A portrait of Italy's Berlusconi government: "All for One, and One for Himself"

Berlusconi's Forza Italia: Part 2

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In June 2001, for the second time since 1994, a right-wing government led by the media mogul Silvio Berlusconi came to power in Rome. Berlusconi's Forza Italia, the neo-fascist Alleanza Nazionale and the separatist Lega Nord formed a coalition that violates the political norms of what was considered normal and acceptable in post-war Europe. Below is the first part of a two-part article analyzing the ideological and political roots of Forza Italia. Further articles, dealing with the other parties in the coalition and the reasons for its accession to power, will follow later. The first part of this article was posted on Monday, April 15.

The collapse of the old party system threatened the survival of Berlusconi's media empire. By the end of 1992, it had accumulated debts of 4.500 billion lira (ca. 2,3 billion Euro), while its legal foundations were shaky. It increasingly drew the attention of the *mani pulite* ("clean hands") investigators and without political protection, it threatened to collapse like a house of cards. Against this backdrop, Berlusconi decided to launch an offensive by going into politics himself.

Forza Italia was founded—just like the housing estate Milano 2 and Berlusconi's TV network—as a subsidiary of Fininvest. In autumn 1993, long before the party made its first public appearance, a group of leading company managers set out its election campaign and strategy. Its leading political personnel were provided by the in-house advertising company Publitalia. Publitalia also elaborated the party program which was then tested by Fininvest's own opinion research institute Diakron and modified in accordance with opinion polls.

The election candidates were selected in the same manner as a resources department chooses the company employees. Specialised head hunters were hired to check all applicants according to criteria of productivity. They concentrated on the candidates' sales abilities while political experience was not required. Those who passed this initial selection procedure were then tested by the party leadership for their political suitability, their physical appearance being decisive. Those with a beard or who wore glasses had little chance. Eventually the marketing strategists of the party headquarters provided the chosen few with catchy campaign slogans and the proper image. The top campaigners were offered special incentives—trips abroad, free tickets for soccer matches and, the highest prize of all, a weekend in Berlusconi's private mansion.

Italian soccer fan clubs—notorious for their racism and anti-Semitism—served as models for the artificial creation of a popular base for the party. This was effected by the formation of Forza Italia clubs, which distributed flags, pins, ties and pictures of their guru in the colours of the Italian tricolour, and had nothing to say in terms of politics. Even the name Forza Italia ("Italy First!")—the battle cry of the fans of the Italian national soccer team—originates from the world of soccer. It goes almost without saying that Berlusconi's TV channel was also placed at the total service of Forza Italia and its election campaign.

To this very day, Berlusconi himself maintains complete control over Forza Italia and is the object of a veritable personality cult. The first party congress was only convened in 1998, four years after the founding of the party. Berlusconi bases himself on a few confidants who have accompanied his rise since his early youth. In both his first and second governments they were awarded major ministerial posts.

A typical example is Cesare Previti, a close confidant and lawyer of Berlusconi, who had been a sympathiser of the fascist MSI before Forza Italia was founded. Cesares father, the tax consultant Umberto Previti, had played an important role as CEO and partner in Berlusconi's building companies. Previti junior served as in-house lawyer of Fininvest. In 1994, he was appointed minister of defence. Originally, Berlusconi had intended to give him the ministry of justice, but this was eventually prevented by a public outcry. Previti, however, freely made use of his post as minister of defence in order to launch media attacks on the public prosecutors of *Mani pulite* and to inundate them with legal charges. In 2001 he did not qualify for a post as minister, however, because he was charged with bribery of a judge.

From a strictly economic viewpoint, Forza Italia turned out to be a profitable investment for Fininvest. With 21 percent of the vote, it won the elections and Berlusconi became head of government. When the ruling coalition broke up and Berlusconi resigned seven months later, Fininvest had truly put itself on an even keel. Finance Minister Giulio Tremonti had pushed through new tax rules which had credited savings in the double-digit millions to Berlusoni's company empire, thus saving it from bankruptcy. Tremonti, incidentally, has meanwhile rejoined the cabinet. As head of the economic ministry, which has been considerably enlarged, he takes responsibility for the realisation of the market-liberal reforms and massive tax cuts which have been announced by Berlusconi.

It would be a gross exaggeration to ascribe to Forza Italia a party program in the traditional sense of the term. The political statements and appeals of the party consist of sophisticated tidbits for advertising spots exclusively designed for maximum public effect and continuously reworked according to the latest polls. Berlusconi's message, reproduced a thousand times over by his aides and TV channels, is crafted to appeal to the emotions, not to the reason of his audience. Packaging takes precedence over the content and nothing is left to chance. Every public appearance, every statement of a candidate is planned to the last detail and must be given the advance blessing of the marketing specialists in the party headquarters.

Nevertheless, Forza Italia does have very definite aims.

