Divergent narratives

The unfinished adventure of European unification

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As neo-nationalists capitalize on citizens’ loss of trust in European elites, even the most powerful of Europe’s member states seem incapable of dealing with runaway globalization on their own. So where next for European unification, 30 years after the fall of the Iron Curtain?

In 1989, ten Central and Eastern European countries were eager to engage in the profound transformation necessary for membership of the European Union (EU), namely the Europeanization of their post-socialist domestic economies, state institutions, and societies. Following the EU’s enlargement in 2004 and 2007, its 28 member states had a combined population of more than 500 million people and constituted the largest single market in the world. Furthermore, as the prominent US social thinker Jeremy Rifkin noted, Europe became ‘a giant laboratory for rethinking humanity’s future’: ‘While the American Dream emphasizes unrestrained economic growth, personal wealth, and the pursuit of individual self-interest, the European Dream focuses more on sustainable development, quality of life, and the nurturing of community.’ [1]

Ten years on, the winds started to change for the unfinished European project. In most new and old EU member states, protectionist forces striving for state control over national borders, people and the economy have gained leverage. The UK’s attempted divorce from the EU has become emblematic of the dead end to which the new struggles against ‘Europeanization’ in the name of ‘neo-nationalism’ can lead. If ‘Brexit’ epitomizes the divisions that the neo-nationalist challenge has triggered within the European Union, ‘global Trumpism’ stands for the dismantling of the international order that the European Union has helped build during the second half of the twentieth century, and which is now becoming ever more uncertain and fluid. As the postwar order seems to dissolve, a new one has yet to crystallize. In these ‘interim times’, where will the ‘unfinished adventure’ [2] of European unification head next?

Ever since the international financial crisis, the European Union has been muddling through a series of stress tests. Their many achievements notwithstanding, Europeans have yet to find answers to a core question: Will the EU’s new divisions – its conflicting narratives and its structural divergences – foster the disintegration of the EU or, on the
contrary, will the current crises provide European leaders and citizens with the momentum for developing new political forms of cooperation and integration, and thus help to renew Europe as a political project? In short, deepening social divisions and diverging narratives do not necessarily add up to a European project in decline. Yet the diverging narratives of Europeanism and neo-nationalism are both too unspecific to resolve Europe’s crucial challenges when it comes to what Dani Rodrik terms the ‘political trilemma of globalisation’ [3] – the supposedly impossible task of reconciling the three goals of democracy, national self-determination and economic globalization. I argue that if Europeans want to be able to make real choices in the twenty-first century, they will have to renew the EU as a political project.

Diverging. Source: Flickr/Jurek D.

**Europeanization and neo-nationalism**

In the wake of the global financial crisis of 2007/8, and years of economic recession and fiscal austerity, social divisions in European societies have deepened, and EU-bashing has become the new norm in the member states. Though EU analysts tend to ignore Europe’s fragmented public spheres, the eurozone is also split by diverging narratives about where responsibility lies for the successes and failures of member states vis-à-vis the EU’s management of the financial crisis. [4] Arguably, this scenario is further complicated by national media systems exacerbating divisions between schools of economic thought and political ideologies when it comes to the role of markets, states and supranational institutions in the lives of ordinary citizens.

However, the range of different neo-nationalisms notwithstanding, their common denominator is to target the European Union as the principle adversary. Their ‘counter-revolution’ aims to roll back European integration and Europeanization by re-nationalizing sovereignty, thus supposedly regaining control over borders, citizenship and immigration as well as the economy and finance. Intellectual debates abound concerning how these backlashes could have come about and what they tell us regarding the European Union’s future. It remains an open question as to whether the Europeanization of societies and state institutions is sufficiently resilient to withstand the pressures of neo-nationalism, or whether Europeanization in itself has changed its meaning and lost its legitimacy. It is however clear that divisive uses of ‘Europeanization’ versus ‘neo-nationalism’ are misleading insofar as they miss the complexities of the conflict over the European economic, social, political and cultural order in any given historical constellation, thus fuelling further polarization. Let us take a closer look at each pole.

Over the last quarter of the twentieth century, Europeanization has been understood as a set of processes geared towards convergence across different member states, based on shared European rules, norms and values. Yet, in the aftermath of the EU’s failed constitutional treaty ratification in 2005 and, even more so, the financial crisis in the eurozone and the migration challenge, Europeanization has become more conflictive and ambivalent, especially in the European periphery. [5] As the EU’s norms and rules have become more politicized, neutrality has given way to a normative template for enforcement, monitoring and surveillance, the effectiveness and legitimacy of which is
highly contentious.

