

Steve Bannon Is a Fan of Donald Trump



Matteo Salvini, Italy's interior minister, waving to supporters in Rome last year



ROGER COHEN

He's crisscrossing Europe because he believes it's a bellwether for the United States. The scary thing is he could be right

Italy is a political laboratory. During the Cold War, the question was whether the United States could keep the Communists from power. Then Italy produced Silvio Berlusconi and scandal-ridden showman politics long before the United States elected Donald Trump. Now, on the eve of European Parliament elections likely to result in a rightist lurch, it has an anti-immigrant, populist government whose strongman, Matteo Salvini, known to his followers as “the Captain,” is the Continent’s most seductive exponent of the new illiberalism.

Steve Bannon, Trump’s former chief strategist, has been close to Salvini for a while. That’s no surprise. Bannon is the foremost theorist and propagator of the global nationalist, anti-establishment

backlash. He’s Trotsky to the Populist International. He sensed the disease eating at Western democracies — a globalised elite’s abandonment of the working class and the hinterland — before anyone. He spurred a revolt to make the invisible citizen visible and to save Western manufacturing jobs from what he calls the Chinese “totalitarian economic hegemon.”

Now Bannon is crisscrossing Europe ahead of the elections, held Thursday through next Sunday. He’s in Berlin one day, Paris the next. As he explained during several recent conversations and a meeting in New York, he believes that “Europe is six months to a year ahead of the United States on everything.” As with Brexit’s foreshadowing of Trump’s election, a victory for the right in Europe “will energize our base for 2020.” The notion of Wisconsin galvanized by Brussels may seem far-fetched, but then so did a President Trump.

Polls indicate that Salvini’s League party, transformed from a northern secessionist movement into the national face of the xenophobic right, will get over 30 percent of the Italian vote, up from 6.2 percent in 2014. Anti-immigrant and Euroskeptical parties look set to make the greatest gains, taking as many as 35 percent of the seats in Parliament, which influences European Union policy for more than a half-billion people. In France, Marine Le Pen’s nationalists are running neck-and-neck with President Emmanuel Macron’s pro-Europe party. In Britain, Nigel Farage’s new Brexit Party has leapt ahead of the centre-right and centre-left.

Salvini, whose party formed a government a year ago with the out-with-the-old-order Five Star Movement, is a central figure in this shift. The coalition buried mainstream parties. He is, Bannon told me, “the most important guy on the stage right now — he’s charismatic, plain-spoken, and

he understands the machinery of government. His rallies are as intense as Trump’s. Italy is the centre of politics — a country that has embraced nationalism against globalism, shattered the stereotypes, blown past the old paradigm of left and right.”

For all the upheaval, I found Italy intact, still tempering transactional modernity with humanity, still finding in beauty consolation for dysfunction. The new right has learned from the past. It does not disappear people. It does not do mass militarization. It’s subtler. It scapegoats migrants, instills fear, glorifies an illusory past (what the Polish sociologist Zygmunt Bauman called “retrotopia”), exalts machismo, mocks do-gooder liberalism and turns the angry drumbeat of social media into its hypnotic minute-by-minute mass rally.

Salvini, the suave saviour, is everywhere other than in his interior minister’s office at

Rome’s Viminale Palace. He’s out at rallies or at the local cafe in his trademark blue “Italia” sweatshirt. He’s at village fairs and conventions. He’s posting on Facebook up to 30 times a day to his 3.7 million followers, more than any other European politician. (Macron has 2.6 million followers.) He’s burnishing the profile of the tough young pol (he’s 46) who keeps migrants out, loosens gun laws, brandishes a sniper rifle and winks at Fascism — all leavened with Mr.-Nice-Guy images of him sipping espresso or a Barolo.

His domination of the headlines is relentless. When, during my visit, a woman was gang raped near Viterbo, his call for “chemical castration” of the perpetrators led the news cycle for 24 hours. Like Trump, he’s a master of saying the unsayable to drown out the rest.

“I find Salvini repugnant, but he seems to have an incredible grip on society,” Nathalie Tocci, the director of Italy’s Institute of International Relations, told me. No wonder then that the European far-right has chosen Milan for its big pre-election rally, bringing together Salvini, Le Pen, Jörg Meuthen of the Alternative for Germany party and many other rightist figures.

“The European elections will be decisive for the future of our continent,” Macron warned in a manifesto called “For European Renewal.” That’s probably an exaggeration, but none has ever felt this important, precisely because European integration, the foundation of postwar peace, and liberal democracy itself seem vulnerable. “Nationalist retrenchment offers nothing,” Macron declared. The Brexit fiasco is Exhibit A in that argument. Still, Macron’s proposal for the creation of a “European Agency for the Protection of Democracies” speaks volumes about where we are.

A nationalist tide is still rising. “We need to mobilize,” Bannon told me. “This is not an era of persuasion, it’s an era of mobilization. People now move in tribes. Persuasion is highly overrated.”

Bannon gives the impression of a man trying vainly to keep up with the intergalactic speed of his thoughts. Ideas cascade. He offered me a snap dissection of American politics: blue-collar families were suckers: their sons and daughters went off to die in unwon wars; their equity evaporated with the 2008 meltdown, destroyed by “financial weapons of mass destruction”; their jobs migrated to China. All that was needed was somebody to adopt a new vernacular, say

to heck with all that “unlimited illegal” American greatness. The rest is history. In Europe, Barlow included several. The “centralized and its austerity immigration and

Salvini gre middle-class of university in its early days was shaped Radio Padaria listen to

the provinces that produced the Sal look-alikes across Europe, Italy is Sc North Carolina, Italy wants to be Ita South Carolina. I to be a union of n

The fact is Italy with its high une archaic public ad between the prosp vini’s League onc secessionist state southern Mezzog has done nothing even as it has det tacked an indepe tolled an “Italians

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Salvini grew up i family, dropped c the League in its and was shaped b Padania where he



Former White House Chief Strategist US Steve Bannon delivers a speech during an anti-immigration meeting organised by the Flemish far-right party Vlaams Belang at the Flemish Parliament in Brussels