

In the Name of God, the Most Merciful, the Most Kind

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## A Nostalgic Feeling for Ancient Silk Road

Trade and cultural exchanges played a crucial role in the development of ancient civilization. Besides commercial give-and-take, the historical Silk Road was a route for cross-cultural contact among the civilizations.

The ancient Silk Road carries an increasing historical weight for being the crossroads of trade and cultural diffusion. That is, trading activities along the Silk Road over many centuries facilitated the transmission not just of goods but also ideas and culture, notably in the area of religions including Islam and Buddhism. That is the exchange of culture was the greatest value of the Silk Road as art, religion, philosophy, technology, language, music, science, architecture, and every other element of civilization was exchanged along these routes, carried with the commercial goods that merchants traded from country to country.

Similarly, the Silk Road was a network of roads for travel and dissemination of religious beliefs across Eurasia for over two thousand years. Missionaries of many faiths accompanied caravans on the Silk Road, consciously trying to expand the reach of their religious persuasion and make converts to their faith.

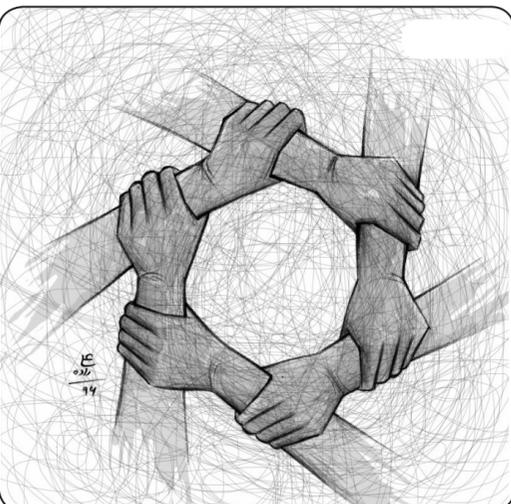
Buddhism was the first of the great missionary faiths to take advantage of the mobility provided by the Silk Road to extend its reach far beyond its native ground as Buddhist monks, along with merchant caravans, went from India to Central Asia and China preaching their faith. Buddhist merchants built temples and shrines along the Silk Road wherever they traveled and Buddhist priests and monks, who staffed those religious edifices, preached to local populations and passing travelers, spreading the faith rapidly. The significant message of Buddhism – that earthly life is impermanent and full of suffering, but that the painful cycle of birth, death, and rebirth can be ended through Buddhism faith and practice – had a broad appeal. Thus, Buddhism was embraced widely, and its official arrival in China was noted by the imperial court in the mid-1st century CE. Buddhist missionaries from Central Asia translated sacred texts into Chinese. From the 4th Century onward, Chinese pilgrims are said to travel to India through the Silk Road to improve access to the original Buddhist scriptures and seek doctrinal instruction. Merchants supported Buddhist monasteries along the Silk Road, and in return the Buddhists gave merchants somewhere to stay as they traveled from city to city. It should be noted that Buddhism is said to spread from China to Korea and Japan by the 6th century CE.

Moreover, Islam is said to enter China in the seventh century and Islamic influence came from the various steppe peoples who assimilated in Chinese culture. Sufis, whose Islamic teachings exist in all the vernaculars and cultures of Silk Road peoples, played a highly significant role in the spread of Islam. The full diversity of Muslim traditions, school of thoughts and civilization influences – including the development of philosophy and science, law and history, literature and arts, and expressions in music and dances – flourished along the Silk Road. Islam is one of the religions still officially recognized in China and has a large number of followers.

Music also spread beyond its land of origin as merchants carried their music and musical instruments with them, like religion, when they traveled. Sufis, dervishes, and religious storytellers used song and chant to spread religion to people gathered to hear them in bazaars, caravanserais, and tea houses. In a commentary titled "Music of the Silk Roads", John Major said, "Religion has been one of the most important cultural forces to promote the dissemination of music along the Silk Road. Members of the Islamic Sufi orders, who have traditionally welcomed the use of music, chant, and sacred dance as elements of prayer, were instrumental in spreading spiritual songs among their adherents". Besides mentioning the "violin", he said, regarding the instruments that illustrate the spread of musical culture along the Silk Road, that "the sheng, or Chinese reed-pipe mouth organ, is thought to have originated in southern China, perhaps even among non-Chinese tribal peoples of the far southwest. It was incorporated into Chinese orchestral music by the 5th century BCE".

