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***“Euroscepticism: roots, solutions and the battle for the next European Parliament”***

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In the scholarly literature, Euroscepticism is often associated with the intensification of European integration that began in 1990's with the ratification of the Maastricht Treaty. It was the time when the UK opted out from the social charter and the euro, and Denmark rejected the euro in a referendum. Increase in the European Union's competences, along with the “referendum politics”, led to the end of what was called the permissive consensus regarding European integration, i.e. the end of the tacit consent of citizens to community integration. “No” to the Constitutional Treaty in the Netherlands and France in 2005 and the Irish “no” to the Lisbon Treaty in 2008 marked the end of that phase of Euroscepticism that concentrated on challenging the institutional changes in the EU.

Euroscepticism concerned with the institutional landscape was countered by “Euro-enthusiasm” – on the scale of acceptable political positions, both somehow balancing the “vital center” of the European discourse. Up to that time it was possible to have a more or less reasoned discussion about the scope and means of necessary institutional changes in the EU. The line was: what should we do to make the EU function better in order to meet expectations of citizens who were skeptical, for example, of the necessity of the Constitution, but still interested in having the EU working for them? With the onset of multiple crises and its subsequent consequences (euro turbulences, danger of Grexit, austerity programs, migration and refugee confusion, as well as the way we reacted to those challenges) that hit Europe, this rational discussion became much more difficult. And making political capital of the impending “European disaster” became a salient factor in European politics.

That was the tipping point when that phase of “benign” Euroscepticism has essentially ended around 2008. Since then we have been witnessing a slow

simmering of a strong ideological component into the formerly Eurosceptic discourse. Euroscepticism became much more virulent in terms of both the ideology and its expressions.

If previously we could somehow rebalance the center between Euroscepticism and Euro-enthusiasm or realism on the political scale of acceptable positions, following 2008 this scale went completely haywire. Euro-enthusiasm or realism practically fell off the chart, while populism absorbed Euroscepticism and turned the scale upside down. This was facilitated by the fact that historically European populism had always had the cloud of nationalism. The center lost its balance and we have been, for a while, in the process of regaining it and getting back the European project from the clutches of toxic populist forces.

Now, when we look back at all what happened in the past decade, it is obvious that Euroscepticism was the fertile soil that supported the birth of this brand of populism that we are facing today. The Eurosceptic populist environment was like a “hothouse” in which the temperature of negative attitudes toward Europe was systematically turned up. It could have been more or less predicted that at some point – translated into political action - it would reach a boiling point and explode.

Well, the name of that explosion is Brexit, which is much more than just the process of leaving the UE by the UK. Looked upon as a long-term challenge to European identity and future, Brexit is a symptom of a convulsive state of mind on part of the European population that has been ruthlessly exploited for political ends by segments of political classes in national contexts.

However, we should remember: with all the British exceptionalism taken into account, the Brexit experience can be replicable in other national contexts as well. And as such, this possibility should be seen as a long-term challenge to European identity and future. There is already a huge volume of texts on this.

Thus although some of the causes for the rise of populism are well identified: including globalization, acceleration in world economic competition, inequalities, crises of 2008 that resulted in falling in the levels of social protection, migration, rise in cultural reaction to liberal values – it is only a part of truth about what happened.

The underappreciated factor has been a skillful operationalizing of the fears and uncertainties of the European people by unscrupulous political operators on the far Right supported by Europe-unfriendly jurisdictions. In addition, it has to be said, it would not reach probably this form – that now looks uncontainable – if not for the

complicity of the established parties of the Right. As a prime example, I have here, of course, the British Tories and their “race to the bottom” in building political capital on the consequences of crisis.

A number of classic European parties of the right bear responsibility. They let the genie out of the bottle, so to speak, by trying to exploit what Peter Sloterdijk called “revenge banks” in their national context. There is no doubt that rage and anger play a very complex role in our contemporary world and politics. There are many movements of disoriented rage holders around. Thus, in short time, the discussion about the ends and means of the European project, which could have filled a certain role if kept within bounds of rationality, became a launching pad for the irrational and often virulent brand of national politics. Now we are experiencing a spillover of those national impulses in the European politics.

What now? Since the illiberal and populist forces arose out of the particular national contexts, an alternative narrative that would be able to capture and hold in the long term the imagination of the Europeans, has also to start not from the top, that is the European level, but from the bottom. We have to “re-capture”, so to speak, the local politics in every EU country and turn it around. It is a tall order and it will not be easy. But we have to do it, there is no other choice, if we want to keep EU as a vital force.

The challenge is, however, not only about Europe. People often heed the populists ideas, because populists are the first to hit the local ground and translate the local stories of particular grievances into an all-encompassing narrative. A clinical example is the phenomenon of “yellow vests” in France, where a particular theme of national tax was fast translated into a narrative of a European significance.

Herein is the lesson: in the world of modern communication and social media, nothing in politics is local anymore. The French troubles or the Polish troubles become European troubles fast. In the case of “yellow vests”, both the right and the left forces try to capitalize on this development. In addition, this movement, amorphous at the beginning, is preparing to put forward its own candidates to the European Parliament in the May elections.

However, creating a counter narrative to Eurosceptic, populist voices, cannot be only based on reactive basis. In such a mode, it will always be too late, too little, to move the Europeans to our side. We have to recalibrate our thinking and acting

into a pro-active mode that would pre-empt the populist attacks on the foundations of our liberal order.

This will only happen if we create a truly transnational political space, where the scope for presenting often toxic national contexts would be somehow reduced. It would not happen immediately, but we have to at least think about it in terms of the next European elections.

We have to use that time between 2019 and 2024 to really build a pro-European coalition of pan-European parties. But we also need to prepare thoughtfully a “generational change of guard” at the top. In order to do that we have to engage fully in the European project the “Erasmus generation” - “poaching”, so to speak, the best people with political instinct, social sensitivity and cultural capital to become the new leaders for the EU in next decades. But a sustainable change can come only if we take the need to invest in morally-based education seriously.

If the parties of anti-Europe, nationalistic bent gain substantial number of seats as a result of the May election, we will face quite a new landscape in terms of European politics. Its nature will change from consensual to antagonistic, from predictable to disrupting and from inclusive to exclusive. Thus, we can expect more constraints of public space for free expression, more hate speech, increase in intolerance and xenophobia, with different local flavors in particular countries.

Thus our immediate task, before the May elections, is two-fold: we need to combat fear and rebuild trust. On the European level, we need to create a pro-citizen, pro-European Alliance to combat the populist challenge.

But we cannot limit the effort to the European level. We have to directly challenge populists on the national levels, exposing their lies, half-truths and false promises that they present in the public sphere. We have to be much better, more convincing in the social media that are vital to the success of any political project now. But we need to exert ourselves not only in the domain of words in social media, but also in being present on our town squares, streets, parks and other public places proclaiming the European values.

Taking into consideration the low level of turnout in the EP election (42.61 % in 2014), it is obvious that if we do not engage people on the personal level, the apathy will win, and the populists will reap the fruits of that win.

In addition, we also need to prepare a long term strategy of reinforcing the moral foundation of the European liberal order. We have to convince the Europeans

that listening to populists' "siren song" is putting our heads in the sand instead of facing the challenges together. "Illiberal democracy" is only a phantom dream: it can destroy what has been built but it cannot provide any real solutions for the future of our children and grandchildren.

In other words, we have to combat the challenge of populism by a political and moral renewal based on rebuilding trust and preparing and implementing a Pan-European project of education about what is Europe, what are real – not imagined – European values. People have to learn to distinguish between the real developments in the EU and the fake news spread about the EU.