Twitter Thread by Leonardo Carella



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A word of caution: many aspects of the social, political and informational mess that led to extremists storming the US Capitol are present in Western Europe too. (1)

I. Political Violence

Wednesday didn't happen in a vacuum: it happened in a context of rising right-wing terrorism, aimed at their adversaries in the elite (pipe bombs mailed to Obama, Biden, Clinton, DNC) and among the public (Charlottesville, El Paso, Pittsburgh, Charleston).

Europe has seen its share of the same violence.

Against parliamentarians: Jo Cox, Labour Party MP, and Walter Lübke (CDU politician in Hesse) have been assassinated. Plots against other politicians, in Germany and the UK, led to further convictions. (3)

Against minorities: in Florence and Macerata, racist shooters targeted, injured and killed black people; there were mass shootings targeted at minorities in a synagogue and a kebab shop in Halle, and shisha bars in Hanau; in Finsbury Park a man drove a van into mosque-goers. (4)

Against seats of power: German protesters tried to storm the Bundestag during the coronavirus protests. The Gilets Jaunes broke into a ministry, after attempting to tear down its front door with a forklift. (5)

II. Legitimation of Political Violence.

Even more worryingly, the radical right in the institutions has inched closer to legitimising political violence against its adversaries. Nothing like the lionisation of Kyle Rittenhouse in the US, but still a significant trend. (6)

Alexander Gauland, AfD leader, described the riots in Chemnitz as an act of self-defence: "If the state can no longer protect its citizens, people take to the streets and protect themselves". (7)

Martin Hohmann, of the AfD, said that "if there had been no illegal opening of borders through Chancellor Angela Merkel, Walter Lübcke would still be alive"

Salvini deflected the blame from the Macerata terrorist:

(8)

“If anyone is to blame, it is the government that has allowed hundreds of thousands of illegal migrants to come”. He also called for “mass cleaning, street by street, road by road, with strong means if necessary”. (9)

And it’s not just what we’d normally think as ‘radical right’. Current foreign minister Di Maio met with Gilets Jaunes Leader. Wolfgang Kubicki, of the FDP, blamed Angela Merkel for the violence in Chemnitz. (10)

III. Media Environment

The US right's radicalisation happened in a media environment that *needs* a chunk of the electorate to have their own facts. Much blame is laid at the door of sm/internet, but the contribution of ‘traditional’ right-wing media cannot be overstated. (11)

Europe is not there yet. But networks of disinformation prosper: in Italy, sites like VoxNews, ImolaOggi and StopCensura bombard SMs with immigration scare stories; in France, Fdesouche (40k unique visitors per day) peddles the Great Replacement conspiracy theory. (12)

In Austria, the FPÖ can count on a vast network of allied media, from its own TV channel to Unzensuriert, info-direkt (published by the extremist network Verteidiger Europas), and the online magazine wochenblick. Again, tens of thousands of unique users per day each. (13)

'Mainstream' press has also radicalised. The newspapers that used to support Berlusconi (Libero and Il Giornale) and part of his own media empire (Mediaset) have shifted – partly for commercial reasons – towards a content much more friendly to Salvini and Meloni voters. (14)

Foreign media actors - Sputnik and RTV - have also established themselves as a major presence in right-wing/covid-19 conspiracy theory circles, with massive branches in Italy, France and Germany.

Most worryingly, grand scale spin-offs of the Fox News model are in the works (15)

GB News is expected to double down on tabloids' shock-jock partisan media. In the ND, Ongehoord Nederland, a far-right backed channel expousing the ‘cultural marxism’ conspiracy theory, has qualified to become a broadcaster. Both are expected to start broadcasting this year (16)

IV. Trust in Elections

According to surveys few Western European countries, most notably France and Italy, have similar levels of distrust in elections as the US, but the norm is still a degree of trust. It’s not as common a strategy to delegitimise opponents as in the US. (17)

Allegations of electoral fraud from the far-right have popped up here and there: notably in the 2016 Austrian presidential election and the 2018 Swedish parliamentary election. Lega politicians regularly peddle conspiracy theories prior to elections about vote-switching. (18)

Postal votes are a particularly contentious issue, as they are also implicitly linked to suspicion about migrant communities. A notable case was Farage's allegations of electoral fraud in the Peterborough by-election. (19)

But let's remember that Le Pen, Salvini and the AfD's Beatrix Von Storch all jumped on Trump's 'stop the steal' bandwagon – as did large swathes of the European right-wing online underworld. It's not unthinkable to see this strategy deployed in Western Europe soon. (20)

V. Police Radicalisation

The extent of police complicity or sympathy for the rioters in the US Capitol is still to be established. But there are worrying areas of overlap between security forces, the radical right, and political violence - in the US, but in Europe too. (21)

It is estimated that between 40 and 55% of the French police vote for the radical right. Isolated cases of extremism among either police or military forces are common, though in cases the phenomenon is much more widespread (as in the case of Northrhein-Westfalen). (22)

In Italy, online publications targeted at the armed forces - such as DifesaOggi - espouse radical right framings and platforms. Some olice Unions, such as Jusapol in Spain and SIULP in Italy, have often promoted extremist personnel and policies. (23)

And this is without even going through the situation in Central and Eastern Europe, which is arguably at a more dangerous stage. And, sure, Europeans have more inclusive political systems and fewer weapons. But we shouldn't be complacent. The rot is in our midst too. (24)