

# Rising support for alternative parties

The daily round-robin e-mail from *Open Europe* on Monday 2nd March would have been unhappy reading for what might be termed the “EU mainstream.” No fewer than four of the eleven items featured discussed political parties in different countries which either are gaining or have gained support because of opposition to the Euro or to the EU itself.

Firstly, there is Syriza in Greece. The party leadership may have rolled over in the face of German intransigence over the bailout, but their climbdown has left a smouldering legacy within the party. A motion to oppose the bailout, put forward by one of the most left-wing factions, was defeated, but only narrowly. Furthermore, Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras insisted that there would be no third bailout. He also hit out at Spain’s Prime Minister Mariano Rajoy, saying that Spain wanted “unconditional surrender.” Rajoy replied that, “We’re not responsible for the frustration generated by the Greek radical left, which promised the Greeks what they knew they couldn’t keep – as it’s now been proved.” Although Syriza has managed to maintain a very high approval rating among the electorate even after the humiliating agreement with the Troika, the violent demonstrations in Athens last Friday suggests that sections of the Greek electorate may soon switch allegiance to other more anti-EU parties if the new government is not seen to make a difference to their everyday lives, something which will not be easy in view of the stark financial statistics. It looks likely that the main pro-EU mainstream parties in Greece will be relegated to the margins for some time yet, during which time anything, including government insolvency or an exit from the Euro, could be on the cards.

Meanwhile, in France, Nicolas Sarkozy’s attempts at a political comeback have continued with a fierce attack on

Marine le Pen's *Front National*. Sarkozy, who said that Tsipras had had to "eat his hat", warned that voting for the FN would lead to a similar scenario in France. Such rhetoric, however, has not impressed the electorate. Latest opinion polls show the FN leading on 33%, with the beleaguered Socialists in third place, down to a paltry 19%. As in Greece, another pro-EU mainstream party has taken a hammering.

February ended in Rome with a rally in Rome in support of Italy's *Lega Nord*, a one-time partner of UKIP in the European Parliament. Like the FN in France, the *Lega* is not a party that fits into a tidy pigeonhole. Accounts abound of some pretty unsavoury statements by some senior figures in the party, but its leader Matteo Salvini is gaining in popularity by attacking austerity and labelling Matteo Renzi, the current Italian Prime Minister, a "dumb slave", the "foolish servant of Brussels". Opinion polls put the party in third place, quite a comeback for a party that polled a mere 6.2% in last year's European Parliamentary elections. The party was founded to campaign for a separation of the northern part of Italy (Padania) from the rest of the country. Its revival, according to some commentators, has been built of switching its focus from Rome to Brussels as the source of all evil. Given the continuing popularity of Beppe Grillo's Five Star movement, Italy too looks likely to drift further away from the pro-EU mainstream.

Then finally, there is Germany. This weekend, the anti-Euro *Alternative für Deutschland* party held a convention. Founded by a university professor, Bernd Lucke, AfD seemed a million miles away from the populist parties of the Mediterranean countries at its inception. Unlike *Lega Nord* or the *Front National*, AfD has never talked of withdrawal from the EU, but its recent embrace of the Pegida movement is pushing it further away from the bland centre of EU politics. Lucke's statement that "Islam is foreign to most, or almost all Germans" is remarkably politically incorrect and the

prevailing mood of the party delegates appears to be very much on the same lines as that of its leader. They voted by a large majority for a general ban on minarets and burquas.

It would be foolish in the extreme to celebrate the ascendancy of any political party purely because of its opposition to the EU. *Golden Dawn* in Greece and *Jobbik* in Hungary in particular do seem particularly unsavoury. However, whether these new alternative parties are unpleasant or not, their growing popularity is an indication that the objective of ever close union which lies at the heart of the EU project, is being challenged as never before.

Sometimes, informal discussions between CIB committee members occasionally raise the possibility that we may not have to leave the EU because it may implode from within before we get the chance to vote. While this still remains quite a long shot, recent developments on the Continent suggest it is not perhaps as absurd a scenario as it might sound.


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