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# We need a European Republic

Equal electoral law, equal tax law, equal social benefits: Ulrike Guérot argues that the only way to secure Europe's future is institutionalised solidarity

*Read this interview in German.*

**Along with the writer Robert Menasse, you are campaigning for a "European Republic". At the end of 2018, it emerged that Menasse had made up some quotes in articles you jointly wrote, such as statements by the European politician Walter Hallstein. Is the scandal surrounding your fellow campaigner's false quotes being used to discredit your central objective of a European Republic?**

I can only reiterate my heartfelt apology. In fact, I did accept quotes without checking them. The two quotes from Robert Menasse that we're talking about here slipped in like a virus.

However, I find the timing interesting. Specifically, we're talking about an article that appeared in the FAZ in 2013. That's six years ago now. It wasn't mentioned during the 2014 European elections, but it's now surfaced four months before the 2019 European elections.

We're in a completely different situation today. Europe is a much more controversial topic. Now, we're really starting to question the dominant narratives. What used to be accepted and believed by everyone is now in doubt. In 2013, we were simply ignored. But in 2019, when we have finally got our proposal onto the political agenda, we are under attack.

**Has the scandal cause any lasting damage to your project of the European Republic?**

The proposal of a European Republic is still acknowledged and accepted. People can easily distinguish between an unfortunate and regrettable quote scandal and the proposal itself. And what makes this proposal successful is not just that so many people have joined our campaign to call for a European republic. It has also been embraced by various parties. The European Republic is now part of the Green

Party's manifesto. And it also came up at a gathering of members of the Free Democratic Party that I recently attended. This shows that the proposal of a European Republic has really caught on.

**Have recent events led to reassessment of the concept of the "nation" on your side? Not long ago, you said that you were keen to see an end to the ethnic demarcation of nations rather than the actual abolition of nationhood. What caused you to change your mind?**

Long before the scandal broke, I told Robert Menasse that we had to address the concept of the "nation" at some point. People seem to need their nation. This seems to be an emotional attachment. A work by Marcel Mauss on "The Nation" contains a brilliant definition. It has become my bible. Mauss defines the nation as institutionalised solidarity. In layman's terms: who gets equal unemployment benefit? Who gets social welfare payments? The Germans. Therefore the Germans are a nation.

**You have announced that your next book is about the nation. What's the state of play with "the nation" in Europe?**

I set out five definitions of a nation that are geared towards shared visions of the future rather than ethnic national identity. Then, based on these definitions, I look at today's nation-states, and ask this question: applying these definitions, can we say that today's nation-states are still nations? I reach a fifty-fifty verdict. It's hard to identify shared visions of the future in the UK, for instance.

Then, I ask the same question with regard to the EU: measured against these civilian definitions of a nation, has the EU become a nation without us noticing? Again, I reach a fifty-fifty verdict here. Of course it isn't yet, but it's on the way to institutionalised solidarity. Look at what German Finance Minister Olaf Scholz is doing. He has proposed a European unemployment insurance.

**So are you charting a path from the nation to a European Republic?**

It's absolutely clear to me: what ultimately makes a nation a nation is neither identity nor ethnicity. In principle, it takes a legal act to turn a people into a nation. The legal act is, first, the constitution and, second, institutionalised solidarity. Put the two together, and you basically have a republic. In other words, it's only the republic, the solidarity, that makes a nation a nation-state at all. This is the circuit for getting back to the European Republic through the back door of the nation. Functional statehood can be decoupled from identity.

I can illustrate this perfectly with data from Flanders, Scotland and

Catalonia: a desire for identity and a desire for independence are two different things. In other words, you can decouple a desire for identity from functional statehood. And then there's no reason why all possible nations, in this case including the Catalonians and the Scots and whoever else wants to be a nation, can't be one. But the functional statehood around them that they are embedded in is something different. That could be Europe, just as Spain is for the Catalonians at the moment.