Overall, the ancient Silk Road was not only a network for promoting commodity exchanges but also dissemination of ideas, religions, and cultures.

With this in mind, we have to carry on the spirit of the Silk Road – peace and cooperation, openness and inclusiveness, and mutual learning and mutual benefit – as reiterated by Chinese officials, and continue religious tolerance, cultural exchanges, and people-to-people contact.



## Why the EU Election Was a Win for Macron

By: Zaki Laïdi

Though the final vote tally might seem to suggest otherwise, the European Parliament elections were a strategic success for French President Emmanuel Macron. There are four reasons why this is so.

First, Macron succeeded in framing the election as a contest between progressives and populists. Though he has been assailed at home in recent months – including by some on his own "side" – it is worth remembering that this message did not emerge out of thin air. Rather, it harks back to Macron's 2017 presidential campaign, which itself tapped into a broader political sea change taking place across Europe. In that election, he overcame the traditional right-left divide. Two years later, this was replicated in the European Parliament elections.

Historically, the Republicans on the right and the Socialists on the left have dominated French politics. Yet these parties' combined share of the popular vote was under 15%, whereas Macron's La République en Marche! won 22.4%, and the far-right National Rally (formerly the National Front) picked up 23.3%. Behind these figures is an unprecedented collapse of the mainstream French right, which has failed to reconcile identity politics with traditional liberalism. Though some French conservatives have migrated to the National Rally, much of the center-right electorate has gravitated toward Macron's party, owing to efforts by Prime Minister Édouard Philippe (formerly of the Republicans). Moreover, most of those who switched to La République en Marche! are pensioners who did so despite being hit hard by Macron's tax reforms (some of which have been reversed). This suggests that Macron's progressive-versus-populist narrative helped to re-mobilize France's – and perhaps Europe's – pro-European electorate. While the National Rally performed well and Italy's right-wing League party made gains, they failed to trigger the EU-wide political earthquake that many had come to expect.

The second reason the election represents a victory for Macron is that his party will now be able to claim leadership over a pivotal centrist parliamentary group of 110 members. The relative losses suffered by the European People's Party (EPP) and the Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats (S&D), combined with the surge in support for the Greens, means that the European Parliament is entering a period of quadripartite governance. Provided these groups are able to compromise, the new arrangement will probably be an improvement on the old one, wherein the EPP and S&D divvied up all of the jobs. For the first time in the European Parliament's history, the number of MEPs affiliated with the two main parties represents only 44% of the total.

A more fluid parliamentary composition will allow for more ad hoc majorities to emerge in support of various policy propos-

als, given that there is so much common ground between La République en Marche!, the S&D, and the Greens. And, as an added bonus, the end of the EPP/S&D duopoly also marks the end of German hegemony in the Parliament.

Third, the Spitzenkandidaten process – whereby the largest party grouping selects the president of the European Commission – is likely to collapse, and this may also work to Macron's advantage. The system is a first-past-the-post mechanism in a proportionally elected Parliament, and has more to do with partisanship than with democracy, because it gives automatic power to the largest group.

But while the EPP won the most parliamentary seats, its Spitzenkandidat, Manfred Weber, is very controversial. Just before the election, he was weakened by the political demise of Austrian Chancellor Sebastian Kurz, whose government was brought down by the release of a video in which his vice chancellor, Heinz-Christian Strache of the Freedom Party, appears to offer a quid pro quo for electoral help from Russia.

But Merkel still defends Weber, and, apart from Macron and Dutch Prime Minister Mark Rutte, most EU leaders are reluctant to confront the European Parliament on the Spitzenkandidaten issue. That may shorten the odds for Margrethe Vestager – who is not from the EPP, but who is, in a sense, a liberal Spitzenkandidat – while while lengthening them for Michel Barnier, who is from the EPP but is not a Spitzenkandidat. If the Council succeeds in ruling out Weber and his populist supporters, Macron will claim it as a success.

Finally, the election provides a check on German hegemony within the EU more broadly. Germany's Christian Democratic Union (CDU) has been weakened, and the country's Greens have grown stronger. For his part, Macron will find the Greens much easier to work with on eurozone reform, especially if they end up joining a new German coalition government.

