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Dangerous EU-phoria

Across-the-board support for the EU does more harm than good. We need to talk about markets and politics instead

Read this article in German.

Despite all the excessive talk of key elections in the past year, we really are facing a key election this time around: the European elections. But will the destiny – and even survival – of the European Union be decided this coming May? Some want us to believe, voters must decide between a positive attitude towards European integration and the destruction of the EU by right-wing populists. Could it get any worse?

There's nothing wrong with fundamental decisions that could change the direction of European integration. And there's certainly nothing wrong with an inherently positive attitude towards integration. However, many in the political arena are taking the easy way out by uttering multi-partisan calls for the defence of the EU, its institutions and its political processes. Have the parties in the centre not noticed yet that their juxtaposition of 'for' and 'against' Europe is fuelling precisely the discourse that the right-wing populists are hoping for? This simplified antagonism is constricting factual issues, shrinking them beyond recognition.

The crucial question of the 2019 European election campaign year – 'Tell me, how do you feel about the union?' – makes it easier for the New Right to promise salvation in the form of a sharp U-turn back to the nation state. Here, the rejection of the EU is always accompanied by the suggestion of reclaiming the capacity to act by reducing complexity. Cutting the Gordian knot of European crises by dismantling the EU and focusing on national interests – this is what right-wing populists dream about at night. The answers proposed by the New Right are utterly banal: no euro – no euro crisis; no refugees – no refugee crisis; no European Parliament – no democratic deficit in the EU.

A misguided discourse

But what's the right response to their discourse? Encouraged by European right-wingers, the examination of conscience with regard to the 'for' and 'against' polarises. But the polarisation is covering up the conflicts that lie behind it. It does not address the specific problems of the lack of European cooperation and burden-sharing in the economic and monetary union, the social division of the continent and the treatment of migrants. It also doesn't help tackle resentment about the broken promises of economic globalisation, fear of fighting a constant battle against social decline, and concern about disoriented and helpless politics that amounts to nothing more than politicking and a lack of alternatives.

There's a growing sense of unease among European citizens that stems from the disappointment with globalisation, the loss of the promise of increasing living standards and post-democratic politics.

For the first time, the question of 'more' or 'less' Europe is on the verge of establishing itself as the central issue of the debate throughout the union. It may even determine the outcome of the European elections. This is fatal, as such a simple dichotomy prevents us from addressing the factual issues and questions regarding the EU's future. The contrived antagonism is a dead end in terms of both content and strategy. Brexit is the perfect example. Grandiose affirmations or rejections of European integration don't provide answers to anything.

For example, committing to a Europe of market liberalism is a different type of affirmation than committing to a Europe of cross-border solidarity, a green Europe, or a Europe in the sense of a community of conservative shared values. And what exactly does turning one's back on Europe mean? The most hard-boiled right-wing populists will understand that, even if they close all their borders, they cannot attain their holy grail of national security without cooperation. So is this really about national isolation, replacing the EU with bilateral agreements or an intergovernmental reform to take us back to Charles de Gaulle's Europe of Fatherlands? Blanket statements or the illusion of a strong sword that cuts through all knots don't resolve anything.

The EU's failed architecture

The right-wing populists are calling into question the existence of a political Europe. Answering them by blindly accepting their friend-or-foe rhetoric will not reconcile the citizens with the EU. Turning the wheel of integration forwards ('good') or backwards ('bad') does not address their

needs or alleviate their daily worries about poorly paid jobs, excessive rents, uncertain pensions and deficient education and care facilities. What's bothering people today, and some very much so, is failed globalisation, the formation of societies in decline and the lack of political plans and alternatives. Demanding that people take a stance for or against Europe does not address the resentment, fears and concerns that arise from this.

There's a growing sense of unease among European citizens that stems from the disappointment with globalisation, the loss of the promise of increasing living standards and post-democratic politics. Analysis shows that all of this can be traced back to a cult surrounding the market and its alleged powers of self-regulation that started in the US and Great Britain in the 1980s, then intensified and spread throughout Europe over the years. Faith in the market has also become a powerful religion in the EU.

Following a string of crises that shows no signs of letting up, the EU is on the defensive.

The idea that the markets serve society has long since mutated into market competition as an end in itself that neglects societal requirements. And politicians are just standing there, dumbfounded. A Schengen zone without shared policies on borders and asylum, a domestic market without comprehensive socio-political regulations and a monetary union without an economic centre – these are huge shortfalls. Creating markets to further integration while the member states are growing increasingly unwilling to make compromises in the context of political cooperation – this was doomed to fail.

Re-politicising European politics

Following a string of crises that shows no signs of letting up, the EU is on the defensive. Across-the-board support for the integration process will not get the EU out of this situation. Instead, it must stop functioning as a catalyst of market liberalism. The building blocks required to rehabilitate it consist of regulating competition, preserving the European Social Model – which does indeed exist in all its variety – and taking a long-term approach to tackling cross-border challenges. Actively advocating for the EU can succeed only by underlining its benefit in the context of handling globalisation. To do this, we need to turn away from faith in the market and towards shaping politics. Even global risks are illusionary giants when countered with determined and united action.

By contrast, forcing the fundamental areas of conflict in Europe into the corset of a debate that demands fundamental commitment to the nation-state or the European Union also has strategic drawbacks. Instead of arguing out their differences with regard to the direction of European politics, such a setting will inevitably result in the established parties, civil society lobbyists and the media unanimously coming to Europe's defence to protect it against attacks from the right.

This will suit some people, as the superficial debate saves them the effort of coming up with fully differentiated objectives and protects them from having to give lengthy explanations of uncomfortable truths with an uncertain outcome. But the right-wing populists will benefit even more. The appeal of their standard arguments increases almost automatically: that of an all-party coalition damaging national interests, of a dominant Europe-oriented elite with no grip on reality and, most of all, of portraying themselves as the only political alternative far and wide.

This contribution is based on the German book 'Weniger Markt, mehr Politik. Europa rehabilitieren' by publisher J.H.W. Dietz, Bonn.



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