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Beyond populism: Why the European Union needs to engage into identity politics

More or less all observers would agree that 2016 was a tough year, if not an *annus horibilis* for European integration, with the first case in its history of a member state deciding to leave the EU on the basis of a referendum and eurosceptical parties obtaining unknown support in member states such as Germany and Austria. Many journalists and academic analysts create a link between the faltering public support for European integration and an allegedly rising phenomenon in democratic politics: populism. As soon as protest movements defying the rules of the political game arise, as soon as political parties fiercely oppose European integration and its constraints, as soon as charismatic leader figures appeal to the feelings of the people, they are labelled as populists. Whereas political movements as diverse as French "Front national", German "Alternative für Deutschland", Greek "Syriza", Spanish "Podemos", Italian "Cinque stelle" and Polish "PiS" serve as European examples for the rise of populism, it is Donald Trump who allegedly embodies on the other side of the Atlantic the essence of populism. However, two essential questions on populism remain unsolved:

Firstly, quite often the reader is left without a clear definition of what the term actually means; which criteria a politician or a movement needs to fulfil in order to be classified as populist. Is it the appeal to the people against the elites? Is it mainly a political style, characterized by a demagogic attitude? Is it a simplifying discourse proposing easy solutions to complex problems? Is it the posture of the leader representing the feelings of the masses? Against this inflationary use of the term, the political scientist Jan-Werner Müller comes up with an operational and discerning definition: For him, a populist claims to be the only legitimate representative of the true people. According to Müller, the populist thus delegitimizes any opposition, by claiming the monopoly on representing the people's real feelings and interests. Thus, following this definition, populism contests the essence of a pluralistic democratic society: the respect for the opinions and values of the opponent. Müller's approach helps us to distinguish between popular movements and populists, between anti-elitist discourses and populist discourses: For him, Alternative für Deutschland, Front national and Austria's FPÖ are clearly populist political currents, whereas Syriza and Podemos, who respect the rules of a pluralistic society, don't comply with this definition.[1]

Other authors take a broader approach to populism. For the French intellectual Pierre Rosanvallon, populism can be understood as a disease of democracy, caused by its own imperfections, its incompleteness, its disappointments. Populism simplifies, according to him, the message of democracy, by emphasizing the necessity of direct expression of popular sovereignty, by contesting the legitimacy of institutional checks and balances and by criticizing the forms of representation practised in our political systems. Quite similar to Müller's reasoning, Rosanvallon argues that populism wants to remove the distance between the people and its representatives in power, between society and the different branches of government. Finally, according to Rosanvallon, populism claims that the cohesion of a society is not guaranteed by the quality of social interaction, but by the homogeneity of its members and their collective identity. This conception of society leads populists to abhor diversity and to stigmatize immigrants as a menace to social cohesion.[2] Taking into consideration the approaches of Müller and Rosanvallon, it becomes understandable why the European Union is a scapegoat for populists and why moderate politicians find it difficult to defend the assets of integration in a public arena increasingly dominated by populist discourse: The European Union epitomizes political complexity, the importance of institutional checks and balances, the limits to direct expression of popular sovereignty and the dissolution of national identities in a collective framework.

The second salient question on populism concerns its relation to the stagnant public support for European integration: Is populism a *symptom* of the crisis of European integration, or is the rise of populism rather more the *cause* for the citizens becoming increasingly disenchanted with the EU? If one takes populism as a cause rather than an expression of

staggering EU support, one could argue that democracies in general, not only in Europe, undergo a massive transformation with new forms of political engagement, mobilisation and opinion-making arising. The public support for the EU would then be the victim of a general trend in modern democracies, which makes it increasingly difficult for politicians to convince by rational arguments in an arena constantly agitated by 24-hours-news and instant messaging on social media. Under these auspices, many analysts have announced the arrival of an age of "post-truth politics".[3] Recently elected "word of the year" 2016 by Oxford Dictionaries, the expression should indicate political communication which is not concerned by the factual correctness of the information transmitted, but appeals exclusively to the emotions of the citizens.[4] Allegedly, both the Brexit campaign as well as Donald Trump's bid for presidency were intensely shaped by "post-truth politics", with false information circulating widely on social networks and voters believing in lies publicly conveyed by opinion leaders. The tendency of social-media-users to form clusters with like-minded people reinforces their staunch belief even in false news and makes them increasingly impervious to information likely to disprove their convictions. However, it will be difficult to defend the point of view that the circulation of false information and the appeal to emotions are new phenomena in democratic politics. Also in previous times, conspiracy theories and threat scenarios devoid of any truth have been used to stir the emotions of the electorate.

