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Is European identity the real issue in Italy?

Rome shows (buffoonery apart, not necessarily a disadvantage here) zero economic growth in 2005? Or from the head of the opposition center-left campaign grouping, Romano Prodi, a former prime minister?

Italy is more graciously self-deprecating and readier to admit to tolerating politics on the edge of the absurd, but the core issues of its election next month are the same miseries that Germany barely confronted last year and France could very likely slide around again in 2007. With its more self-important cousins showing only faint signs of facing up to their dead-ends in domestic policy, Italy votes April 9 with nothing like the expectation that there is a choice on the ballot that would raise it from economic stagnation, and deal with the blockade to change that are its entrenched unions and stifling public sector.

Or — almost more existentially — recreate a sense of a “who we are” as a way out of the Italian share of a European identity crisis that involves the



Marcello Pera

failed integration of its Muslim immigrants and the pressure of Islamic fundamentalism on its society.

Although Italy lives blessedly minus their augustness, the range of problems and non-solutions here say France and Germany all over again. For all her brilliant poll results and successful recalibration of German foreign policy, Angela Merkel has done nothing palpable so far to open up an economy palsied for a decade. In France, after a month of riots in immigrant neighborhoods, and now a murder with anti-Semitic implications, little says presidential elections next spring will offer a clear break with habit and myth. Big, serious change would mean both installing affirmative action programs to bring immigrants into the police force, army, civil service and business, and ending disincentives to hiring like the quixotic 35-hour French work-week.

So why suppose something enormously hopeful and better might emerge now, after five years in office, from Silvio Berlusconi, whose record

shows (buffoonery apart, not necessarily a disadvantage here) zero economic growth in 2005? Or from the head of the opposition center-left campaign grouping, Romano Prodi, a former prime minister?

This time around, Prodi, who has led in early polling, is incoherently allied to both the Communists and Greens, while Berlusconi has clammy ties to nasties on the hard right.

Although it abhors Berlusconi, the left-of-center newspaper *La Repubblica* caught the country's electoral perspective in a phrase: “poor us.” If Berlusconi has compared himself (kind of) to Jesus and Napoleon, the newspaper argued the left had offered nothing clear and convincing, but rather an alliance of a dozen parties, extravagant individuals, and unreasonable stubbornness.

In fact, both sides carry around the baggage of their “impresentabili,” a recurring phrase here, meaning electoral allies who cannot be brought into the parlor of political respectability, even by Italy's wavering definitions.

The murkiness of who really means to do what can be next to impenetrable. Against Italy's declining productivity and its massive debt, neither camp — Prodi in a 281-page election program, Berlusconi in 10 points for the center-right — has demonstrated how it could find the leverage to achieve significant change.

Probably the most striking departure of the campaign comes on its margins. It involves Marcello Pera, president of the Italian Senate, who is trying to inject the issue of a disappearing Italian and European identity into voters' concerns.

Pera picked the campaign's outset

to launch a manifesto to promote the idea — my phrasing here — that there is nothing racist, fascist or shameful about being alarmed about the threat to democracy in Europe from Islamic fundamentalism. He argues Europe's right to require a kind of political/cultural “reciprocity” from the Muslim populations growing in its midst.

As a member of Berlusconi's party, Pera is not beyond partisanship. But he has the second-ranking post in the Italian state hierarchy behind the president, and the luster of intellectual legitimacy as a former university

professor of the philosophy of science. A book of his letters and conversations about Europe's decline with Pope Benedict XVI, compiled two years ago with the then-Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, called “Without Roots,” was published in the United States last month.

Pera takes no prisoners. He says Europe is “fading away,” “hiding itself from reality” and unable to defend its values.

This is because, Pera argues, its intellectual and political elites, obsessed with a dialogue that doesn't exist and a multiculturalism that rationalizes every anti-Western act into European guilt, lack the courage to mark out the reciprocal parameters of pluralism. That results, he thinks, in Europe's burying its Judeo-Christian identity and running from demanding compatibility with its tenets.

He calls Britain's attempt at multicultural integration an obvious failure, and explains the French approach to its Muslim community as “nationalist and secularist.” The notion here is that the French are stuck with an increasingly incapacitated state, whose role had been elevated to that of an empty religion.

Talking in his office, Pera described Prodi as a man who made out Europe to be a “happy island,” a counterweight to America, that needn't be concerned about its security or identity in relation to the fundamentalists — while Pera insists exactly the opposite is true.

As for Berlusconi, reported to be willing to endorse his manifesto, Pera referred to him cautiously, saying, “sometimes he looks timid.” I think that means Berlusconi has picked up insufficiently on Pera's notion that, in the blur of Europe's economic and social

stasis, the identity issue could be the winning line of political demarcation between center-right and center-left.

Pera defines himself as a nonbeliever, yet winds up talking about the need for a “nonconfessional civil religion,” based on Europe's Christian tradition, as Europe's remedy and route back to itself.

That's a terribly abstract mouthful, even from a very serious politician. Winning office in Europe these days

demands less leaden language. Indeed, for now, there are next to no signs of Pera's argument taking off here, grabbing the mainstream.

But, extrapolating from an idea belonging to André Glucksmann, the French political theorist, I credit Pera

with underlining the argument, perhaps for the first time in a national election campaign, that defending Europe's identity is an existential matter that must not be left for nihilists to mock or fascists to seize.

In an election whose results prom-

ise Italy and Europe very little, least of all a burst of economic revival, that's more than an asterisk or a footnote.

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Tomorrow: Roger Cohen writes on being poor in Africa.

Economic stagnation and failed integration of Muslims.