Calls directed at the Economic and Monetary Union (EMU) to learn from its mistakes have come from all sides. In the Greek context, the management of the eurocrisis has been widely criticized for privileging fiscal consolidation (austerity) and neglecting social solidarity for the sake of monetary stability and structural convergence. [6] The IMF’s previous director Dominique Strauss-Kahn has cast a critical eye on the responsibility of the EU, the IMF and indeed himself for fundamental flaws in the financial assistance programmes for Greece. At the peak of the Greek eurozone crisis in summer 2015, Strauss-Kahn asserted that ‘we need to think different, we need a change in the logic, we need a radically new direction to reframe the negotiations with Greece, […] a radically new context of constructive cooperation rather than antagonistic conditionality’. [7] Moreover, Financial Times columnist Martin Wolf, in his 2014 book The Shifts and the Shocks: What We Have Learned and Have Still to Learn, critically noted the failures of the eurozone leaders and crisis managers to take into account and correct the design flaws of economic and monetary union.

As a matter of fact, the three largest founding member states France, Germany and Italy share only limited economic convergence with regard to competitiveness, public finances, income development and labour market performance, and therefore put the stability of the EMU at risk. [8] Clearly, stricter conditionalities by no means offer a clearcut remedy here. For instance, comparing the conditionalities used by the EU for the accession of candidate states on the one hand and for managing the EMU on the other hand, Frank Schimmelfennig finds that positive conditionalities or incentives can be better reconciled with democracy than negative conditionalities or sanctions. [9] As a consequence, the latter may have unwelcome consequences for the legitimacy of Europeanization, not only in southern Europe’s fragile periphery but also in the new Central and Eastern European member states. As Ivan Krastev puts it: ‘After 1989 the political philosophy of postcommunist Central and Eastern Europe could be summarised in a single imperative: Imitate the West! This process had different names: democratisation, liberalisation, enlargement, convergence, integration, Europeanisation’. [10] Krastev frames Europeanization as the forced imitation of the West by the East, that is, as asymmetric power relations that pit ‘we, the Europeans’ versus ‘they, the people’. [11] His narrative resonates with widespread popular feelings and discourses. But its tendency to polarize falls back into the logic of the Cold War: by portraying the EU as an enemy of the nation-state, this account feeds into new East-West divisions. [12]

On the other hand, neo-nationalist narratives attempt to reframe the analytical concept of Europeanization as a contentious device for cultural globalization. Such strategies have benefited from the EU’s migration crisis of 2015, allegedly imposed by a dominant core (‘the West’) on the southern and eastern European periphery. Positioning themselves as an antidote to the pro-European establishment, new rightwing nationalist parties and movements within and beyond the EU are by no means restricted to the Central and Eastern EU member states. Seventy years after the launch of European Economic Community, in both old and new EU member states, eurosceptic, illiberal and even extremist political parties have gained enormous leverage on public opinion and on government EU policy (UK). They have become significant parliamentary opposition forces (Netherlands, Germany, Finland), participate in government coalitions (Austria, Italy) or even control national governments (Hungary, Poland, Czech Republic, Italy).
Capitalizing on public anger at the migration movements of 2015, the neo-nationalist agenda also caters to the dissatisfaction of many citizens vis-à-vis the unjustifiable injustices of the EU’s crisis management that has antagonized national societies towards one another, as Jürgen Habermas argues. [13]

Further invigorated by the Trump presidency since 2017, rightwing populism has spread within and across diverse national and regional contexts, from the United States and Europe to Asia and Latin America. Cross-national varieties notwithstanding, global Trumpism has prompted a cultural backlash that appeals to ‘economic have-nots.’ [14] Its ‘illiberal counter-revolution’ [15] aims at an anti-pluralist democracy, [16] and the spread of euroscepticism. [17] Politically, populist neo-nationalist leaders apprise a majoritarian democracy devoid of liberal principles such as the rule of law and minority protection; their cultural backlash, if not a fully fledged ‘conservative revolution’, is intended to create an anti-pluralistic, ethnically homogeneous society; while in the economic sphere they tend to privilege national protectionism. In their domestic politics, rightwing populists embrace ethnonationalist identities underpinned by xenophobia, anti-Islamism, anti-Semitism and anti-feminism. In the international sphere, they oppose multilateral international regimes, notably the fight against climate change, as well as movements in support of international human rights, international solidarity and European Human Rights. [18]

The past and future of European unification in the global constellation

What do these ongoing shifts in meaning and contradictory struggles of neo-nationalists against Europeanization narratives tell us about the future of European integration? Some policy analysts have warned that the EU might implode, like the Soviet Union in 1991 for instance. [19] Arguably a symptom of the contemporary demise of the nation-state, [20] global Trumpism is an outcome of, and at the same time feeds into, the crisis of liberalism. [21] Ultimately, it threatens to confirm the ways in which ‘democracies die’. [22] Against this pessimistic international vein, the EU’s crises would be addressed more constructively in the framework of transition, not decline. [23]