Still, the idea of an age of "post-truth politics" can help us explaining the problems to find widespread support for European integration among today's citizens: Supposedly, the EU doesn't appeal sufficiently to the emotions of the citizens and thus becomes an easy victim of false allegations, as demonstrated the Brexit debate. In a recent article for the German newspaper "Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung", the historian Ute Frevert, internationally known as an expert on the history of emotions, argues that the EU suffers from an "emotional deficit". The nation states, she points out, were ultimately successful in their relentless efforts to turn parochial provincials into committed, emotionally involved citizens, through education, mobility, military service, through enemy images and through warfare. The European integration process, on the contrary, kept from its very origins a low profile, as far as emotionalised narratives, symbols and myths are concerned. However, the story of European unification, Frevert suggests, doesn't lack strong moments which could be presented in such a way so that citizens feel emotionally concerned: The passionate courage of young European federalists who tore down borders right after the end of World War II; the reunification of Western and Eastern Europe under a common institutional roof; the introduction of common currency, which could become a symbol of a collective European identity in the same way as the Deutschmark served as a symbol for a post-war West Germany stripped off from its historical identity. Not enough has been done in order to present European integration as an emotionally seducing project: Neither has a museum of European integration history been created, nor do politicians deploy an unstinting discursive effort to positively convey the message of peace-making and cooperation among previously war-torn nations.[5]

According to Frevert, it is not too late to launch the project of turning the EU into an emotionally attractive venture. However, one should be aware that such an effort needs to go against the prevailing trend in many European countries to restore one's own national myths. At the end of the 20th century, the obsolescence of the nation state, the obliteration of national identities and the arrival of a "post-national constellation" have been announced prematurely, when the benefits of globalisation and regional integration seemed to largely outweigh their drawbacks.[6] The more globalisation proceeds, the more competences are transferred to the European level, the stronger citizens seem to cling to the immaterial treasures of their nation states. In virtually all EU member states, we are confronted with the desire to recover and to cherish one's own national myths, which distinguish the country from others and make it allegedly unique.[7] Notably, these efforts are not the monopoly of populists and right-wing nationalists, but are carried out by mainstream politicians, historians, intellectuals and artists.

Instructive in this context is the example of France: In the year the Lisbon treaty came into force, French president Nicolas Sarkozy started a "grand debate on national identity" and exhorted his fellow citizens to restore their "pride to be French". When campaigning in fall 2016 for the nomination as candidate of the moderate right for presidency, he

celebrated French history as a "national novel", urging immigrants to "assimilate" by accepting, as soon as they acquire French citizenship, "the Gauls as their ancestors."[8] Sarkozy proved to be the most outspoken advocate of a general political trend: In the run-up to the presidential elections, candidates on the right as well as on the left stress the importance that schoolchildren imbibe French history and comprehend it as a source of pride. François Fillon, candidate of the moderate right, promises to terminate such school programmes which make children feel doubtful about French history.[9] Politicians like Emmanuel Macron and Ségolène Royal celebrate Joan of Arc as a national hero, in order to counter her appropriation by the "Front national". However, no candidate stresses the necessity to tell today's schoolchildren the history of European unification, in order to make them into fully adhering and fully participating European citizens. Their priority goes to the nation state and the restoration of its frail cohesion. Thus, as far as identity is concerned, the nation state and the European Union have become competitors who both want to acquire the loyalty of the citizens. In this competition, the EU clearly is the weaker party, because so far it doesn't have any powerful myths at its disposal, which could stir the enthusiasm of the citizens. As far as emotionally charged mythology is concerned, Jean Monnet is no Joan of Arc, and the Maastricht treaty is no storming of the Bastille. If the EU wants to gain the battle for the hearts and minds of the Europeans, it needs to engage into identity politics - and be it for the simple reason that the nation states will not stop pursuing their own ones.

*__Matthias Waechter__ *is General Director of CIFE*

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