Early Results

Far-Right Local Governments and Civil Society: Findings from France and Italy

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Abstract

The rise of far-right parties across Europe and their entrance into government at the local, if not regional or national, levels pose challenges for established civil society actors. This article draws on early findings from an ongoing research project in order to present two case studies of far-right local governments in small industrial towns in France and Italy: Hayange and Sant'Agata Bolognese. Keying in on these local administrations' approaches to civil society and drawing on semi-structured interviews with local politicians and trade union actors, the article identifies preliminary patterns in far-right local government relations with civil society organizations (including trade unions), including a bypassing or outright attacking of established associations deemed hostile (especially left-wing ones) in favor of those deemed politically more palatable. This exclusionary and partisan approach to civil society notably coexists alongside other aspects of far-right local governance centered on a performatively enacted claim to serve the entire community, most notably with the highly visible provision of non-excludable public goods such as public fountains and rotaries. These considerations provide a basis for ongoing and future work on far-right interventions in different areas of civil society, in different countries, and in light of a broader spectrum of actor perspectives.

Introduction

In October 2018, the right-wing Italian trade union UGL (General Union of Labor) made news headlines when it hosted a meeting between Marine Le Pen and Matteo Salvini at its Rome headquarters. On the surface, the meeting was emblematic for far-right parties' increasingly visible attempts to appeal to the world of labor and trade unions—a

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phenomenon that is hardly new in itself, with parties such as the Vlaams Blok in Belgium and the Front National in France having held their own May Day events in the mid-1990s with slogans such as "Work for our people" (Spruyt, 2000: 130) or "The Front National is the trade union of the French" (Choffat, 1999: 59). A question that nonetheless arises with renewed urgency is how the relationship between far-right parties and established trade unions or civil society more generally looks like in actual governing practice—especially in light of more recent experiences with far-right-led governments at the local level, where relationships between town halls and civic associations take on heightened relevance. France and Italy constitute two countries in Western Europe in which far-right parties in local government have become an increasingly visible phenomenon in the context of a "fourth wave" characterized by increased mainstreaming of the far right (e.g. Mondon and Winter, 2020; Mudde, 2019; Pytlas, 2018). If the far right has traditionally been considered hostile to established civil society organizations in liberal democracies, the question is not only how the overall politics of far-right parties, once in power at the local level, toward organized civil society can be characterized, but also how these parties appeal at the same time to the citizens or indeed the "people" that civil society organizations are supposed to represent (or "the workers" in the case of trade unions; see also Schroeder et al., 2020). In other words, the question is not least to what extent differences emerge in the performatively enacted "representative claims" (Saward, 2006) of far-right parties vis-à-vis organized civil society on the one hand and the constituencies the latter seeks to represent on the other.

    This article presents results from an ongoing research project on far-right strategies toward trade unions and workplace representation, which draws on semi-structured interviews with trade union actors at the workplace level in six European countries (Belgium, France, Germany, Hungary, Italy, and Poland). The starting point for this research, therefore, is an interest in trade unionists' perceptions of how their sphere of civil society is affected by far-right interventions, while triangulating these accounts with macro-level data on working-class support for the far right as well as communication materials produced by far-right actors themselves (building here on the author's extensive prior work in political discourse analysis). Against this background and in an exploratory vein, this article develops findings on the related question of far-right local government approaches to organized civil society (of which trade unions constitute one part), identifying preliminary patterns from two small industrial towns in France and Italy—Hayange (home of a once-thriving steel industry) and Sant'Agata Bolognese (home of Lamborghini Automobiles)—with incumbent far-right mayors who were elected in 2014 and subsequently re-elected with increased vote shares.

