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Europe's twin dangers

Normative disintegration, normative disengagement

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Should anti-democratic populism continue to cast a shadow across the continent, Europe may well succumb to a creeping process of disintegration, warns Jan-Werner Müller. Now is the time for renewed political engagement, if Europe's democracies are not to start slowly corroding from within.

A quarter century ago, a then virtually unknown official in the American State Department published an article in a neoconservative policy journal which was to achieve global fame (or perhaps notoriety). The author of the piece was Francis Fukuyama, and its title was “The end of history?” (though most people eventually forgot about the question mark). From the start, critics savaged Fukuyama’s claims. Strobe Talbott, later to be a deputy secretary in the very department where Fukuyama worked in 1989, called them “the beginning of nonsense”; Christopher Hitchens sneered at “self-congratulation elevated to the level of philosophy”. And these were some of the gentler criticisms.

Yet Fukuyama had of course not been so naive as to argue that the end of the Cold War meant the cessation of all conflict. Rather, he had posited that only liberal democracy ultimately fulfilled basic human aspirations to freedom and dignity. This claim did not rule out the possibility of what he described as more or less local fanaticisms. But there was to be no serious rival to liberal democracy that exerted anything like global attraction, in the way communism and fascism had done in the twentieth century.



The other noticeable blind spot of many commentaries on Fukuyama was this: the place where history had ended first, according to Fukuyama, was what in the eighties had still been called the European Community. Western Europe, Fukuyama claimed in 1989, had seen the “common-marketization” of international relations, with the result that conflict now simply meant haggling over tariffs, not military confrontation.

And twenty-five years later? It is far from obvious that Fukuyama has been proven wrong (even if anyone who didn't have much to say about the post-Cold War order felt compelled to sneer that at least one thing for was sure: history had *not* ended). China is rising, but are millions across the globe really dreaming the “Chinese Dream”? (And what would such a dream entail anyway? A Leninist party ensuring continuous economic growth?) Is Putinism a serious rival to liberal democracy? Or the model of “illiberal democracy” that the Hungarian prime minister Viktor Orbán praised this summer?

I don't think so. But this conclusion should not lead to liberal complacency. For all is not well. In 1989 Fukuyama had claimed that the great danger for a place like western Europe might actually be boredom: he predicted that there would be no more occasions for heroism, as the continent turned into a sort of living museum. But are we bored in Europe today? Hardly. Yet conflict is less a matter of a return of grand doctrines that claim superiority to western liberal - and capitalist - democracy. Rather, we are witnessing the spread of what might be called a dark shadow of democracy, a shadow that can resemble the real thing in many ways: populism.

Much has been written about this phenomenon in recent years, but the inner logic of populism has not always been well understood (leading, I would say, to an unfair application of the label to groups such as the Spanish Indignados, or, for that matter, any critic of the euro as we know it). Of course, all populists present themselves as anti-elitist, but not all those who find fault with current elites are populists. Another necessary condition to justify the label “populist” is anti-pluralism. Only the populists, so populists claim, properly represent morally pure people; all political rivals are *per se* suspect, and there can be no such thing as a legitimate opposition. Think of Orbán claiming, after electoral defeat back in 2002, that the nation could not be in opposition (thereby equating his party with the nation). Or, another example of this logic: Recep Tayyip Erdogan, having been chosen by his own political party, the AKP, as candidate for the Turkish presidential elections in August 2014, threw this at his critics: “We are the People - who are you?”



Populists thrive on conflict with elites – they are fine with vertical conflict, so to speak – but they do not condone horizontal conflict, as there can be no other legitimate contender other than them to represent the people. It is populism understood this way that has been rising in and around Europe recently. And it is precisely populism that has been creating what I would call the danger of *normative disintegration* in the European Union.

According to the European treaties, Europeans share fundamental values, such as democracy and human rights, and are committed to promoting these values both inside and outside the EU. Moreover, what one might call a normative European *acquis communautaire* was strengthened with the “Copenhagen criteria”, according to which countries had to demonstrate that they were in fact proper democracies and respected human rights as well as political pluralism, before they could accede to the Union. Today one might have very serious doubts about this picture and ask: is there really a consensus about fundamental values, let alone a consensus as to whether and how to promote these values? Can we agree on what might be problematic about “illiberal democracy” and the politics of figures like Putin and Erdogan? And, as far as EU Member States are concerned, do we have any idea of how to deal with countries where democracy and the rule of law are under threat?

