

Europe, mind the gaps!

A call for reducing social and political cleavages

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With the results of the 2019 EU elections and the highest voter turnout in 20 years, the European Union may regain momentum for a profound reform process. By casting their votes, 50.8 percent of EU citizens eligible to vote proved to take both EU representatives and EU institutions seriously. Although the completed elections were not as concussive as predicted and pro-EU parties hold ground in the parliament, it would be a grave mistake to take this outcome for granted. In fact, it is time to analyse the subtexts of regional and local results that expose a variety of worrying grievances and urgent calls for action.

One week before the so-called trendsetting elections of the EU parliament in May 2019, the publication of a video revealing corrupt attitudes of right-wing politicians led to a governmental crisis in Austria. As a result, the country faced intense weeks of insecurity. Followed by a successful no-confidence vote, all members of the government cleared their desks and paved the way for re-elections. Although this political earthquake has become a topic far beyond its epicentre in Vienna, the seismic waves have not impacted Paris, Warsaw, Rome nor Budapest as much as expected. Several observers thought that the failed coalition with FPÖ would minimize the current popularity of right-wing forces in Europe tremendously. The results of the elections, however, proved them wrong. The far right may not have swept the EU elections, but nationalists and populists increased their share in the EU parliament nevertheless. The lesson learned is as follows: Right-wing populists cannot be stemmed by exposing their shady business deals, questionable morals and corrupt attitudes alone. Yet the question remains: Why do voters still place their trust in right-wing populists?

Future of EU – Whose narrative will succeed?

We currently face a conflict of competing narratives in Europe. Narratives are in this context understood as mostly simple, but causality-based stories that evoke emotions and affect people's views on the world. Anti-EU politicians are willing to exploit every weakness of the multi-level system to undermine its capability to act. Far right-wing Politicians such as Matteo Salvini from Italy and Marine Le Pen from France are highly motivated to create transnational alliances far beyond the pragmatic logics of traditional parties. Although Germany's AfD (Alternative for Germany) could not solve the contradiction of running for political functions that are considered needless according to their party program, it would be short-sighted to underestimate such forces. Whereas in the history of the European integration, EU politics have always been a negotiation process of different directions, recent developments introduced a third player – one who prefers leaving the game rather than discussing its rules.

Right-wing populism accelerated ongoing polarization of elites and caused disruptions within traditional parties – an observation that gained evidence in the recent EU election results. Now political logics and strategies need to react to these developments with a trustful narrative of solidarity and cooperation. In 2017, one step into this direction was taken by Jean-Claude Juncker, President of the European Commission, who published a White Paper on the Future of Europe. Apart from altogether 42 previous White Papers, the current is the first and only one that generally reflects on fundamental challenges of the EU. 60 years after the Treaties of Rome, Juncker maps out five scenarios – from “carrying on” till “doing much more together.” Despite its disturbing PR language and euphemisms, the paper comments on severe issues including the EU's failing integration of a social market economy. It remains arguable if such sort of elitist communication strategy might convince EU sceptics. However, Juncker's commission has succeeded in raising the awareness for the necessity to act against European asymmetries. “Europe cannot afford to lose the most educated age group it has ever had and let generational inequality condemn its future,” the White Paper states. It becomes more and more clear that liberal democracies have ignored what Francis Fukuyama calls the people's “desire to be recognized as the equal of other people.” Based on Plato's thoughts on *thymos* (“spiritedness” or *human desire for recognition*), Fukuyama explains the current tendencies of right-wing ideology and

renationalization as a collective “demand for dignity.” For this reason, we have to further analyse and contextualise the narratives behind right-wing populism in order to find out why they appear to be increasingly convincing.

Calls from the margins

Within the Visegrad Four, EU-sceptical parties are dominant. Even if Slovakia has mostly voted pro-European, its far-right party L’SNS (Ludová Strana – Naše Slovensko) led by Marian Kotleba made it into EU parliament for the first time. In Central Eastern Europe, prominent winners of the elections such as Viktor Orbán in Hungary or the PiS leader Jarosław Kaczyński in Poland were successful, because of identity-based and anti-immigrant narratives. By representing anti-EU, nationalist and exclusionist politics they approached a severe weak point of liberal democracies: social inequality and the collective perception of it. We see the success of this strategy particularly in Hungary, where Orbán’s Fidesz won more than 52 percent of the votes, but Poland’s PiS (Prawo i Sprawiedliwość) could gain more than 45 percent as well. By promising security, representation and direct impact on changes, the one-dimensional frame of renationalization is portrayed as the only way out from perceived inequality, insecurities and historical traumas. These narratives find fruitful ground in a region that is still recovering from system transformations. The aftermath of the financial crisis has disillusioned the hope to easily make up previous leeway after the EU accession. The acceleration of democratization after 1989 has developed into a regression since the mid-2000s. The neoliberal transformation left social and cultural integration behind. Getting entangled with a globalized economy too quickly and facing a complex Europeanization without leaving time and energy to reflect on historical trajectories have brought populists and anti-intellectuals into the position of presenting themselves as the only defenders of the own nation, or national identity. Obviously, the promises of international solidarity and strength-by-unity was not convincing enough in countries where historical “losses of the nation” have not yet been absorbed. National identities built on the reinterpretation of the past rather than on future visions are not ready to sit at the table to discuss the future of the European Union. The more pressure is applied, the more they drift apart.

