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The ego of nations

European crises require unity, yet leaders continue to prioritise sovereignty, making citizens the casualties of political posturing

What is the nastiest bug destroying Europe at present — populism, nativism or sovereignism? Most point the finger at populism and nativism, but I believe sovereignism is even worse. Sovereignism prevents Europe from coping effectively with the major problems of this century, which are transnational in nature. Think about the series of recent crises — from the financial to the migratory, from Covid-19 to the security crisis caused by Russia. None of them could be handled effectively by any single state.

When governments prove inadequate, if not toothless, citizens search for scapegoats to blame for their misery and miracles that might improve their fortunes. This explains why populists and nativists thrive. Their success is not the disease but the symptom of a deeper malady. One would expect these arguments to make liberal politicians rally against sovereignism, but they prefer to bash populism and nativism instead. Populism is clearly harmful, and nativism is overtly racist, but sovereignism enjoys appeal even among liberal politicians. Why? The answer has much to do with the model of democracy and European integration we have at present.

The convenient Brussels scapegoat

The nation state remains the primary site of democracy, where the people – be they French, German or Dutch – are supposed to be sovereign and free from external interference. European integration, from its inception, was designed to rescue, not dismantle, nation-states after the havoc of two world wars. This is why the Council, not the Commission or Parliament, has the upper hand when it comes to all major EU decisions. It comes as no surprise, therefore, that at the table where key decisions regarding Europe are made, we find only sovereignists obliged to defend their respective national interests. Some are steadfast believers in the sovereign power of their states, while others are more hesitant, but none

wants to be pushed around by either the Commission or other member states.

If sovereignism is the rule of the European game, why do so many politicians promise to bring power back from Brussels to their respective capitals? They do so because it is convenient to blame Eurocrats for their own failures to control migration, rising debts, financial speculation, climate change, security vulnerabilities and foreign campaigns of misinformation. However, they bark up the wrong tree. The United Kingdom left the EU several years ago, and none of these problems disappeared — on the contrary, they intensified.

The more nation-states prove unable to contain transnational flows and the disruptive results of interdependence, the more their leaders insist on going their own way.

After witnessing the price of Brexit, none of the continental leaders is keen on leaving the EU, but they attempt to transform it into a loose conglomerate of self-governed states with few, if any, strings attached by Brussels. This policy is carried out not only by politicians such as Viktor Orbán or Geert Wilders. Supposedly liberal and pro-European leaders like Prime Minister Donald Tusk or Chancellor Friedrich Merz also play the sovereignist game. How else can we explain the reintroduction of border controls between Germany and Poland? Have you noticed how much these supposedly European leaders talk about defending their selfish national interests when it comes to security, migration and economics?

A perverse paradox is at play here. The more nation-states prove unable to contain transnational flows and the disruptive results of interdependence, the more their leaders insist on going their own way, ignoring the United Nations, the World Trade Organization, the World Health Organization and even the EU. The only actor they are unwilling to ignore is the United States of America, governed by the most unpredictable, transactional and avaricious president in the history of that great country.

The European Union finds itself in a precarious situation at present. Sovereignists have managed to defuse, if not undo, its flagship projects such as the green agenda or the migration pact. The EU talks much about its new role in the security field, but little progress has been made in practice. Member states have simply pledged to spend more money on buying American arms, which can only be used with American consent, as Ukraine recently learned.

Even the 'coalition of the willing', determined to confront aggressive Russia, is haunted by mutual suspicion, lack of resources and dependence on Uncle Sam. This decision-making paralysis, leading to suboptimal cosmetic solutions for mounting challenges, is not new. We have seen a similar pattern during previous crises, with member states struggling to apply optimal solutions due to national brinkmanship. Optimists would say that this brinkmanship does not lead to war between European states as it did historically, but given the dire state of the Union at present, it is only a question of time before the Hobbesian ghost enters the gates of the EU due to internal conflicts and external interference.

Beyond the nation-state monopoly

What can be done to secure Europe's future and the future of its scared, disoriented and progressively impoverished citizens? The answer usually given is well-known: we should finally create a European federative superstate. As Josep Borrell, Guy Verhofstadt and Domènec Ruiz Devesa put it recently: 'We must become a true federal union, finally freed from the constraints of unanimity and endowed with competences in foreign and security policy.' This is easier said than done, however, in a period when promising to restore a proud and sovereign nation state looks like a recipe for winning national elections. A federation of sovereignists is a contradiction in terms.

A federation is also resisted by liberal heads of Europe's governments, who see their states as the strongest and most legitimate actors. But can nation-states still perform the traditional state functions in such fields as social, monetary and defence policy? Is democracy in nation-states strong enough to offer any solid legitimacy? I have serious doubts.

More than half of Europeans want to replace lawmakers with artificial intelligence.

The data show that the democratic legitimacy of our states is at its lowest historic point. For instance, a recent poll conducted by Sciences Po established that only 26 per cent of French people say they trust politics, while 71 per cent say that democracy is not working well in France. Another survey revealed that more than half of Europeans want to replace lawmakers with artificial intelligence. States' ability to handle social and economic problems effectively is also at its lowest historic point, with only minor variations across countries.

As numerous articles in *Social Europe* show, public services in many

countries are on the verge of collapse. States pride themselves on defending their borders against migrants, but this is hardly corroborated by the available data. And it is now plainly clear that none of the European states is able to provide effective defence against resurgent Russia or to exert meaningful impact on the burning conflicts on Europe's southern flank in the Middle East and North Africa.

This is not to argue that states are utterly useless, let alone that they are withering away. This is only to argue that European states are not as able and democratic as they claim to be. Not just the EU, but also Europe's cities, regions and numerous NGOs often have a better record of providing public goods than states, even in such sensitive fields as migration, security and diplomacy. And these non-state actors enjoy higher levels of trust than states.

Europe of networks

The Spring 2025 Eurobarometer has shown that 52 per cent of Europeans trust the EU, while only 36 per cent trust their national government, and 37 per cent trust their national parliament. Eurobarometer data from a year earlier revealed that about 60 per cent of Europeans declared trust in their regional or local public authorities. What then justifies states' virtual monopoly on decisions and resources? Perhaps we should finally force states to share sovereignty and resources not just with the EU, but with a broader group of actors that I call the fifth estate of democracy. Perhaps we should give real meaning to the term European multi-level governance.

The problem is that the fifth estate is dispersed and disconnected. It also lacks a unified voice. The EU serves states chiefly, treating NGOs, regions and cities as clients rather than indispensable partners. Some regions pretend to form their own state, while others are chiefly trying to obtain more money from the EU. Cities, unlike regions, are not interested in sovereignty games, but their concerns are practical rather than political, local rather than European.

Europe needs a major game change.

NGOs struggle for noble but distinct causes, and they compete for public support. There is no platform uniting different branches of the fifth estate, and so they are subject to manipulation and marginalisation. The Committee of the Regions and the Social Platform are loose and toothless organisations. The European Citizens' Initiative, which allows EU citizens to suggest new legislation, has had

no practical impact so far and tends to concentrate on narrow issues such as caged farming or regional languages.

Until distinct actors of the fifth estate join forces in demanding a major reorganisation of Europe's decisional space, nation-states will refuse to share any significant powers and resources with them. Power is seldom voluntarily shared; power is taken. So the recommendation is simple and clear: those who contribute to public goods in an effective manner should unite and raise their voice.

Europe needs a major game change, and this change is now being pushed forward by sovereignists. If mayors, non-governmental activists and Europeanists believe in a different continent, they should unite and promote their own vision. Let's call it: Europe of networks.

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