The Far Right's Paths to Local Government in France and Italy

Le Pen's Rassemblement National (RN; previously Front National) and Salvini's Lega (previously Lega Nord) can be considered two of the leading faces of the "fourth wave" (Mudde, 2019) characterized by a mainstreaming of far-right politics, albeit in contrasting ways: the FN/RN has increasingly taken on an agenda-setting function for mainstream politics even while being subject more or less to an electoral *cordon sanitaire*—with notable examples including Nicolas Sarkozy's law-and-order-centered 2007 presidential campaign or the "*pas de deux*" of Macron and Le Pen under the former's presidency

(Mondon, 2014; Mondon and Winter, 2020)—while the Lega has long been integrated into center-right electoral alliances since the mid-1990s, which also saw its participation in the Berlusconi cabinets of 1994–1995, 2001–2006, and 2008–2011. In France, however, the established practice of center-left and center-right parties declaring support for each other's candidates with the best perceived chance of beating the FN/RN in runoffs (in the name of the "republican consensus") has eroded in recent years, with the center-right in particular increasingly opting for a "neither-nor" (*ni-ni*) strategy of supporting neither the center-left nor the far right in such scenarios; it was this kind of constellation that saw the election of an FN mayor in Hayange in 2014, which will be discussed in the French case study. In Italy, by contrast, the Lega has been a recurring element in center-right electoral alliances at the local, regional, and national levels since the mid-1990s, alongside the various party projects of Silvio Berlusconi (first Forza Italia, then Popolo della Libertà, then Forza Italia again) and the post-fascist national-conservative right (first Alleanza Nazionale, then Fratelli d'Italia). While this arrangement led to positions of executive power in most major right-wing governed cities and regions being held by candidates of the FI/PdL, the balance of forces within the right-wing party camp has shifted in recent years, with Lega candidates winning the mayoralty or regional presidency for the right in a growing number of formerly left-dominated areas, such as the municipalities of Ferrara (2019), Pisa (2018), Terni (2018), or the Region of Umbria (2019), in addition to being (re-)elected in traditional strongholds such as Friuli Venezia Giulia, Lombardy, and Veneto. This, in turn, has played out against the background of the Lega's growing political influence and polling numbers (up to 35%–40% at its peak) in the aftermath of the 2018 general election, including Matteo Salvini's visible use of the immigration issue as Minister of the Interior in the first Conte cabinet.

In a sense, therefore, the RN and the Lega represent two distinct faces of the mainstreaming of far-right parties in Europe: the RN remains electorally isolated even with its growing vote shares and agenda-setting influence, while the Lega has long been integrated into the center-right electoral mainstream in addition to seeing both its electoral and agenda-setting influence grow in recent years. A major underlying difference here between the two parties consists in their organizational genealogies: the FN and its founder Jean-Marie Le Pen have their roots in the neo-fascist extreme right—to which the mainstream conservative and Gaullist right, for instance, has traditionally been hostile—including the Ordre Nouveau and the 1965 presidential campaign of Jean-Louis Tixier-Vignancour, both of which Le Pen was active in. The Lega, by contrast, originated as a broadly anti-statist alliance of northern Italian separatist groupings that initially did not situate itself on the far right—with party founder and longtime leader Umberto Bossi even promising "never with the fascists" in a 1994 pre-election speech. With the Lega's subsequent transformations into an ethno-nativist regionalist (and partly populist) party under Bossi and an increasingly pan-Italian nationalist-nativist one under Salvini (Albertazzi et al., 2018; Albertazzi and McDonnell, 2005), numerous convergences between today's RN and Lega can be seen, including a focus on anti-immigration politics, appeals to national sovereignty against the European Union, and not least an apparent openness to far-right extra-parliamentary groupings such as the Identitaires in France or CasaPound in Italy, which has even led to both parties receiving consideration as "movement parties" in recent literatures. Against this background, the question in the following is how RN and Lega approach relations to organized civil society from a position of executive power at the local level.