**So you're calling for an equal level of social benefits within Europe in order to create this European identity. Do you really believe that Germans who have lost out to globalisation will be pacified with the promise of expanding social benefits in southern Europe?**

First of all, you need to distinguish between the eurozone and the non-eurozone. Robert Menasse and I always say: one market, one currency, one democracy. And democracy simply means equal laws for equal citizens. That's the idea. "Equal laws" means equal electoral law, equal tax law, equal social benefits. The others would have to join the single currency first, then the single democracy – essentially a two-stage plan.

Obviously, the figures show differences in the eurozone. But there are much bigger differences between town and country and between centre and outskirts than between individual countries. Northern Italy is just as good as Greater Frankfurt, Brandenburg is just as bad as Umbria or the department of Ardèche. Therefore, when it comes to the European minimum wage or European unemployment benefit, it's not a question of whether the Germans would end up paying for the Italians again. For the most part, the metropolitan and prosperous regions would transfer resources to the rural regions. Therefore, it would be helpful to stop viewing things from a national perspective.

We tend to talk a lot about European democracy and European citizens. But one necessary, albeit not sufficient condition of a democracy is that its citizens are equal before the law. And if they are equal before the law, they vote on equal terms. "One person, one vote" leads directly to "no taxation without representation". This means that there must also be equal tax law. And then, of course, equal access to social rights. Otherwise, citizens end up competing with another within the same democracy.

**Which is the case at the moment.**

Yes. We're having big debates about Italy, the budget and Salvini. However, we have noticed that Italian populism or the Five Star Movement may be based on the fact that Italians have no basic social

security provisions like Hartz IV, and this is feeding a populist backlash against euro policy. This takes us to Oskar Negt's thought: a currency union is already a social contract. Whatever position you are criticising the euro from – populist, ordoliberal or left-wing – you always arrive at the same point: the euro is a social contract that was made without social and fiscal unity. That's why it doesn't work for many people. It works for us Germans, but not for the others.

And that's why the principle of equality is so important to me — in political terms, it clearly has to recognise the general political equality of citizens as a starting point. Then, as European citizens, we decide in our parliament how much tax we want to pay. Do we want inheritance tax – yes or no? Do we want wealth tax – yes or no? What retirement age do we want? By doing this, we get rid of these jingoistic debates, as in the euro crisis: we, the poor Germans, who can't retire until we're 67, need to pay for the lazy Italians. By the way, to me, there's nothing utopian about all of this.

**You recently said that people in Europe hate Germany again, but we can't see it. The only ones who don't realise it are the Germans. Do you think this trend grows stronger?**

Yes. An anti-German dimension to the anti-EU sentiment, sometimes explicit and sometimes implicit, has already become apparent for a while now. Not everyone perceives it, as it is veiled as anti-EU. But the cause of anti-EU sentiment are those who made all the decisions in the euro crisis: us. I think we should take this criticism seriously. I remember a phrase that Jacques Delors often used: the French are European so that they don't have to be anti-German. So this latent criticism of Germany, a long-held tradition in France, can be softened via Europe. But if Europe no longer works, the latent anti-German feeling is back.

**You are warning emphatically against reducing the debate on Europe to one question, namely Europe – are you for or against? What do you make of the early stages of the European election campaign? Are you optimistic?**

I have a different definition of optimism. To me, Vaclav Havel hit the nail on the head. He said: hope is not the conviction that something will turn out well, hope is doing the right thing even if it doesn't turn out well. I share this dialectical attitude. I see the danger that the European Parliament will be obstructed, that the so-called populists will make up more than 30 per cent of the European Parliament. In that sense, I'm not naive. I see the populist forces gaining momentum and the evisceration of European democracy. But above all, I still

notice only hesitant attempts by conventional parties to propose an alternative.

**Why are traditional parties falling into the populists' trap on this issue?**

We need to be clear about what populists actually are. Part of the problem is that we always put the so-called populists against the so-called liberal democratic elite that defends Europe. The EU actually has a democratic deficit here. It really needs to reform itself. If we leave legitimate criticism of the EU to the populists, we have a problem. The EU's inability to reform, the ignoring of justified and legitimate criticism of the EU, has caused us to leave justified criticism of the system to the populists. When Boris Johnson says: "I am not in control", he's unfortunately right. We have a legitimacy problem in the EU. It doesn't put the people first. Although we elect a European Parliament, that parliament doesn't choose the government. We don't even have a European government.