For instance, intellectuals advise courageous innovative reforms, such as a ‘Europe first’ strategy aimed at strengthening the EU’s independence [24] or encouraging citizen initiatives to rise up for ‘Europe now’ and put the political utopia of a ‘European Republic’ into practice in the longer run. [25] When it comes to renewing Europe as a political project, cultural theorist Aleida Assmann makes the case for taking a historical-cultural perspective. Drawing four lessons from Europeans’ past failures, she suggests reconciling divided European memories of the past as a precondition for building a shared European future. [26] If we want to overcome East-West divisions, she argues, first of all we need to reconcile Europeans’ divided memories. [27] In her critique of our present ‘asymmetric European remembrance’, she insists that the imbalance between official remembrance of Hitler’s Holocaust and the lack of recognition of the suffering in Stalin’s Gulag has left scars among eastern populations that must be addressed. [28] To tackle the deep-seated social-psychological roots of these rifts in the European Union, Assmann calls for a dialogical culture of European memory: ‘Eastern European states should not imitate the West but contribute to building a shared new Europe. This requires that Europe is no longer presented as an enemy but acknowledged as a common
Yet even if we fully agree with the historical and cultural lessons that Assmann sees as requisite to building the future European order, we still have yet to tackle Europe’s political and economic divisions. Empirically speaking, recent research in the social sciences provides evidence that populist scepticism about constitutionalism and liberal protections for individuals is triggered by economic dislocation and demographic change across the West. Although the driving factors of popular dissatisfaction with political institutions and parties, and of democratic distress – spiralling income, wealth inequality and the increasing weight that money carries in politics –, are more pronounced in the United States, European political systems still offer more incentives for anti-establishment parties. Thus, Europeans have had to live with ‘anti-pluralist populism’ for quite some time, especially in Italy and the Netherlands for instance.

Yascha Mounk discerns a ‘technocratic dilemma’ at the core of liberal democracy’s potential ‘to meet the public’s twin demands of responsiveness and performance’. In recent decades, Mounk argues, ‘the ability of liberal democracies around the world to translate popular views into public policy’ has declined. He attributes this to two major developments: legislatures have become less reflective of popular opinion because of the growing role of money in politics. At the same time, they have also become less powerful because of the growing importance of bureaucratic agencies, central banks, judicial review, free trade and international organisations. As William Galston points out, generally speaking, the populist challenge to liberal democracy drives ‘a wedge between democracy and liberalism’ in response to a popular demand for strong leaders; even though defining the people as homogeneous is incompatible with ‘the basis for a modern democracy, which stands or falls with the protection of pluralism’.

As for Europe in the contemporary global constellation, its actually existing liberal capitalist democracies display internal contradictions that affect their prospects for survival in the twenty-first century. Thus Europeans need to choose whether to further strengthen the agencies of liberal economic and financial globalization at the expense of democracy – or, alternatively, renew their representative democratic institutions. Provided they prioritize the latter, democracy can go one of two ways: either back towards re-nationalizing democratic self-determination, or forward towards a European democracy.

In the case of the former option, the Hungarian neo-nationalist leader Viktor Orbán has come up with the term ‘illiberal state’, thereby positioning his Fidesz Party at the extreme right margin of the European People’s Party. This new term stands for an electoral, majoritarian democracy and ethnonationalist ideology that rejects progressive principles and practices established in the European Union in respect of, for instance, asylum rights, protection of minorities, gender equality and non-discrimination. Very much following the model of ‘capitalism with Chinese characteristics’, European neo-nationalists seek to build an ‘illiberal democracy’ that hollows out democracy and strengthen the state capacities needed for implementing economic globalization on the one hand, and for limiting social and cultural globalization, on the other. They oppose Europeanization in order to detach economic globalization from the EU’s normative framework as regards rule of law, fundamental rights and international human rights as well as liberal and pluralist democracies.
Recasting the alternative Europeanist option in the framework of Rodrik’s political trilemma, this route could take on two different meanings. Europeanization can either aim at a European constitutional order in the name of economic globalization, enhancing state capacities but undermining democratic qualities such as representation and responsiveness to citizens’ priorities and needs. Or, alternatively, Europeanization can be used to expand representative democracy so as to govern the European monetary union and economy, better manage global financial capitalism, civilize the power of finance and empower social and ecological norms and common interests that transcend member states. Whether it can succeed in ‘making gender equality work in theory and practice’ will be something of a litmus test for such competing meanings and expectations. [36]

Both agendas of neo-nationalism and Europeanism need to be scrutinized for the hidden implications they carry regarding liberal, pluralistic democratic principles and practices in relation to economic and cultural globalization. While neo-nationalists tend to be too short-sighted, the politics of Europeanization may be too far-sighted. Populist nationalists refuse to look beyond their own borders when propagating nationalist re-empowerment and are eager to sacrifice the European achievements of liberal and pluralist democracy along with peaceful transnational cooperation, with a view to resisting cultural and empowering economic globalization. Europeanization, in turn, may go too far, subjecting European common interests to ‘Western’ powers beyond the EU’s control.

