

EVENT REPORT

BÖLL Lunch debates

Reconnecting Europe V

Six Months to Go! What Can We Do to Restore People's Faith in the European Project? ¹

'This time it's different' was the promise to the European voters in the election campaign 2014. As part of this promise the 'Spitzenkandidaten' experiment was launched. It did not do much to change the attitude of European citizens towards the European Union. The election resulted in a worrying rise of right-wing populism. The wake-up call didn't seem to do much to alarm the mainstream parties. In the years following the election, the British voted for Brexit; illiberalism became a pressing issue in central eastern Europe with the triggering of article 7 procedures against Poland and Hungary as consequence. Right-wing populism and anti-EU sentiment grew almost everywhere in the Union, so did anti-migration sentiments as a result of the inadequate handling of the refugee/migration situation. The upcoming European election in 2019 might bring about a real political earthquake, already foreshadowed four years ago, blowing away the political centre altogether. So, have 'we' (the political class and the rest of the people involved in project Europe and in civil society) done enough to prevent Europe from further going down the drain? What can be done in the last 6-7 months to reverse the tide? Is there a chance that the green wave we witnessed in recent elections in Bavaria, Luxemburg and Belgium will roll on and what about the 'new movements' like 'En Marche' in France or on a European level 'Volt', 'Pulse of Europe' or 'Stand Up For Europe'?

Six months before the election to the European Parliament in May 2019, the prospects are bleak. It is almost tedious to point to the rise of populism in almost all Member States, as if the need to act on it was no longer urgent. The election in Italy was only the latest in a series of elections in Europe dominated by fierce populist rhetoric and a predominantly Eurosceptic and nationalist agenda. Also it needs to be said that in France, where the win over populist forces with a pro-European campaign was celebrated just a few months, the tide has turned again. Recent polls show only 19% support for the group of current president Emmanuel Macron, while 21% support Marine Le Pen's far-right Front National. The European elections in May could become another backlash to European Integration.

¹ The event took place on 6 November 2018. The panelists were _____, European Policy Lead and co-founder of 'Volt', **Łukasz Pawłowski**, managing editor and regular contributor at *Kultura Liberalna*, **Julian Rappold**, Project Leader of 'Connecting Europe' and 'FutureLab Europe' at the European Policy Centre (EPC) and **Judith Sargentini**, Member of the European Parliament (Greens/EFA). The debate was moderated by **Klaus Linsenmeier**, Head of Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung European Union, Brussels).

Feeling like outsiders

For **Cahen-Salvador** populist and anti-EU sentiments in Europe stem from the lack of inclusion of many citizens. She, herself a young woman, often felt as if her voice was not being heard and therefore, never engaged in politics. She pointed out that many people do not recognise themselves in traditional party lines and therefore lose interest in (European) politics. **Pawlowski**, a Polish citizen, sees different reasons for the discontent with EU politics in his country. He explains that even 30 years after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Poles still feel like outsiders in the EU. This sentiment is shared both by Europhiles as well as Eurosceptics. Europhiles, on the one side, feel like a poor cousin being invited into a rich family: happy to be part of it, but also feeling intimidated and alien. Eurosceptics, on the other side, see the membership in the European Union as something that is owed them. In their way of thinking, Poland deserves the benefits of the membership because of the many wars in which their country defended European values and for which the West should feel a sense of guilt. In the end, elites on both sides still share the feeling of still not really belonging to the EU. From the German perspective, the current erosion of the traditional national party system plays an important role in the debate, as **Rappold** explains. Traditional centre parties are failing to deliver and lose votes to both sides of the political spectrum. He demonstrates his point with the recent election results in the German state of Bavaria, where the former leading party CSU has lost its absolute majority partly to the more leftist Greens, but also to the extreme-right AfD. This reconfiguration of old national party systems can be seen all over Europe.

A lack of responsiveness

A cause for this perceived lack of representation would be the failure of the established parties to deliver to citizens needs. In the case of Bavaria, instead of tackling the issues that people are actually concerned about (health, housing and education), campaigners focused on topics which promised to deliver the most votes and, therefore, placed their bet on migration. For **Sargentini**, this in her eyes 'stupid' strategy exactly marks the key problem of current politics in many countries. Instead of solving real issues, politicians focus on people's 'perceived needs'. Sargentini illustrates her point with an anecdote: when she was a member of the Amsterdam City Council, surveys on the security of the city were carried out each year, measuring real security and security as perceived by Amsterdam's inhabitants. As real security went up by the years, perceived security went down at the same time. The story serves as a good example of the divergence of perceived and real needs of citizens, which becomes especially severe in the topic of migration. European countries have repeatedly inflated the issue of migration in order to put it on top of the political agenda. This way the perceived need for action went far beyond the level of attention which should be spent on the problem. This strategy has been perpetuated, even though a solution has already been found on European level, as some speakers pointed out, at least as far as the arrival of migrants in Europe is concerned. Now European leaders have navigated themselves into a dilemma: they have to solve a 'nonexistent problem', trying to maintain their credibility.

How to deal with Poland and Hungary?

In the case of Poland, **Pawlowski** is rather optimistic on the future. His hope lies on the younger generation of Poles, which is the first generation in 200 years of Polish history to grow up in a free country. Supposedly, they have a different mindset towards European integration, but they are not yet represented in governmental and other important functions in Polish society. Therefore, future elections are likely to have a more positive outcome for the EU. Also, measures by the EU have been undertaken to stop the dismantling of democracy by launching the Article 7 procedure against Poland and Hungary. But more needs to be done. For Pawlowski, the most effective approach would be to take legal procedures via the European Court of Justice and sanctions against the current government. **Sargentini** on the other hand warns against outsourcing political decisions to judges. Instead of asking for sanctions, European leaders need to call directly on the individual responsibility of politicians in the respective countries. They have to be held responsible and urged to change their rhetoric and their acting. If politicians in power want to ignore the law, they will continue to do so in the future and no court decision would stop them.

Reversing the Tide

In view of the elections in May, the problem remains how to engage people in the European project. With her only two years young movement called Volt, **Cahen-Salvador** is assured to have found new ways of enhancing citizens to make their voices heard on a European level. In founding a new party in response to Brexit, she wants to show how politics can be done differently. Volt promises to involve a wider part of society by not putting itself into the classic categories of left and right or pro and contra EU, but ensuring practical and pragmatic solutions. With different experts on their team, they claim to find clear solutions for problems on the ground. Their aim is to work locally on city levels and at the same time, establish a pan European party that hopefully will be elected into the European parliament in May next year.

Can politics without ideology work?

Cahen-Salvador's invigorating approach was not met with enthusiasm from all sides. In **Sargentini's** opinion, the young movement is falling into the trap of instead of freeing themselves from traditional categories, Volt is getting caught up in them, ending up with a populist pro European approach. Also Volt's technocratic style of policy-making evoked criticism. Political decisions cannot be replaced by expert decisions, which do not answer to the question of how to distribute means in society. At this point, ideologies (values) are needed to deal with the ever-present problem of scarcity in politics, Sargentini points out. She stresses that good politics is when everyone understands them and is willing to live with the consequences. Still, for many, Volt represents a move in the right direction. As pointed out in many European elections before, European politics must be more accessible for citizens. Volt's success in reaching people on the ground is shown by their 70% share of members, who have previously not been engaged in politics. It is something established parties can learn from. If politicians can show that they are willing to respond to the real needs of the people and are able to connect local issues with the European level, there might still be hope for the European elections.