First, there is the hysterical anticommunism which characterises all of Berlusoni's public appearances and grows into a veritable persecution mania. Continuous attacks are levelled against the public TV channel RAI; judges and public prosecutors are denounced as "red robes". Given

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the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the Communist Party of Italy, this kind of anticommunism appears somewhat strange, like a relic from the Cold War. However, it has a rational kernel. It is directed against everything with even remote connections to state intervention into the blind workings of the market. Above all, Berlusconi's anticommunism is directed against any attempt on the part of the state to bring about greater social equality.

In one his speeches, Berlusconi described his enemies as follows: "They don't believe in the market, they don't believe in profit, they don't believe in the individual. They don't believe that the world can be made a better place by the voluntary contributions of many people who are very different from each other. This is why we are compelled to oppose them. Because we believe in the individual, the family, in entrepreneurship, in competition, in progress, in efficiency, in the free market and in solidarity, the daughter of justice and freedom."

The right-wing alliance which stood in the elections was called "pole of liberty". But Forza Italia knows only one liberty, the liberty of using one's elbows, the liberation of the individual—or, rather, of Silvio Berlusconi—from all considerations for the needs of society as a whole. The motto of Berlusconi's party was once described as "all for one, and one for himself".

This takes us to the second element of Forza Italia's program. With a delay of 20 years, Berlusconi has brought Thatcherism to Italy. The infamous remark of the Iron Lady, "There is no such thing as society, there are only individuals", could just as well have been uttered by Berlusconi. His closest aides include extreme representatives of the monetarist school which provided the economic cues for Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan.

First among them is Antonio Martino, who contributed decisively to the formulation of Forza Italia's election platform. In the first Berlusconi government, he headed the foreign ministry, meanwhile he serves as minister of defence. Martino studied economics in Chicago, collaborating closely with Milton Friedman, the leading exponent of monetarism. The jurist and tax expert Giulio Tremonti, finance minister in Berlusconi's first government, who now heads the combined ministry of economics and finances, is of the same making. He gained prominence as one of the first to propose the lowering of taxes on property, profits and exceptionally high incomes.

The mantras of the monetarists figure prominently in the programmatic statements of Forza Italia. Downsizing of state authorities, limits on state expenditures, tax cuts, withdrawal of the state from the economy, deregulation of the labour market, strengthening of small and medium enterprises, restructuring of the social security system and of family support programs occupy a central place in the 45 points of the party program which was later expanded to 100 points. As in all right-wing programs, the withdrawal of the state from the economy goes hand in hand with a strengthening of its role in domestic policy: more law and order and a presidential system which gives additional weight to the executive at the expense of the legislative branch of government.

During his election campaign, Berlusconi spiced his watery soup from the kitchen of monetarism with populist promises which have proved both exaggerated and groundless. For example, he boastfully announced the creation of one million new jobs, without explaining in the least how or from where these were to come.

While Forza Italia is being steered from a single centre, in its outward form it strives to give the impression of a citizens' movement. One of its first appeals, which was published by "independent" professors even before its founding, was entitled: "Counterattack by Citizens". It put forward the demand that ordinary citizens re-conquer politics and denounced parties and intellectuals for having usurped all political rights. The party structure—innumerable clubs (2,500 by February 1994) instead of local or regional units—served to create the fake impression of citizen-friendliness and served to veil the authoritarian character of the party. The members of the clubs have nothing to say, they have no influence whatsoever, either on the program of the party or the selection of its candidates. Not even political discussion is envisaged.

The "citizens" targeted by Forza Italia in its program clearly belong to the upper middle class. This relatively small but influential social layer is the real audience and social base of Berlusconi's party. Most of its functionaries come from these circles—entrepreneurs, self-employed people, freelancers and well-situated employees.

The traditional employers' association Confindustria originally sneered at Berlusconi as a parvenu and for a long time continued to support the middle-left-coalition, in which confidants of big business—such as the former boss of the huge state holding IRI, Romano Prodi, or the central bank leader Azeglio Ciampi—played a prominent role. However, in spring 2001 Confindustria changed sides. When Berlusconi addressed their conference during his election campaign, he was celebrated frenetically. In turn, he posed as a 100 percent representative of big business ("I will be your first Italian entrepreneur") and stressed his complete agreement ("One might wonder whether I copied your program or you copied mine.")

This turn of events had been preceded by a change in the course and leadership of Confindustria. For the first time ever, the association was now led not by a representative of large-scale industry in the North, but by a small businessman from the South. Behind this was a change in the structure of the Italian economy. Intensified global competition and the outsourcing of ever larger portions of major companies had greatly increased the weight of small businesses. Only 15 percent of the Italian workforce are today employed by companies with more than 500 workers, whereas 20 years ago it was 30 percent. (In France today it is still 43 percent, and in Germany as much as 56 percent.) Roughly three-quarters of the Italian workforce are employed by small businesses with less than 100 workers. The owners of these small companies, some of which have prospered during the stock market and economic boom during the past years while suffering from heavy competitive pressures, are furiously hostile to taxes and compulsory contributions to the social security system. They form the social basis that Berlusconi seeks to mobilise in order to bring about a radical turn in economic and social policies.