Realistically speaking, not one of Europe’s most powerful nation-states on its own can come up with more sustainable solutions for governing the impacts of run-away globalization on European societies than the EU. This applies to a large range of policy domains where transnational interdependencies exist and is true especially for the crisis of human rights and illegal trafficking in the Mediterranean, which only Community policies could ease: A European regime facilitating legal immigration would supplement and develop the dysfunctional asymmetries of the present Common European Asylum System. While protecting the free movement of persons within the European internal market, the eurozone countries could work towards reducing unemployment in some countries and the lack of skilled workers in others by integrating national labour markets and helping migrants integrate in the European labour market. Moreover, a common European unemployment insurance scheme would contribute to building a European social pillar, enhancing social cohesion in the eurozone and the structural convergence of EU member states. Yet so far, as a result of the eurozone crisis and the EU’s human rights crisis – referred to by populists as the ‘refugee crisis’ – structural divergence among member states has increased, their cohesion diminished, and, as a consequence, narratives have diverged along with national interests.

**Improving the European politics of crisis, choice and change**

How can the unfinished European project of unification possibly constitute an antidote to the ‘great regression’, [37] and counter the illiberal, anti-European ‘counter-revolution’? [38] In conclusion, I want to make the case for renewing Europeanization as a process of collectively learning from past mistakes. Neither technocracy nor illiberal, anti-pluralist neo-nationalism will be capable of reflecting and learning in the common interest. Only in a liberal, pluralist democratic framework can European researchers and political leaders conceive of and advance forms of Europeanization that will work towards bridging
Europe’s divisions. Thus the renewal of Europe as a political Europe needs more self-reflective deliberation about alternative narratives, their conditions and consequences. [39] National fora for citizens’ debates about Europe have flourished since 2017. But we also need a transnational format for publicly debating proposals for necessary and desirable reform, such as for a ‘sovereign, united, democratic Europe’ that safeguards the rights of citizens. [40] For to protect citizens in Europe, liberal pluralist democracy must be reinvigorated. And to this end, European democracy must be upgraded.

Today’s European Union is a far cry from an undemocratic regime but it still has some way to go to become a fully-fledged federal European democracy. If this is to be achieved, Europeans need innovative ideas and devices aimed at renewing Europe as a project of political unification. Confronted with anti-pluralist populist political parties and governments, EU leaders, political actors and institutions can learn from past mistakes in order to deal with the present and shape the future. In contrast to the boldness of innovative ideas, step-by-step political developments in European governance seem piecemeal, incremental and tiny in their ambition and scope.

Nevertheless, in a large range of domains change is not only necessary but also achievable. It is impossible to predict where the unfinished European journey will head in the future. European societies are faced with ever more risks that transcend national borders – from terrorist assaults and cyber attacks to climate catastrophe and mass migration. These risks, together with the EU’s internal complexities, challenge the belief in the post-war European idea of an ‘ever closer union’. Yet, the political development of the EU does not necessarily require ‘more’ or ‘stronger’ European integration. Instead, it should improve the quality of politics itself. [41] The quality of European politics will advance if power is exercised in ways that neither obstruct citizens’ participation in the political sphere nor leave them to resort to individual or collective violence to resolve their disputes.

Moreover, the quality of European political decision-making will improve if lobby regulations across all EU institutions increase transparency and accountability. If democratic modes of governance embrace the needs and preferences of discontented, previously excluded social groups will develop political and social trust. If EU politics promotes common European goods, it will gain legitimacy for new forms of integration. If political development promotes new devices for constructive cooperation and replaces ‘antagonistic conditionalities’ for Europeanization, then the ‘finality’ of the EU might shift from ever closer union to ‘unity in diversity’. After all, renewing Europe as a political project means experimenting with innovative, flexible and inclusive modes of cooperation and integration. Arguably, as long as EU leaders and citizens are committed to enhancing this European political project, the cooperation that has been a distinguishing feature of the post-war and post-1989 European project will further evolve.

**Footnotes**


6. Dimitri Sotiropoulos: In the wake of the economic crisis: the empowerment of (un-)civil society in Greece. In: Liebert / Jenichen (eds.): *Europeisation and Renationalisation*.


11. Ibid.


26. Assmann, *Der europäische Traum*.

27. Ibid., 172ff.

28. Ibid., 173.

29. Ibid., 172.


34. Galston, *The Populist Challenge*.


36. Ulrike Liebert, ‘Gendering Europeanisation: Making equality work in theory and


38. Zielonka, *Counter-Revolution*.


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