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Barking up the wrong European tree

Only a Europe of networks will be able to secure public goods in the unbounded, digitalised and interdependent EU of today

The European Parliament made headlines late last month by approving a package of more than 250 proposals for changes in the European Union treaties. Frothy coverage in the Eurosceptic media expressed outrage at the parliament's suggestion of abolishing national vetoes almost everywhere, even in sensitive fields such as foreign policy.

The liberal media were, however, less excited, because treaty changes require the unanimous approval of member states not usually in the mood to give up control over European integration. Even liberal politicians such as the French president, Emmanuel Macron, or his potential Polish counterpart, Donald Tusk, do not want their states to be outvoted in the Council of the EU. And they are afraid that any step towards a European federation would play into the hands of dangerous national opponents, such as (respectively) Marine Le Pen and Mateusz Morawiecki.

Abolishing vetoes has not, however, been easy, even in the golden era of European integration.

Undoubtedly, though, national vetoes lead to decision-making paralysis or, at best, wishy-washy policy solutions. A compromise amounting to the lowest common denominator can hardly solve any of the epochal challenges Europe is facing, from people movement to climate change.

Vetoes may also represent a security threat. As the European Parliament's rapporteur on treaty changes, Daniel Freund, observed in a message to his network, 'Putin only has to turn one government to block all of Europe. We have to stop this.' Abolishing vetoes has not, however, been easy, even in the golden era of European integration. And we are in the midst of a sovereigntist turn, which aims to take power back to the nation-states from 'Brussels'.

Three common fallacies

The debate, as always, is framed in statist terms: do we want a Europe of nation-states or a federal European state? Freund sees the proposed treaty changes as a step towards a *Föderale Republik Europa* and another EP rapporteur, Guy Verhofstadt, once wrote a book called *The United States of Europe*. Needless to say, this federal ambition is vehemently opposed by such sovereigntist leaders as Viktor Orbán in Hungary, Giorgia Meloni in Italy or the winner of the recent Dutch elections, Geert Wilders.

The choice between the nation-state and a European one is false, however. We should rather ponder whether we want a dysfunctional Europe governed by an unruly group of states or a Europe in which power and governance are shared among European, national and local actors. Rather than a clear hierarchy, rooted in treaties, the latter envisages a Europe of flexible governance, with different actors stepping in depending on the nature of the issue to be tackled.

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Protagonists of the contrasting statist visions see such flexible pluralism as a recipe for chaos and freeriding — yet, it is hard to picture more of either than we have already. On such diverse issues as the rule of law, people movement or even the transit and storage of Ukrainian grain, member states do as they please in disregard of formal arrangements. Even if they could stop quarrelling one day, it would be hard to govern a highly diversified Europe in a centralised manner.

A rule of thumb for effective governance is that the more diversified the qualities to be governed, the more diverse the structures and mechanisms required. This is a clear endorsement of 'multi-level governance', in which neither nation-states nor the EU, nor various local actors, possess a monopoly on decisions and resources.

Informal multi-level governance has been practised successfully for many years. During the 'refugee crisis', while the member-states could not agree on a sharing of responsibilities, welcoming cities indicated their know-how and accommodated flows. And during the pandemic, the EU was in a better position than states to negotiate vaccines with the big pharmaceutical companies.

With this backdrop, how can we explain the current urge to define where absolute power lies? And why are populist politicians, who are calling for

the return of 'sovereign' states, winning elections?

The reason seems simple: Europe's postwar security, prosperity, social policy and cultural cohesion have become retrospectively identified with the renascence of nation-states. Although Europeanists are fond of arguing that *lestrente glorieuses* of peace and prosperity were thanks to integration, many voters now blame the EU for porous borders undermining individual states' ability to collect taxes, protect employment, offer decent wages and stem migration.

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There is no doubt that the policy of open borders has produced many losers, who decided to back the sovereigntist agenda. But to blame the EU is barking up the wrong tree. In the last three decades, borders have indeed become fuzzy but primarily for other reasons.

First, there was a geopolitical revolution caused by the fall of the Soviet Union. After 1989, people, ideas and even alliances started to shift across the continent with relative ease. Around the same time, the neoliberal revolution reduced public actors' ability to control markets within and across state borders. The digital revolution, which also started three decades ago, represented a massive technological push towards a 'flat', and so borderless, world. And, more recently, the pandemic shattered any illusion that national borders are anything but redundant in combating deadly viruses.

The impact of European integration in that regard was minimal by comparison. In fact, the EU helped Europeans to cope with the effects of border erosion with active measures, from embracing the unstable post-Soviet states to creating the Recovery and Resilience Facility amid the pandemic. The Schengen external border has not proved effective — but that is because EU member states failed to endorse adequate common measures to combat the wellsprings of people movement, such as war, poverty and climate change.

It is, however, not just sovereigntist Eurosceptics who bark up the wrong tree. Supporters of treaty changes with the aim of bringing us closer to the prospect of a European federation are also in error. Moving from nation-states to a European state is not likely to make us either more efficient or more democratic.

Europe badly needs genuine multi-level governance — not another form of centralised statism.

Size matters in politics, but any aggregate power wielded by a European federation may be only on paper, because it will suffer from bureaucratic overload, divided loyalties and a hazy common purpose. Brussels, by nature, is further away from problems and citizens in various European corners. Decisions made there risk ignoring local context and one-size-fits-all solutions are usually inadequate.

There is no guarantee that a state-like democracy can be applied successfully to Europe. After all, Europe has not yet manifested the 'constitutional patriotism' advocated by Jürgen Habermas. And the European Commission tends to treat regions, cities and nongovernmental organisations as clients rather than partners. Europe badly needs genuine multi-level governance — not another form of centralised statism.

A Europe of networks

Today, the real question is not whether states should decide in Europe on the basis of unanimity or qualified majority. The challenge is to make states co-operate with local and European actors, public and private. States insist on their sovereign powers, although their ability to deliver public goods is diminished. The EU, regions, cities and a plethora of NGOs, including trade unions and business associations, have manifested their abilities to help citizens, but they are not given adequate powers and resources.

Some states not only ponderously obstruct common European endeavours but also criminalise NGOs and demonise networks of cities. They do it in the name of democracy, claiming that only nation-states are truly democratic. Paradoxically, this argument is voiced most loudly by states that are the least democratic.

States where democracy works are able to join hands with transnational and local actors for the benefit of citizens. Consider how differently Finland and Poland handled their redundant mines in Callio and Turów — the former a positive example of multi-level governance, the latter a negative instance of sovereigntism.

Only a Europe of networks will be able to secure public goods in the unbounded, digitalised and interdependent Europe of today. We in Europe would do well to think about how to make these networks transparent, purposeful, accountable, accessible and responsive. Clashes

about sovereignty will only benefit nativists.

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