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Europe's polarisation trap

How EU supporters give Salvini and Orbán the upper hand

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Never before has Europe been so closely connected. The economies of the EU's member states are virtually inseparable. With the single market, supply chains and labour relations between European countries are often as close as they are within a given country – and therefore it makes no difference whether the business partner works in the Low Countries or Lower Saxony. Millions of EU citizens spend their holidays in neighbouring countries or commute to work in another member state, while each year hundreds of thousands of students study in other European countries.

Moreover, Europe is closely connected not only in everyday life, but in politics as well. In most policy areas, the EU's members work closely together. Climate and energy policy is one example: in 2017 and 2018, the EU reformed emissions trading in several fundamental ways. The guidelines for renewable energies and energy efficiency were revised. The EU ratified the Paris Climate Agreement in record time.

Another example: after the financial crisis, the EU revised the European financial market regulation and created supervisory authorities with broad powers. The agendas of the EU Council and Parliament are filled with legislation that is routinely negotiated. Contrary to popular belief, the Council usually decides by consensus, and member states are rarely overruled. All this occurs almost invisibly, because it's part of everyday life.

Nevertheless, another image is dominating political debate: that of an EU divided into camps. These camps, according to the widespread perception, face each other as irreconcilable opposites: progressive against populists, federalists against nationalists, Macron against Salvini. Right and left alike cultivate this antagonism.

Salvini sees himself as Europe's liberator from the Brussels bureaucracy.

He wants to tear down the Brussels Wall like the Berlin Wall before. Orbán meanwhile sees himself as the defender of Europe and Christianity from the liberal, faceless elites and their compliant tool, the EU. On the left, Luigi Di Maio accuses the EU of market terrorism. However, not just the right and left, but even the centre occasionally promotes these differences, the way that Macron delights in being Salvini and Orbán's main opponent.

The problem with opposites

Emphasising these oppositions is often justified. The authoritarian beliefs of Orbán and Salvini are incompatible with the core values of the EU. The so-called 'Stop Soros' campaign and legislation of the Hungarian government, as well as Salvini's statements to the Italian judiciary, are diametrically opposed to the basic rules of the EU. Statements by the governments of Hungary or Poland to ignore judgments of the European Court of Justice on refugee policy and judicial reform are attacks on the foundations of the EU. Profound differences exist concerning refugee policy. The debate over the Italian budget makes it clear that the euro is dividing the EU in the political debate.

The contrast between opposites may well boost the public's interest in the EU, mobilise voters and increase voter turnout for the next European Parliament elections. But it poses a problem for the EU for three reasons.

No state alone can combat climate change or cross-border crime. Unlike the US or China, no member of the EU alone can shape international politics.

First, highlighting oppositions in this way gives an advantage to the opponents of the EU. Many voters find Salvini and Orbán convincing when they emotionalise with their shrill rhetoric of 'us against them', the people against the elites, a Europe of Nations as opposed to a United States of Europe. These polar opposites provide fuel for the arguments of Orbán and Salvini. They make headlines. For these reasons, they escalate, provoke and polarise – for example, in the dispute over the Italian budget or in refugee policy. Discussions of complex issues do not stand up to simple diametric opposites and amount to foreign territory for these extremists. Macron and everyone else who play the game of opposites thus fall into a trap – they're led into confrontation on their political opponents' turf.

Secondly, pointing out opposites emphasises divisiveness and overshadows the commonalities of European everyday life. This renders

the strengths of the EU almost invisible. Its solutions to practical problems can succeed only by joint effort and require institutional co-operation; its members find compromises calmly, working together on substantive issues over extended periods of time.

Third, the accentuation of opposites suggests that the EU is a liberal concept. This is partly true – especially when it comes to EU economic policy. But in the absolutist terms of this debate, it is wrong. Even in economic policy, the EU is not exclusively liberal. Many of its environmental, social or labour policy rules have little to do with liberal economics and the free play of market forces. In policy areas that are part of the liberal-vs-illiberal dispute – for example, abortion or same-sex marriage – the EU has little or no jurisdiction.

The EU's real advantage

In other words, the EU leaves room for liberal, conservative or social-democratic policies. It does not amount to a liberal project. This neutrality is essential for the legitimacy of the EU. The protagonists of the opposites thus reinforce the false impression that the EU is merely the brainchild of liberals.

It's therefore important for the EU and European co-operation to find a better way to formulate or frame the debate on the EU and its future: concrete and objective rather than abstract and ideological. Instead of polar opposites and big concepts, practical issues should provide the framework for the debate on the future of the EU. Can states fight cross-border crime on their own? Can they stop climate change alone? How do EU members ensure that they have a say in the state of the world and aren't pushed around? What is the EU's stance regarding the attacks on justice and media in the member states?

Unlike the 'us versus them', or a Europe of Nations against a single European federal state, these practical questions invite approval of the EU. No state alone can combat climate change or cross-border crime. Unlike the US or China, no member of the EU alone can shape international politics. This can only be done together – with and in the institutions of the EU.

Collaboration will work only if all governments involved are democratically legitimised: this constitutes a prerequisite for the democratic legitimacy of European legislation. Therefore, practical issues form the better basis for a constructive debate on the future of the EU, its strengths and weaknesses. They give the EU the upper hand.



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