Clearly, the eurocrisis – which is to say: the spectre of financial and economic disintegration – has distracted attention away from the dangers of normative disintegration. Yet the latter is arguably more serious than the former. To be sure, the dissolution of the eurozone might have catastrophic consequences for the global economy. But, looked at dispassionately, it would in the end just go to show that European elites committed a very, very serious policy mistake. On the other hand, ignoring the rise of genuinely anti-democratic populism, letting Orbán get away with the creation of an “illiberal democracy” in Hungary, the fundamental rights crises of Roma and refugees – these all erode the moral foundations of the European project as such. It is easy to say that the EU cannot do more about any of these, because it lacks legitimacy in the eyes of its own citizens. But perhaps it’s exactly the other way around: the EU lacks legitimacy, because it cannot do anything.

There is a level of integration and interdependence inside the EU which makes it impossible to say, echoing Neville Chamberlain, that there are unfortunate, far-away countries within the EU about which we know nothing



- and care little about. As long as a member state retains a vote in the European Council, all European citizens are at least indirectly affected by that country, because it votes on EU legislation. Yet European elites shy away from using the existing possibilities that EU treaties offer (depriving governments of voting rights in the European Council) to sanction rogue member states. Individual countries are also reluctant to confront another member state directly, as they have rather bad memories of the year 2000, when 14 EU members enacted bilateral sanctions against an Austrian government that included Jörg Haider's Freedom Party (though it is by no means obvious that those sanctions were as much of a failure or embarrassment as many observers concluded at the time). And civil society has played little role in mobilizing citizens to care about what happens in other member states. This is no doubt partly due to a sense that any problems are primarily the business of the people inside the rogue member state (despite the fact that everyone holding a European passport is affected, so that, on one level, we cannot really speak of purely internal affairs in the EU anymore). But it is also due to the fact that we still lack anything like a real European public sphere - many people may never hear of particular problems in other EU countries to begin with.

To be sure, normative disintegration might not take the form of a political bang - but instead a moral whimper. We might witness the slow erosion of EU values and norms, and a growing sense that there is a periphery of countries (not necessarily at the Union's actual geographical borders) where something is not quite right - and yet nobody feels they have the legitimacy or the means to do much about that periphery. And there is the related danger of what I would call a comprehensive *normative disengagement* from Europe's various neighbourhoods. This has been particularly clear in responses to the Arab Spring. It might seem unfair to contrast Europe's actions after 2011 with the EU's engagements after 1989 - but, at second glance, it is actually not such an implausible comparison to make. After all, we tend to forget that EU expansion was by no means a foregone conclusion in the early 1990s; to put it bluntly, it took Helmut Kohl, arguably the last truly emotionally committed European integrationist, to push it through in 1994 (of course it helped that enlargement also served German economic interests). The point is not that Europeans after the spring of 2011 should have rushed to offer membership to countries around the Mediterranean - but that a much more extensive and intensive engagement (economic and political, plus lots of soft power) might have been possible.



In retrospect, the use of the three European M's – mobility, market access, and, perhaps most important, money – might not have made a decisive difference in a country like Egypt, as Jan Techau has argued. But another M might still have come more into play: the European model of pluralist transition to a stable democratic regime. This in contrast to what happened in Egypt, where in the end two populisms – that of the Muslim Brotherhood and that of the secularists – confronted each other. It was yet another populism that eventually won out though, this time promoted by the military along the lines of: only General el-Sisi represents the people, and all opposition is illegitimate. The EU has not been terribly vocal about the major human rights abuses that followed. At the time, the objection to Europe offering, let alone pushing, any “models” was of course that, in the face of Europe’s colonial past in the region, any engagement might have provoked a backlash, or at the very least been rejected as patronizing. But was that danger not also there in central and eastern Europe after 1989? Could one not have argued then that, with the atrocities of the Nazis and of local collaboration still being part of living memory, Germany should not have led the push for enlargement? Part and parcel of which was the push for the implementation – often as *de facto* precondition for enlargement – of distinctly German institutions, most prominent among which were the more or less approximate copies of the German constitutional court.

Of course, normative engagement can sound moralizing – or even hypocritical. It would indeed be hypocritical (or, more likely, a somewhat typical form of European self-delusion) to say that it is not also *political*. For far too long, the EU has thought of many of its “instruments”, such as market enlargement, neighbourhood policies, etc., as largely apolitical. But Putin’s lesson for Europe this year has clearly been that his regime does not accept any division along the lines of NATO equals political, and the EU equals apolitical. In a sense, the choice is out of the EU’s hands: if Putin says it’s political, then it is political. And Europe needs a political strategy in response.

It’s pure speculation, of course, but one could imagine that in fifty years historians will treat the eurocrisis as a footnote (my point here is not to deny the very real suffering it has caused), but the Arab Spring and its failures as a momentous global event with far-reaching consequences – which Europe largely failed to shape (with a somewhat similar, though perhaps less dramatic, argument about Ukraine). And: one could see the rise of populism not as the real end of the end of history in Fukuyama’s sense, but as the



beginning of a slow corrosion of Europe's democracies from within. Another political spring-time around the Mediterranean is unlikely anytime soon, but it might not be too late to counter populism.