Taken together, these post-election considerations paint a rather positive picture for Macron. The question now is whether he can use his strength at the EU level to shore up his domestic position. This will not happen automatically. With the fall of the French right, there may be a temptation to position La République en Marche! as a new home for right-wing French voters. But while this might capture Paris's bourgeois 16th arrondissement, doing so would be a mistake. Instead, Macron should focus on securing more of the atomized left, particularly those who have moved to the National Rally.

As matters stand, La République en Marche!'s base remains limited to the "winners" of globalization. Rural, alienated, and economically vulnerable voters remain in the National Rally's camp. To win them over, Macron must reduce the polarization between the two parties.

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## Italy's Narrow Path to Recovery

By: Pier Carlo Padoan

Italy faces a double economic crisis in which two recessions and a banking crisis over the past decade have come on top of a slow structural decline in growth over a far longer period. And the country's high level of public debt leaves policymakers with limited options.

The public debt is now an astronomical €2.3 trillion (\$2.6 trillion), or 131% of GDP, requiring the authorities to issue more than €400 billion per year of government bonds. This makes Italy's economy extremely vulnerable to external shocks, and means careful public-finance management is crucial for maintaining market confidence. Investor sentiment can change suddenly – as in the fall of 2011, when the spread between the yields on Italian bonds and German Bunds reached a peak of 575 basis points. Sucked into the vortex of a serious financial crisis, Italy could not avoid a severe recession.

Here, the fundamental issue of reputation comes into play. As with people, a country's credibility can be destroyed in a few weeks and may take years to recover. And the markets are ready to present Italy with the bill, as we saw in the summer of 2018 when the new coalition government of the Five Star Movement (M5S) and the League party announced its spending plans.

Given the constraints imposed by the public debt, Italy must continue to consolidate its public finances. At the same time, policymakers need to lay the foundations for the road back from low growth and declining productivity. After all, Italy's economy was growing by one percentage point per year less than the eurozone average well before the 2008 global financial crisis.

Italy must urgently regain competitiveness, boost productivity, and reduce taxes without worsening its budget balance. This will require structural reforms to reduce bottlenecks in the economy – for example, by opening up entire sectors that remain substantially monopolistic – and fundamentally reorganizing the public administration. The country needs targeted investments in innovation, training, and research, and tangible and intangible infrastructure. And it needs direct interventions to support the most vulnerable sections of the population and make growth more inclusive.

These are huge tasks at a crucial juncture for Italy. The biggest challenge is to find the necessary political consensus for such a strategy, given that reforms – especially the most painful ones – generate costs long before they yield benefits. Moreover, it is

difficult to combine budgetary discipline with measures aimed at quickly increasing disposable income, strengthening social protection, and helping the many citizens who, owing to an economic crisis that caused Italy's GDP to contract by 9%, are facing severe distress.

In a recent book, I argue that Italy's Democratic Party, and center-left forces more broadly, lost the 2018 election because, after leading the country out of recession and dealing with a very difficult banking crisis, they failed to respond quickly and clearly to long-mounting popular discontent. The election was held amid growing disaffection with politics, at a time when the public mood – and not only in Italy – was decidedly favorable to forces calling themselves populist and seeking to defend national sovereignty.

Given such pressures, Italy's ruling coalition may be tempted to ignore the EU's fiscal rules, finance new current expenditure, and cut taxes without regard to the budget deficit. In reality, however, the path to recovery will be narrow for any Italian government. There are no shortcuts to reducing the country's huge debt, despite insistent calls from some commentators for extraordinary measures. But policymakers can, and must, support stable and inclusive growth while keeping the public finances under control.

Italy's economic debate also has a European dimension, which has become all the more important following the recent European Parliament election. Two points merit emphasis: first, the parliament continues to have a pro-European majority, and Italy, with a government fixated on national sovereignty, finds itself increasingly isolated.

The government's hopes of forcing the EU to relax its fiscal rules will soon run up against these facts. Moreover, the government mistakenly believes that its nationalist counterparts elsewhere in the EU will show greater leniency toward Italy on budgetary matters.

But that's not all. The Italian government's growing isolation in Europe leaves the country on the sidelines of decision-making processes concerning key issues of European governance and reform of the eurozone. Here, too, Italy could follow a narrow path to rebuild reputation and trust, yet it risks veering off course and losing the ability to defend its interests effectively in Europe.

Italy already faces a difficult road to economic recovery, and to generating sustainable, job-creating, and inclusive growth. We should not make it even harder for ourselves.

Pier Carlo Padoan is a former Italian minister of finance.

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