress, families are trying to secure and have their children obtain a portfolio of skills and knowledge that would have been unthinkable a few decades ago.

Schools of excellence, language courses, competitive sports courses, study trips abroad, these are the primary goods for Western cosmopolitan families, and all these goods require a considerable expenditure of time and economic resources.

It is possible to guarantee this to a family with 2 dependent children, but already with 4 children it would begin to be highly unthinkable.

Not only that, but the fact also that most of the terrorists who started attacks in Europe were born and raised in our continent and held citizenship is an indication that there is a root problem. Radical secularism, the enormous divergence between the center and the peripheries, the assimilationist policies of many European governments and the lack of intercultural and interreligious dialogue have created the seeds of a widespread malaise among the young people of the second or third generation of migrants.

The existential crisis and the deprivation of meaning that these people experience is a real cry of alarm for a generation that risks growing up in resentment and without identity.

The lights and glitter of progress have not touched at all the areas of origin of these people who have been rather marginalized on the sides of society in social contexts of drugs, delinquency, and unemployment.

The European Union and governments need to seriously consider creating a community plan for the suburbs:

a five-year investment that addresses culture, integration, dialogue, employment and combating religious radicalism, but without forgetting the importance that religion, whatever it may be, plays a key role in the dialogue between people.

After the collapse of the Berlin Wall, it was thought that secular ideologies and considered by many "retrograde" such as religious or ideological belonging were disappearing, but in fact the opposite is happening people, especially young people, are rediscovering religious and ideological attachment of various kinds because living an existence deprived of meaning is not worth living and man, in his ontological nature, needs a how to answer his why.

And finally, right-wing populism must be considered as a phenomenon to be analyzed and observed, never judged.

We believe that the rise of right-wing populism in Europe is the result of multiple cognitive biases of various kinds and that many people have opted for this choice partly because of the socio-economic difficulties they are facing and partly because of a lack of knowledge and keys to understanding complicated concepts such as those that are happening today.

We believe that the right-wing populism and its becoming is a physiological factor of the western society that insists on safeguarding only the economic and financial agenda but has long forgotten the cultural, social, environmental and real welfare visions.

Surely 2021 will not be the year of the decline of populism. On the contrary, we are convinced that given the socio-economic conditions from which Europe is trying to recover, social causes will be created for which politicians and charismatic leaders will try to press discontent in order to gain electoral support.

However, we have noticed that political and economic populism is not able to propose effective solutions in the medium-long term but mostly proposes quick solutions in the short term that are socially inefficient and economically unsustainable.

It seems that the electoral flow leads people to launch into hasty and conscienceless solutions when they find themselves in a situation of socio-economic difficulty, only to return to the democratic circuit when it comes to entrusting their vote to the faculties of politicians and competent personalities.

Finally, we would like to make a provocative appeal: "Next Generation Europe calls the European Union".

We are many and we are eager for new horizons. Economic liberalism, materialism, xenophobia and environmental exploitation are no longer tolerable to land in new islands of progress. We need a strong, democratic, and competent deterrent to lead the struggle towards civil peace and social progress and to defend us against the demons of the 21st century.

Today, we find these faculties only and exclusively in the figure of the European Union, a numerous entity, rich in soft and hard power, solid, competent, and alternative to traditional forms of government.

Capable of proposing growth solutions opposed to US arrogance, Russian aggressiveness, or Chinese double-dealing.

Rather, a leadership, the only one in the world, that is able and able to continuously propose innovative, sustainable solutions with an eye to the civil rights of its citizens and to those outside our borders who must fight for their rights.

We believe that the three problems listed, analyzed, and broken down in the thesis can find a common solution with the help of a multi-level governance in which governments, international organizations and the European Union intersect.

And we hope that the European Union decides to get out of the current political inertia and its colorblindness and to take a strong and decisive position by clearly identifying who are its allies and friends and who instead need to address and oppose; not for a mere and sterile economic competition to the sound of customs duties and protectionism, but to reaffirm the non-negotiability of the principles that make us proud to be Europeans and to live in the Temple of Liberty.

The Next Generation Eu: An Introduction

The first of a long series of structural reforms that will stem the economic losses of the SarsCov19 pandemic and indirectly try to stop the advance of populism by reprojecting welfare, growth and jobs will be the Next Generation EU approved by the European Council in July 2020.

Initially, Germany and four other countries, the so-called "frugal countries" (Sweden, the Netherlands, Denmark and Austria) opposed the project to create a common debt fund to avoid the insolvency of some countries with governments in the balance or very unstable debt/GDP conditions, Italy in primis.