In a nation, I can vote to get rid of those in power and elect a new political force. That is just not possible in Europe. We can all vote in May, but what are we voting for? Will we get new policies? What are we voting for in functional terms? If we are serious about Europe, we need to take the so-called populists' criticism seriously. The biggest problem is that the so-called populists at least know what they want. Those who oppose them and defend the EU have no clear objective. In politics, the winners are always the ones with a clear objective. In this respect, the populists obviously have a major advantage because they have a clear agenda. And, of course, it's always easier to oppose. Those who seek to defend the old order against people who clearly want a new order and have clear ways of achieving it will always be the losers.

**What can be done to counter this development?**

Instead of hoping that things will turn out well, let's do the right thing even if it doesn't turn out well. That's why I'm doing this with the European Republic. Here's what I want: equality for all people, electoral equality, equal tax law, social equality for the eurozone in the future, parliamentarisation.

Defending the old order isn't enough if the others want something new. The others, it has to be said, don't want no Europe either. Just who is Gauland [leader of Germany's right-wing populist Alternative for Germany]? Salvini is much smarter. I don't want to give the Alternative for Germany tactical advice, but it's nowhere near up to speed with modern electoral campaigning. The others have

understood the value of winning seats in the European Parliament. They have understood that an anti-Europe stance isn't a vote-winner.

That's why I think that the liberal centre has a chance only if it brings a big, emotionally appealing new European project to the table and says: this is our vision!

**Where do you see European social democracy in all this? You argue that the future of social democracy is decided at European, if not international level. And that's why the democratisation of Europe should be the big future project of European social democracy. What specific ideas do you have here?**

In my youth, I never got attached to the great social democratic tradition. Its impact has really dawned on me only in the last 10 to 15 years. At the same time, I realised just how tragic things have been for European social democracy in the last 15 years. To put it simply, there's been a shift from social democracy to capital. The ranks of the left have been cleared. Perhaps this had to happen, maybe there was no other option. This tragedy has actually come about because we have been stuck in grand coalitions throughout Europe for fifteen years. Just when the left, when European social democracy has largely abandoned right-left confrontation, its opponents have naturally channelled themselves elsewhere. Politically, every system thrives only on polarisation.

**Looking at it positively, Europe's social democratic parties have lots of space to sharpen their profile. Do you think social democracy will use it?**

You know, I've been to many German cities with the project of the European Republic in the past three years. When you're at an event and ask the usual 300 to 400 people: do you really believe we can do Europe in a German version of Animal Farm, where we're doing well and the Greeks or Italians aren't? Would you really have any objections to European unemployment insurance? In that case, apart from two or three AfD die-hards, you can expect 80 to 90 per cent to be on your side. I've always wondered why this opportunity for an aggressive discourse on European social insurance has never been taken. That's why I'm so pleased that Olaf Scholz has now made a move with the European unemployment fund. The same applies to Hubertus Heil and the European minimum wage.

If Marcel Mauss is right that institutionalised solidarity is the key criterion for a nation, to me the issue of Europe stands or falls on institutionalised solidarity in terms of European social policy. We should set up European social insurance for all European citizens now.

This would be a first step towards putting the general principle of political equality into practice in Europe.

**Aren't you worried that a debate of this kind would immediately be used in Germany to make people think that money is likely to be shifted, in a sort of transfer union? That's how the debate on European unemployment insurance actually developed.**

Then we have to stand up and get our message across. Let me be clear: Europe stands or falls on this. We can lead from the front here. If it doesn't happen, we will pay the price. People are well aware of that. Most Germans don't want to lose Europe. We have a sizeable majority in favour of Europe. But the Germans must understand that Europe comes at a price, and we must cope with that price. If we don't pay it, we will pay much more. By that, I mean we will lose German-Polish relationships, Franco-German relationships, peace and stability, and populism will rise. Everything we support and treasure, namely a stable situation, neighbours who like us – all that will be gone. And it will come as a massive shock. We will be horrified at the price we're paying. So European unemployment insurance is better, isn't it? It's a bargain.

*This interview was conducted by Claudia Detsch.*

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