No description of Forza Italia would be complete without mentioning the intimate links between political power and the power of the media personified most clearly by Berlusconi himself. Since the days of Joseph Goebbels—who as propaganda minister of the Third Reich brought radio, press, film and culture into line and subordinated them to Nazi power—government-controlled media are generally interpreted as a sure sign of totalitarian dictatorship. While Berlusconi is not Goebbels and Forza Italia is not the NSDAP, neither of them have the slightest respect for the freedom of the media.

Berlusconi as the head of government (and, by now, foreign minister) owns and controls the country's three largest private TV channels. But that is not all. As leader of the opposition and even more so as head of government Berlusconi has led a constant vendetta against left journalists and representatives of cultural life—the term "left" applying to all those who have reservations about his policies. Above all, the public TV channel RAI is a thorn in his side. His campaign against RAI has taken on a hysterical note. During his first and second periods in office he replaced the RAI leadership, and he recently threatened to sack the entire leading personnel for its unwelcome political orientation. He accused the channel of "scandalous behaviour during the recent election campaign" and brazenly claimed that RAI had led a "campaign against democracy". He declared himself the victim of a political murder campaign—"Killeraggio", as he called it. The leadership positions of the most important cultural institutions—the museums and even the Venice film festival—have also been staffed with Berlusconi's supporters, who know little about culture.

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The three channels of Berlusconi's TV network Mediaset—Italia 1, Retequattro and Canale 5—have a combined market share of 45 percent, which is about as much as the three public channels of RAI. The remaining 10 percent belong to smaller, mostly regional networks. Without this TV power, Berlusconi's rapid political rise would hardly have been possible. His company empire was turned into an integral part of his campaign apparatus. Forza Italia spent billions of liras on TV election ads, which promptly flowed into the coffers of Berlusconi's marketing companies and TV channels. In addition, he had free propaganda incessantly showered upon the Italian television audience by his news programs, talk shows and entertainment programs. Thus the news editor of *Retequattro*, Emilio Fede, indulged in gushing praise for his boss and broadcast the entire first party conference of Forza Italia—an American style convention.

Prior to the elections, Berlusconi had promised to resolve the conflict of interests between his position as TV magnate and head of government within his first 100 days in office. In the event, he did nothing of the sort. Instead, the government's majority in parliament passed a law which explicitly allowed Berlusconi to keep his company empire. He is only barred from leading it personally, e.g., he has to employ managers who are again recruited from his closest friends and family.

Berlusoni's monopoly on the media served him not only as an effective political instrument during the election campaign, it also contributed considerably to creating a social climate favourable to his political accession. In this respect, there are strong parallels to other media moguls like Rupert Murdoch in Britain and the US or Leo Kirch in Germany.

The conception that television and other media could play a role in raising the general cultural level of society is completely alien to all three of them. Around the clock they broadcast programs that foster the most backward and primitive conceptions. Berlusconi gets his ratings above all through scantily-clad girls, cheap entertainment shows and soap operas (which does not prevent the otherwise quite prudish Catholic Church from closing ranks with him). In the case of Murdoch, the same effect is created by shows featuring excessive violence, and Kirch uses a combination of all these elements. Even harmless sport programs are turned into advertisement shows with unabashed chauvinism.

This is not simply a by-product of commercialisation. In other words, Berlusconi is not simply producing a product in response to some already existing demand. It is rather another aspect of the anticommunism, the rejection of any social responsibility in the name of social Darwinist individualism, which is so central to Forza Italia's ideology.

The socialist, above all the Marxist socialist movement, had once set itself the task of raising the cultural level of the working population. This is an integral part of the perspective to overcome class antagonisms and enable the working class to master society. German Social Democracy under August Bebel undertook exemplary work in this respect. In innumerable educational clubs and publications the SPD not only instructed their members in the works of Marx and Engels as well as the basic concepts of politics and class struggle, but also introduced them to Goethe, Schiller, Heine, Balzac, Tolstoy, Beethoven and Schubert, to name but a few.

These efforts were opposed not only by the ruling circles, who fought them by mobilising the means of state power and all available ideological weapons such as superstition, religion and nationalism. They were also rejected by the bureaucratic apparatuses which took over first the social democratic and later, under Stalin, the communist parties. Against this backdrop, it is no accident that Berlusconi rose to prominence under Bettino Craxi, the leader of the Italian social democrats, or that British Labour leader Tony Blair is bound by close ties to Rupert Murdoch.

The cultural mission of Berlusoni's media empire can be summed up in one phrase: the stupefaction of the people. Just as in the field of economy and society, Berlusconi and Forza Italia stand for unbridled backwardness and reaction in cultural life.

Concluded

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