However, in May 2020 when the devastating effects on the economy deeply affected Europe, French President Emmanuel Macro and German Chancellor Angela Merkel agreed on the creation of a common economic aid fund that would initially provide €500 billion to be disbursed according to a common European debt issue.

Among the key clauses of this plan is that 70% of the fund will be disbursed in the two-year period 2021-2022 and the remaining 30% in 2023. The allocation of funds will be calculated based on the unemployment rate for the two-year period 2021-22 and the cumulative loss of GDP in 2023. Each Member State that intends to receive the funds is called upon to draw up a programme plan containing items and expenditure that will be presented to the European Council, which will then decide whether to approve it by qualified majority.

What emerges most and what links the Next Generation EU and the Green New Deal is precisely the clause that provides for 37% of the fund to be compulsorily allocated to GND and an important 21% for technological and digital innovation.

Commissioner for Ecological Transition Timmermans has defined the Next Generation EU combined with the New Deal as the "Fourth Industrial Revolution taking shape", indicating the irreversibility of the measures to ecological and technological sensitivity that are essential for the restart and from which there will be no turning back.

The reason why more than half of the resources will be invested in ecological development and digital technological development is part of a long-term project to make the European Union a socio-economic system that is independent of limited primary energy resources, innovative, i.e. in which efforts will be made to create previously non-existent jobs thanks to developments in the

green and digital economy, and above all sustainable, in the sense that it will try to be able to create its own livelihood without affecting the ecosystem and other surrounding areas.

The reason for this green revolution has a double ethical and strategic nature:

While most EU politicians agree on laying the foundations of an eco-sustainable socio-economic system as problems such as global warming, disfigurement of the natural heritage and constant cataclysms, there are more contingent motivations.

The opportunity to create renewable and self-sufficient energy sources, to use environmentally sustainable means of production and to revolutionize the Green Economy, will also mean becoming independent of commodity-exporting countries, which, given the political instability of many of them and the fluctuating prices of raw materials such as crude oil above all, have often and willingly pushed us into production, economic and social crises.

Being able to be autonomous from fluctuations in the price of energy resources, from the political blackmail of illiberal governments, and no longer having to resort to non-renewable energy sources could be an epoch-making turning point that could further strengthen European solidarity and lay the foundations for a Green revolution that is not only European but global.

As regards Italy specifically, on 26 and 27 April the Draghi government presented to the Chamber of Deputies and the Senate the National Recovery and Resilience Plan (PNRR), a package worth a total of 248 billion euro, of which 191.5 billion from the PNRR and another 26 billion to be allocated to the "implementation of specific works".

Italy presented a very ambitious programme document to Brussels, especially in the item devoted to the green revolution and ecological transition (for which 40% of the resources, equal to 68.6 billion euro, will be allocated). To assist the government's work, Prime Minister Draghi has appointed a so-called "super" Minister for Ecological Transition, Roberto Cingolani, who will manage the Recovery Plan's huge amount of funding and resources earmarked for ecology and green development.

At the European level, the first effect of the Next Generation EU is to give a positive shock to the severely damaged economy and to attract both domestic and foreign investment with a huge injection of cash and liquidity.

Another radical breakthrough is the creation of a common public debt fund, which, despite initial opposition from frugal countries, has been set up for the first time to try to disperse the burdens between countries without increasing pressure on specific cases and share the common risk.

On the one hand, there are those who are convinced that this measure will consolidate European integration, since if the European Union were to overcome this complicated moment through a common economic policy instrument this would be a sign of the effectiveness of the common political measures; on the other hand, there are those who are doubtful about the generosity with which a huge amount of funds have been disbursed to be returned, especially to Spain and Italy, countries whose accounting and economic rigor systems have often lacked efficiency and credibility.

Specifically, in addition to the majority investment for the countries of Southern Europe, great importance is attached to the plan for the countries and economies of Eastern Europe.

Among the winning countries are Hungary, Poland, Romania and Slovakia, for which the plan has provided a particular interest in industrial reconversion and redevelopment; the countries of Eastern Europe, headed by Poland, are characterized by a so-called "heavy" secondary and industrial system. Even though some countries have experienced continuous GDP growth and very low unemployment, the levels of pollution and emissions reached were considered unsustainable by the inspections carried out by the European Commissioners for the Environment and Economic Development.

The measure of allocating a large percentage of resources to Eastern European countries was seen by many as a strategic political measure to stem the populist and Eurosceptic waves that affected the country both before, during and after the SarsCov19 crisis.

Eastern Europe has always been a clear winner in the disbursement of EU funds through which it has used to rebuild its economies following the collapse of the Soviet Bloc; the "Eastern paradox" lies precisely in this two-faced policy: a decisive hostility when it comes to the cession of sovereignty and the distribution of migrant quotas but a diplomatic and accordant attitude when the disbursement of EU structural funds is on the agenda.