Far-Right Town Halls and Civil Society: Hayange and Sant'Agata Bolognese

The case studies in question are the municipalities of Hayange (Moselle Department) and Sant'Agata Bolognese (Bologna Metropolitan City), two small industrial towns of some 15,000 and 7000 inhabitants, respectively. In both places, far-right candidates won narrow and largely unexpected victories in the second round of the respective local elections in 2014: in Hayange, FN candidate Fabien Engelmann won with 34.7% of the vote in an unusual four-way runoff featuring one center-right independent, another "without label" (*sans étiquette*), and the Socialist Party (PS) incumbent; in Sant'Agata, Giuseppe Vicinelli headed a non-party "civic list" (*lista civica*) of the right that won by just over 100 votes. Vicinelli was previously active in the FI/PdL before joining the Lega in 2018; Engelmann was a former activist for two radical left-wing parties (Workers' Struggle, then the New Anti-Capitalist Party) and a CGT (General Confederation of Labor) union delegate before being expelled from the latter in the wake of his 2011 cantonal election candidacy for the FN. The 2014 results marked an end to decades of left-wing local dominance in both towns: Sant'Agata, as a municipality within the historically Communist-dominated Bologna metropolitan area, had been governed continuously by center-left mayors after the dissolution of the PCI; Hayange, within the otherwise historically right-leaning Moselle region, had been governed by PS mayors since 1995. Engelmann's victory, in particular, attracted widespread media coverage for its symbolic status arising from the FN candidate's background on the left as well as the PS government's recent backtracking on its 2012 election promise to save the ArcelorMittal steel complex in nearby Florange (partly also located in Hayange) via nationalization. Engelmann was re-elected in 2020 with over 63% in the first round (albeit with a massively reduced turnout of about 36%), while Vicinelli won a landslide of over 75% of the vote in 2019.

Left-wing local politicians and trade union officials, when asked in the interviews to explain the initial 2014 victories of the far right in Hayange and Sant'Agata, point to various demand-side factors such as an influx of internal migrants from Southern Italy identifying as right-wing (Sant'Agata; Interview IT-3) or widespread voter disaffection with established parties of the center-left and center-right (Hayange; Interview FR-3). In explaining the sustained electoral success and re-elections of these mayors, however, the interviewees point to a certain style of governance centered on "attention to the cleanliness of the city," including repainted public fountains and increased police presence (Hayange; Interviews FR-1, FR-2), as well as public works projects such as two new rotaries and an expanded bicycle road network, funded by a public–private partnership with Lamborghini concluded under the previous local administration (Sant'Agata; Interviews IT-2, IT-3). In both contexts, the interviewees emphasize the performative dimension of these policies: both mayors are said to capitalize on "visible things" to market themselves as guardians of the common good bringing about tangible improvements to the community. In this vein, one CGIL (General Italian Confederation of Labor) union official from the Bologna area summarizes Vicinelli's representative claim as follows: "you see, I am the leader of the town, I do work useful for everyone" (Interview IT-1). The centrality of publicity-oriented symbolic politics extends onto other actions such as the inauguration of a public square dedicated to Ferruccio Lamborghini (Sant'Agata) or the annual town-hall-sponsored "pork festival" that has attracted international attention as a thinly veiled provocation to the significant Muslim minority in the municipality (Hayange). What is performatively enacted in all these

examples—with the notable exception of the Hayange pork festival—is a claim to represent *all* citizens of the community on a very basic level through the servicing of non-excludable public goods that, by definition, are freely available to everyone at the point of use. In the language of post-foundational discourse theory, what is at work here is a logic of difference rather than equivalence, administration rather than antagonism (Laclau, 2005)—a striking absence, in other words, of the "us" versus "them" politics that is otherwise so characteristic of the far right.

