



Mundo

The spectrum of neofascism in Thüringen, Germany

(*) Elísio Estanque, jornal PÚBLICO, 31.10.2019

In the regional elections of October 27th in Thüringen, Die Link (The Left) won and, together with the SPD and the Greens, has formed to this day the majority alliance and government support led by Ramelow. This solution is now unfeasible because this political party needs the CDU deputies to form a new government. The alternative is to hand over political power to the far right. Indeed, it was the AfD (“*Alternatif für Deutschland*”), a political force just five years old, which advocates Germany’s exit from the European Union, which considers the European Parliament superfluous, which assumes itself as anti-Jewish, Islamophobic, and intends to expel immigrants and refugees from Germany, who overjoyed with the results.

In Mühlhausen, a town that is proud to have been the home of Johann Sebastian Bach, when he held the post of official organist there, the current mayor, quoted by The Guardian, said that a large part of its 36,000 inhabitants feel left on their own (“*abgehängt*”). As in the former GDR in general, thousands of the region’s residents saw their lives suddenly changed after the fall of the Berlin Wall. Some have succeeded, but a significant part have never felt that their lives improved with reunification. The agencies that assisted the “funeral of socialism,” managing the winding-up of many textile companies, the mainstay of the municipality's economy, have unleashed a process of drastic social consequences that is having a far-reaching political impact on this region. The AfD takes advantage of this feeling and shouts, “Vollende die Wende!” (Completing the transition).



As in other countries of the former Soviet bloc the so-called transition - one might say, from the “radiant” past to the capitalist “paradise” - was accompanied by sudden upheavals in which the economic and social fields have been so intertwined that one’s effects had immediate repercussions on the other. This, however, without local people realizing what was happening to them and thus having a voice as to the fate that awaited them. The unification of the currency overnight (Euro) made East German investments and wages completely depreciated compared to the West zone, reducing the GDR's gross national product to a third of its previous value within a few months. State-owned companies collapsed, and shortly after, with the intervention of public agencies such as the “Treuhand”, created to manage the sale of large hundreds of

production units (state-owned enterprises), notably in the textile sector, which sustained the workforce in many small towns in the region. Facing serious difficulties in finding investors and pressured to complete the process, the agency eventually sold many goods and equipment at subsidized prices to dozens of speculators. Corruption networks, more or less irradiated from the wreckage of the former Soviet state, have benefited from abrupt closures and fraudulent bankruptcies, equipment sold at a low cost in a process that became known in the memory of locals as a “liquidating GDR”, that is, smashed like an end-of-season store. The asymmetries between the East and the West are still clearly visible both in economic terms and in people's references and subjectivities, but the common thread is that nationalism and Euroscepticism are showing threatening signs on both sides of the "torn curtain".

It is not my intention to draw close parallels with other historical cycles, but it is necessary to keep memory alive. Nazi growth took place at a different time and with different international constraints than today. The nationalist currents that brought Hitler to power – beginning with a scarce result in the 1928 elections to the Weimar Republic Parliament, then growing to 107 deputies in 1930 and finally to 230 members in the Reichstag in 1932 – with increasing popularity were fed by resentment against what was seen as a "diktat" of the war-winning powers (the 1919 Treaty of Versailles). They exalted the feelings of humiliation and abandonment of various popular segments martyred by 1st World War, sparking repressed hatred and its willingness to retaliate against various "enemies" (external and internal), particularly the Jews. Fear and hate have always been powerful fertilizers of the fascist drive.

Weimar still enjoys today the aura of having been the seat of the democratic regime of the same name, which laid there the foundations of the republican constitution in 1919. But if a hundred years ago this democracy was short-lived, today democracy seems to be stronger, and this can be seen in multiple traits. From the rich patrimony and heritage offer – where Goethe's name is summit reference – to the diversity of political proposals, ideological currents and cultural events. At the Onion Festival, two weeks before the last election, the colorfulness of the streets and the variety of spectacles displayed the contrasts and creativity, but also the convivial civility of a daily life in which medieval urban features coexist with modernity, offering the visitor the pleasant landscape of a mature and developed democracy.

However, behind the apparent normality of the main cities of this state, such as Erfurt, Jena or Weimar, it seems that there are shady areas where signs of hatred and violence have multiplied in recent years, while neo-Nazi groups have begun to raise their voice. Many examples even passed from threats to acts. Especially the smallest towns, probably because many of their inhabitants find themselves left behind, are the ones providing most electoral support to the far right. Recently violent actions have occurred, like the one reported in Halle, about a month ago, where an individual, neo-Nazi, shot a group of Jews in a synagogue. Despite Björn Höcke's, the local AfD leader, attempt to demarcate himself from the case, his constant anti-Jewish and racist speeches are proof of his contribution to this atmosphere. His radical attitudes in public acts such as the interruption of a television interview or proclamations against the memorial honoring the victims of Nazism in Berlin, became famous. Already during the election campaign, the local CDU leader Mike Möhring received

death threats supposedly following his (apparent) refusal to assume an alliance with the Höcke's party, whom he accused of being "a Nazi." Interestingly, the only region where the Christian Democrats won (with 38%) was in the homeland of that AfD regional leader. This highlights the tension between a more moderate conservatism of the CDU (Eischfeld, with a strong Catholic influence) and the protofascist radicalism of AfD. But it remains an open question whether the national CDU will admit a possible approach to the left field on the regional scale or impose an agreement for a right-wing government in Thuringia.

It is important to note, however, that the left won the elections, with Die Linke growing by about three percentage points (from 28 to 31%). In addition to the popularity of its leadership (the PM, Bodo Ramelow), the campaign relied on stopping far-right by using slogans such as "Against Nazi remains!", "There is no place for racism and hate!". But I believe it is largely the government's social policies that justify the party's strengthening in the region. Its growth, however, is very little compared to the far right results, which went from 11% in 2014 to over 23% in this election. If the left has maintained and even increased its strength at the expense of the larger cities (Erfurt, Weimar and Jena), where the Greens have also resisted (although they have shrunk on the state level), AfD confirms a worrying trend of victory especially in the inland small communities. Consistent public policies, revitalized economy and reinvention of utopias provide the raw material on which the European and German left will have to work on in order to prevent against a disturbing future.

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URL: <<https://www.ces.uc.pt/en/ces/pessoas/investigadoras-es/elisio-estaque>>