Until now the European Union has always tried to propose a policy of appeasement towards the bipolar behavior of the Visegrad Group in particular; this is to safeguard unity and not to give breath to the Eurosceptic currents taking place in a particularly delicate moment of European history and to include these countries in the "sharing-burden" of the Union.

The behavior of the European institutions with the Visegrad countries in the last period has also been observed by analysts as "two-faced": while on the one hand the Union has not hesitated to include the Eastern European countries as net beneficiaries of the Next Generation EU, on the other hand Poland's decision to establish so-called LGBT free zones in the south-eastern part of the country has aroused the unanimous indignation of all representatives of the highest European

institutions as a consequence of a clear violation of the European Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms.

As far as the frugal coalition is concerned, the negotiations to reach a compromise have been long and often tortuous and have underlined how the issue of Member States ceding sovereignty on economic and financial issues is still an extremely delicate one.

The first opponent of the European Common Debt Fund was Dutch Prime Minister Mark Rutte, who defined himself as extremely skeptical about the implementation of such measures given the difficulty of some countries, especially the PIGS, in implementing fiscal and financial reforms to repay loans and curb the unsustainable ratio between debt and GDP.

Only with France's stubbornness and Germany's guarantee did the group of "frugal countries" manage to obtain guarantee clauses on loan repayments and in the event of insolvency.

Again, this shows us how the European Union today needs a Franco-German engine to engage the optimism and will of the other member states in order to reach major conclusions; On the one hand this reminds us that the influence of the individual member states is still very relevant rather than an organicist stance of all the members of the Union, and on the other hand it confronts us with the disturbing reality that Italy, given the sudden change of its governments and economic conditions, is often cut off from the fundamental European negotiations despite its presential nature in any type of European and international initiative and negotiation.

The cause is also to be found in the post-Brexit period where, following Britain's exit from the European Union, the Franco-German push has been further strengthened to create stability and security in the Union at a very delicate time for European integration.

Conclusions

“Hard Times for these Times”

Charles Dickens

There have been recent events that have indelibly marked our lives, mine especially.

When on November 13, 2015, Paris was stormed and for a few days plunged into a scenario of war. A war that none of my peers or our parents ever touched, but that we listen to fascinated by the tales and weary voices of our grandparents. Yet, for a few minutes that day, we all touched the war with our hands.

Or again, when on March 27, 2020, the bulletin of the Ministry of Health marks the record 980 deaths from SarsCov19 in Italy and from the city of Bergamo military means are departed to sort the corpses of people to whom it is not possible to guarantee a worthy burial in the city given the maximum capacity of the cemeteries.

Not to mention March 18, 2019, when Melbourne and all South Australia were enveloped by indomitable flames that in a few months destroyed 17 million hectares, killed 40 people and decreed the death of millions of animal species.

It is true that none of us has been asked until now to take up arms and go to fight against a specific enemy, but we live in an era in which enemies have multiplied and often have various forms, invisible, liquid, dislocated and intangible.

This is precisely the contradiction of our age: we live in unprecedented levels of well-being, but which are often alternated by episodes of violence, suffering and despair that rarely have any equal in history.

I, in the impotence of my twenties, have never surrendered to the idea of being an uncritical spectator of inhuman scenarios of this caliber, and not having the strength and lucidity to create a protest movement on a global scale, I opted for an unpopular and rather old-fashioned decision: to inform and learn.

Over the years, a kind of independence from knowledge, information, and current events around me has been created.

The awareness was born in me that in order not to be left behind and not to turn away from the suffering of a world crying out for help, I had to re-engage with a place where each of us lives and in which each of us is a conscious or unconscious actor: society.

And I realized that fewer and fewer people today observe society: they live it, they exile from it, they fight it, they deface it, they praise it, but very few observe it.

Observing society has allowed me to connect events that took place thousands of miles away from me to events that happened in my hometown, in my region or in the city where I studied.

Let me give you a brief but concise example:

Why in my small Tuscan town of 8 thousand inhabitants, in 2013 for the first time in its history did people from Africa begin to be seen on the streets? Why in the fall of 2018 in Tuscany was there an October so rainy that the combined rainfall of that month alone was equal to the combined rainfall of the entire previous year?

And again, why was that girl in the headscarf at my school first being sneered at by her classmates when in subsequent years no one had paid attention to that piece of clothing? Why, in so few months, had the gasoline of Gigi, the gas station attendant under my house, shot up to 1.84 euros per liter?

For many people these questions do not make sense, or at least they do but they do not find a common thread, but if you go to dig deep inside you will notice how today very distant facts and seemingly remote to us can have direct repercussions on our lives and our communities.