Exploited perceptions of inequality

Today, the lives of EU citizens are more entangled than ever. At the same time, we are experiencing a rise in socio-economic inequalities within the EU. In January 2019, the digital media publisher Social Europe (SE) emphasised that this inequality was “one of the key drivers of higher immigration, which in turn fuels feelings of anxiety and insecurity and the rise of populism. [...] High income differences between countries with close economic ties also contribute to the outsourcing of labour-intensive production stages, which in turn threatens wages and employment in regions which previously had enjoyed greater economic prosperity as the home of low-skilled manufacturing industries.” The report also shows that while Europe had faced a decline of inequality until 2009, it rose again in 2010 and has been only slowly declining ever since. The EU accession of Bulgaria and Romania in 2007 has significantly increased the level of pan-European inequalities. Without effective and visible actions against this, no well-intended narrative of peace and stability will be able to balance these recent experiences. The consequences of marginalization can already be observed on the streets of Europe: In France, the “yellow vests” reveal a complex scenario of social unrest – even in a nation state that offers a relatively good social welfare system. Certainly, current transformations such as the enormous urbanization and digitalization processes are creating new peripheries of society (both social and geographical). With their unpredictable mobilization, potential social movements such as the “yellow vests” teach Europe an important lesson: Do not underestimate the danger of perceived social inequality. One driving force of inequality (mis)perception is social media. Right-wing actors who have been marginalized from traditional discourses of politics and media have realised the opportunities of the digital arena long ago. By investing into their social media competence, the campaigners used this chance to dominate the public framing processes. Now actors using traditional media lag behind them and still fail at their agenda setting.

Taking all these challenges into consideration, the European Union is once more at the crossroads, where it must set forth without losing its people on the way. The upcoming legislature period will show if representatives take on the responsibility of tackling ongoing “demands for dignity” by subtending the right-wing narratives and winning back the trust (followed by votes) of European citizens.

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Recommendations

1. Liberal democracy needs social practice – both at EU-level and “at home”

As Francis Fukuyama says in his book “Identity: The Demand for Dignity and the Politics of Resentment”, a serious debate can only be successful if all actors respect each other. Furthermore, a dialogue at eye level requires mutual understanding and knowledge about each other. Throughout the EU Eastern enlargement in 2004, Brussels actively fostered the imparting of culture and knowledge on Central Eastern Europe, yet it has lost sight of the region afterwards. The European integration, however, has not been completed by the accession itself. Europeanization begins with daily practices. Cultural exchange and contact to civil society representatives within the neighborhood need to be strengthened. Both political players and media are called upon to strengthen the inclusion that is the basis for every reform process.

2. Stand tall against illiberalism and foster dialogue in the neighborhood

30 years after the fall of the Iron Curtain, Austria has become a leading voice in isolationist and xenophobic rhetoric. Not only Hungarian and Polish, but also Austrian decision-makers considered limitation of human rights and liberalism as a necessary sacrifice for the sake of (national) security (e.g. in terms of data protection/surveillance). Austria should clearly strengthen its liberal stance in the neighbourhood. At the EU-level, two political factors will be essential: First, the competence of MPs in the EU parliament in finding consensus and therefore majority votes in the EU parliament. Second, the power of the future EU commission. Certainly, the wise choice of top EU positions is a crucial task regarding the future perspective of Central Eastern Europe. The upcoming debate will also show if the current interim government of Chancellor Brigitte Bierlein will take a strong part in these debates.

3. Tackling inequalities must be a priority

In the White Paper the authors use the Gini index to support the claim that the EU was the “home to the most equal societies in the world.” The other side of the coin is faded out as the index is only used within the frames of nation states. Considering the high mobility within the EU, both the real and the perceived inequalities need to be analysed at a European and regional level though. As we could read in the paper, the call from the margins has been heard. Now it will be crucial to create realistic perspectives for marginalized groups. One step can be targeted long-term programs that foster Europeanization on an individual level. Inspired by programs such as Erasmus+, we need to create perspectives for less-educated young citizens. Mobility programs for marginalized groups will be a key factor in absorbing the rising inequalities and the increasing doubts about the EU’s problem-solving competence. The Danube Region might offer a case study to reveal the needs and effectiveness of such programs.

4. Concurrent evaluation is necessary

Finally, the EU institutions urgently need to invest energy and money into more direct and authentic communication. 13 years after the White Paper on European communication policy, an update is needed. Integration and educational programs on the processes and fundamentals of the EU need to be developed and institutionalized. Otherwise, the ambitious aims of an EU that is able to “move quicker to interact with citizens, be more accountable and deliver better and faster on what has been collectively agreed” is doomed to stay as a wish. Only if Europe minds its gaps and margins, will we be able to put the wind out of the sails of right-wing populists.

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What is the post- worst-case-scenario?

The Brexit drama has given a glimpse of what can happen if right-populist campaigns win. Once the promise of renationalization has led to concrete decisions in the EU institutions, the illusion of right-wing populists as problem-solving

actors will dissolve into chaos and ignorance. As the concept of resentment and nationalism is neither constructive nor concrete, there is also no way to re-gain what seemed to be lost. The promise of a better life, which has never been outlined in detail by such populists, will be breached. Europe will then face a tremendous amount of frustrated citizens who have lost every belief in democratic and consensus-based decision-making. In order to prevent this scenario, we need to build bridges over existing social and political cleavages.

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