EUROPE 27.06.2018 | Michael Bröning

Europe's left turns right on immigration

Instead of following the nationalist right, the left should pursue a strategy that can be popular without being populist

Read this article in German or Russian.

Europe's established left is facing the threat of extinction. In less than two years, the continent's social-democratic parties have suffered historic losses in France, the Netherlands, Germany, and Italy. On a continent long defined by democratic competition between centre-right and centre-left parties, the collapse of the left could have far-reaching consequences, beyond particular party interests.

Many factors underlie the left's decline, including the dissolution of the traditional working class. But one of the most important reasons is as grim as it is simple: European voters are increasingly opposed to immigration, and do not trust the left to limit it.

Faced with a sustained influx of refugees and migrants, primarily from the Middle East and Africa, European voters have transformed a series of recent elections into popular referenda on immigration. Right-wing populist movements have skilfully played on blue-collar voters' fears by convincing them that traditional labour parties will allow immigrants to flow in virtually unchecked.

In April, Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán won a landslide election victory after running a campaign that focused on the 'threat' to 'Christian values' supposedly posed by Muslim immigrants. Italy's new anti-establishment coalition government was propelled to power by the popularity of the staunchly anti-immigrant League party, led by Matteo Salvini, who is now interior minister and deputy prime minister.

Centre-left parties across Europe have begun to

In Slovenia, former Prime Minister Janez Janša's right-wing opposition party secured just under 25 per cent of the vote in this month's

change course, with social democrats in several key countries changing long-held positions on migration.

parliamentary election, meaning that Janša will form the country's next government. Echoing US President Donald Trump, Janša campaigned on an anti-immigrant 'Slovenia first' platform.

Changing position on immigration

When right-wing populists first started gaining political traction, Europe's centre-left parties hoped that their traditional strengths would enable them to weather the challenge. To avoid unwittingly strengthening right-wing narratives, centre-left campaigners attempted to shift public debate toward their ideological comfort zone: unemployment, inequality, and social justice. Germany's Social Democratic Party (SPD) based its entire 2017 election campaign on the slogan, 'It's time for more justice.'

Yet defeat after painful defeat has driven centre-left parties to a stark realisation: voters who are concerned primarily with immigration are not going to be won over with calls – however justified – for equality. As a result, centre-left parties across Europe have begun to change course, with social democrats in several key countries changing long-held positions on migration.

In Germany, the coalition government (comprising the SPD, the Christian Democratic Union (CDU), and the CDU's Bavarian sister party, the Christian Social Union) is embroiled in a bitter fight over immigration that threatens the survival of the coalition. While the SPD aims for a European solution and rejects sealing Germany's borders, party leader Andrea Nahles called for accelerated asylum procedures that would enable authorities to conclude asylum applications from safe third countries within one week. Last month, Nahles launched the debate within the SPD when, seemingly echoing right-wing rhetoric, she declared that Germany 'cannot accept all.'

Some in the SPD's leadership and its youth wing were up in arms. Yet Nahles has doubled down on her stance, publicly endorsing a critical analysis, compiled by a board of independent observers, of last year's election defeat. That report identified 'the lack of a consistent social-democratic position' on migration issues as one of the party's structural weaknesses.

Pro-integration instead of pro-migration?

Austria's Social Democratic Party has taken its shift on immigration further. The party leadership has presented a new platform, to be officially endorsed later this year, that formally redefines the party's position as 'pro-integration,' as opposed to pro-migration. While the platform does refer to the country's 'humanitarian responsibilities,' it also demands 'functioning protection' of the EU's external borders.

At the same time, too drastic a change could be self-defeating for struggling centre-left parties.

Denmark's social democrats are a step ahead of their Austrian counterparts: in preparation for next year's elections, they have adopted a new position paper on immigration titled 'Just and Realistic.' By establishing 'reception centres' outside Europe to decide on asylum claims, the paper asserts, the flow of migrants into Denmark can be reduced. The paper also calls for stronger cooperation with the United Nations and a 'Marshall Plan' for Africa that would presumably convince more migrants to stay home.

This stance is largely mirrored by Sweden's social democrats, as they attempt to cope with strong public support for the far-right, anti-immigrant Sweden Democrats. Prime Minister Stefan Löfven, who is campaigning for re-election in September, recently called his country's traditionally open immigration policy 'not sustainable.' His proposed policy, entitled 'A Safe Migration Policy for a New Time,' would halve the number of refugees allowed into Sweden and prevent rejected asylum seekers from receiving social support – a position that pro-migration groups harshly criticise.

The criticism highlights a key challenge. On one level, social democrats' immigration shift is a necessary response to voter demand. Efforts to limit or manage migration are not necessarily based on racism or xenophobia. The key is to ensure that policy responses remain morally acceptable.

At the same time, too drastic a change could be self-defeating for struggling centre-left parties. They clearly cannot copy the crude nativist recipes of the radical right, which would not only be economically counterproductive, but would also fly in the face of progressive values, alienating cosmopolitan supporters.

Instead, Europe's centre-left parties should strike a balance between national and international solidarity with a three-pronged strategy comprising effective limits on immigration, a focus on integration, and humanitarian efforts to ease large-scale human suffering. Such an approach would eschew incendiary rhetoric, and instead offer real, forward-thinking, and morally sustainable solutions that are not populist, but certainly can be popular.

Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau has embraced this approach, as has French President Emmanuel Macron. Struggling centre-left parties across Europe should follow suit, recognising that such a repositioning may well be the key to political survival.

(c) Project Syndicate



Michael Bröning
New York CIty

Michael Bröning heads the office of the Friedrich Ebert Foundation in New York.