This is not to say that these far-right mayors govern in a non-antagonistic manner; indeed, it is precisely in the sphere of civil society relations that the exclusionary effects of far-right local governance can be seen. Our interviewees accuse the local administrations of open hostility to civil society organizations: in Sant'Agata, the *Centro 21 aprile*, a youth center that had organized concerts, film screenings, as well as anti-fascist Liberation Day celebrations, was forced to close when the town hall demanded a monthly rent of €1000 for the facilities that the group had been using thanks to donations and support from the previous administration (Interview IT-3); in Hayange, the *Secours populaire*, a charity organization historically close to the Communist Party, faced a virtual crackdown when the local administration not only cut subsidies, but also cut access to heating and electricity before this was restored following a court ruling (Interviews FR-1, FR-2). Local representatives of established trade unions also report either being ignored (Sant'Agata) or facing outright hostility from the far-right administration (Hayange): a CGIL official notes that there is no bilateral contact, let alone consultation, with the mayor of Sant'Agata, in contrast to other (center-left-governed) municipalities in the region with a major industrial and trade union presence (Interview IT-1); in Hayange, reports of intimidatory practices by the mayor's office toward CGT union activity or membership among civil servants—including retaliatory dismissals and re-assignments—have found coverage in the national media (Abdelilah et al., 2020).

In these far-right actors' own communication, a distinctly partisan approach to civil society can be seen: namely, a conspicuous bypassing of left-wing associations in favor of others deemed more politically palatable. In Sant'Agata, a left-wing local politician notes that the Vicinelli administration closed two of the town's four nurseries and transferred the other two to external management by a cooperative—a move that the interviewee criticizes as an abdication of municipal responsibility for public services, while noting that there is no relationship of political proximity between this cooperative and the far-right administration (Interview IT-3). In a region that has been internationally acclaimed for its vibrant civil society (e.g. Putnam, 1993), the strategy of the Lega seems to be to selectively support associations or cooperatives that can be marketed as "neutral" and more representative of the many "citizens" who are civically engaged in some way or another. Tellingly, Salvini claimed at a regional election rally in Sant'Agata in 2019 that he supports "real cooperatives that really make cooperation" as opposed to "false cooperatives" that "don't pay taxes" (Pupia News, 2019). In Hayange, too, the Engelmann administration tries to position itself as supportive of civil society organizations, except the undesirable ones: the town hall's most recent "directory of associations," issued in 2019, in which Engelmann encouraged readers in his foreword to "be active in an association—it's to be active in the life of the community," featured a listing of local associations in areas ranging from arts to sports—including charity organizations such as *Secours catholique*, while conspicuously omitting *Secours populaire* (Ville de Hayange, 2019).

Conclusion

The small industrial towns of Hayange and Sant'Agata Bolognese provide an instructive look into different faces of far-right local governance today: on the one hand, performatively enacted claims to service public goods for the entire community; on the other hand, a politics of bypassing or attacking established civil society organizations, especially left-wing ones including trade unions with strong roots in the respective areas. At the same time, the far-right local administrations present themselves as supportive of local associations deemed politically palatable or compatible with their own conceptions of civic engagement. It is in this partisan approach to civil society that the exclusionary effects of far-right local governance are felt especially strongly in both municipalities. Nonetheless, these far-right local administrations rely on maintaining the formal democratic separation between civil society and the state—and the "relative autonomy" of the former, as it were—while attempting to redraw the boundaries of what constitutes legitimate civil society. The extent to which these local governments try to innovate organizationally—such as by establishing new civic associations close to them—appears to be limited: in the sphere of industrial relations, the focus seems to be on either bypassing or displacing an established union presence deemed hostile, rather than courting or forming administration-friendly yellow unions, for instance. Ongoing and future research can build on these considerations to develop findings on different spheres of civil society (as Schroeder et al., 2020, have done for Germany), from other countries, and with a broader spectrum of actor perspectives.

List of interviews

FR-1   CGT union official, Moselle
FR-2   CGT union official, Moselle
FR-3   Left-wing local politician, Moselle
IT-1   CGIL union official, Bologna area
IT-2   CGIL union official, Bologna area
IT-3   Left-wing local politician, Bologna area

Declaration of conflicting interests

Funding

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