This is the real sense of the interconnected society that characterizes our lives, and that only through a clear stance and a constant critical sense we can understand its movements, changes, and fluctuations.

However, there is one aspect of our civilization today that I refuse to support and endorse, what is precisely called the "End of History" and the "death of ideas".

I speak for young people and for my generation when I say that ideas, values, and common feeling is far from dead; on the contrary, I firmly believe that we have reached the dawn of a new beginning. We have realized that turbo-capitalism has plundered nature and has impoverished the many to the detriment of the few, and that this economic system is destined to self-destruct due to finite resources. We have realized that nationalism, protectionism, and homogeneous societies are not ideals compatible with our times, as well as migratory exodus, multiculturalism and denial of identity have shown their enormous limits.

Rather, the desire to meet each other, Interculture and the creation of new spaces for dialogue are the driving forces that push our society and my generation towards something new and beautiful.

Finally, we have come to realize that a society that is so interconnected, highly dependent, and increasingly multifaceted can no longer be governed by the 19th-century vision of state-centricity. Rather forms of international cooperation, integration and supranational institutions that assist the work of governments and in which they work together to solve problems of a vast nature that, as recent events have shown, they are no longer capable of solving alone.

We reiterate the key and indispensable role of the European Union, for us young people vital and on which we have so many hopes. House of rights, sustainable market, perpetual peace, meeting of peoples, direct democracy, ecological laboratory of ideas, pursuer of substantial equality. This is what the European Union is for us, this is what our non-negotiable principles are. And it is on these principles that we will base our work from now on and for these principles we will defend our freedoms in every situation of our lives.

Thanks for your attention

Vittorio Sgobba

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Abstract

The 21st century is a year of challenges and momentous events for the European Union.

From the demographic crisis, the first symptoms of which could already be felt in the early 1960s.

The economic and financial crisis of 2008, which dealt a lethal blow to the European economy and severely eroded the private savings and living standards of many Europeans. The migratory crisis that erupted in 2011, which highlighted the Union's inability and inertia to find effective solutions to resolve it in a cohesive and solidarity-based manner. The rise of right-wing populism and the growth of Eurosceptic, xenophobic and illiberal movements that have put the liberal-democratic European institutions to the test. Finally, the health and social crisis due to the SARSCov19 pandemic.

These epochal challenges have underlined how the current social system needs to be revolutionized at its roots, since the old schemes by which we read and orient ourselves in society are no longer effective in this liquid, chaotic and dynamic era.

American turbo-capitalism has revealed all its flaws and limitations: climate and environmental crises, exploitation, neo-colonialism, protectionism, are just some of the pathologies of a society based on market liberalism where man is no longer the protagonist of his actions but is crushed between the gears of technology and scientific progress.

The gap between rich and poor has widened to a point of no return: 20% of the world lives on 80% of the resources and vice versa; and even in the so-called "rich world" an impressive gap has been created where very few people have dizzied wealth and assets and more and more people are pushed to the margins of society.

Mass migration has awakened xenophobic, sovereigntist and nationalist feelings, just as Western arrogance and military presence in the world has laid the foundations for the international Islamic terrorism that has strongly marked our lives in recent years.

Complex, multifaceted problems that have often been resolved in a hasty, unsuitable and often undemocratic manner:

Right-Wing populism is the "child of our years". But it is also the child of fear, ignorance, demagoguery and fear of change.

From being a continent of opportunity and hope, Europe today finds itself fighting on two fronts: the front of closure, embodied by right-wing populist politicians and parties, who dream of an

armed, arid, closed and aggressive society; on the other hand, the front of the future, led by the European Union, which proposes an open, solidarity-based, strong, courageous and secure Europe. Even though today, due to the vicissitudes it is experiencing, it finds itself operating in a timid and defenseless manner, many of us have placed great hopes in it, if not all of them.

The arrogance of the United States, China's neo-imperialism, Russia's aggressive foreign policy and instability in the Middle East. In this incandescent scenario the European Union is now called upon to act.

And it has the capacity to do so because it is the House of Rights of the world.

Respect for the Rule of Law, economic and political integration that is unique in the world, the protection of rights, the ecological alternative it pursues: these are the characteristics that a World Leader must propose and pursue in a world that strongly needs an alternative.

Resilience is the virtue of Europeans, who despite dramatic events that have severely tested our civilization and our common living, now is the time to start again.

Each of us has the right and the duty to make our own contribution to safeguarding those who are most in need, to rethink the world of living together and to propose alternative solutions that take special care of the weak, the environment and the protection of opportunities.

We are the Next Generation Europe that talks, but this time talking is not enough, we believe that the time has really come to act.

With words, with the pen or with actions, we will lay the foundations for a better future that we deserve.