

## EVENT REPORT

### BÖLL LUNCH DEBATE

#### Reconnecting Europe I

## The European Union at the Beginning of 2018: Still Alive, but Can It Kick Hard Enough Under Pressure?<sup>1</sup>

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*2017 was another bad year for the European Union, maybe not quite as bad as many of us feared, but certainly not one to be celebrated, even though it should have been a year of celebration 60 years after the signing of the Treaty of Rome. Many of the serious problems Europe had been wrestling with over the last years remained unsolved. For the lunch debate event, we picked three of them. First, the continuing wave of populism. With elections on the agenda in the Czech Republic, Hungary, Italy and Sweden, we will see whether the populist train which was hold up last year in the Dutch and French elections, has really been brought to a halt. As has recently been shown in the Austrian election, but also in Germany before, that doesn't seem to be the case at all. So, what if Central Eastern Europe continues to backslide and polarise, Italy will plunge into chaos and even the often highly praised Swedish democracy is eroded by hateful populism? Will the EU be strong enough to cope with new populist setbacks? And then there is Brexit, the tiresome negotiations, the insecurities for citizens on both sides of the channel, the heated, often spiteful political and public debate. Where will we all stand by the end of this year? And finally, there is the relation with Turkey, one of the EU's two powerful and difficult neighbours and still officially accession candidate, its seemingly unstoppable backsliding into 'illiberalism', the at times aggressive rhetoric of its president against Europe and his bold interference with European citizens and values. A Turkey, also, which is widely divided about Erdogan's policies and whose co-operation Europe needs to solve the migration crisis and to fight terrorism. How can Europe continue to work with Turkey without (further) compromising its values and abandoning the country's democratic opposition?*

### Framing the concept of populism

Populism is often defined as a flaw, a political discourse that endangers democracies; it does not belong to any specific political side, it can only be said that it is always part of a radical ideology. It is more about the way of doing politics and reaching people than about content.

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<sup>1</sup> The event took place on the **31 January 2018**. The guest speakers were **Péter Kreko**, Political Capital Institute in Budapest and **Jean Lambert**, Member of the European Parliament (Greens/EFA). **Amanda Paul**, European Policy Centre, specialised in Turkey issues, had to cancel her participation. The debate was moderated by **Klaus Linsenmeier**, director of the Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung European Union. The event was held under Chatham House Rule.

Populism has different genetics in every country; yet it is possible to distinguish a few common features: the constant reference to the 'people' in its rhetoric and the claim to be its only true representative facing an elite kowtowing to the banks and/or foreign interests.

It is too easy to think that populism has been triggered by the economic crisis and is fueled by difficult social and economic conditions. Populist parties are, indeed, targeting lower income and less educated groups, but they do it with identity issues. For instance, in central eastern Europe (the 'Visegrád Four': Poland, Hungary, Slovakia and Czech Republic) growth rates are high, but this is not enough to counter ethnic identity arguments used against refugees. Populism is a new political phenomenon in line with the post-materialist era we live in. Migration and asylum issues are the only feature shared by central eastern populism. Considering most topics, the V4 looks more cohesive from the outside than it really is at the inside. Where the Polish government seems to follow Orbán's path with judiciary reforms challenging the Rule of Law standards and the dispute over relocation quotas of refugees, the Czech Republic and Slovakia, the other members of this unofficial alliance, appear to act more ambiguously and pragmatically than their northern neighbours. Hungary for the moment can be seen as the spearhead of populist rhetoric in Europe, targeting global liberal elites and their representatives such as George Soros or the EU institutions accusing them of destroying the European identity and even hinting at a deliberate 'importation' of migrants. In fact, there are almost no migrants in Hungary (or Poland); this 'platonic xenophobia' serves purely domestic electoral interests. For instance, it is suggested that the Hungarian identity is threatened and thus the country needs a strong leader to resist this process. Orbán's role on the European scene is more about the circus than the bread. Fidesz officials and Orbán are playing a game at European level for domestic electoral purposes; they are member of the EPP group and they know that there are red lines that cannot be overstepped.

However, the EU must be careful when addressing populist rhetoric; the western European narrative is not relevant from an eastern point of view (e.g. political conditionality such as the compliance with Rule of Law standards as a condition to access to the Cohesion Fund). If not responding in a coercive manner, the EU institutions and the Commission will have to respond to the populist allegations with facts and figures and not leave the floor to media pandered to the illiberal governments. In turn, the Commission also has to support civil society organisations promoting the EU. At the same time, it is important for the EU and pro-EU movements to adapt their discourses to reality; because people have proven receptive to populist approaches. Perhaps movements and parties have to forget about the negative association with the word 'populism' and pave the way for a positive pro-European populism that would advocate liberal democratic values.

### **Brexit: has England succumbed to its own identity problems?**

Populism is able to frame issues in a way that reaches citizens, most of all those who feel being left behind in the globalisation process, those who have been neglected by public policies. This was the case during the Brexit referendum in which the UK, most of all, England, decided to leave the EU in order to 'take back control.' The latter must not be underestimated: England is

the only UK country without a devolved government (except from London which is governed by a metropolitan authority). The biggest mistake of the REMAIN campaign was that they largely omitted to explain the benefits of EU funds for the vulnerable regions in a context of austerity, even though the LEAVE campaign focused on economic aspects. However, the Brexit referendum result has several other causal features.

At the centre of the debate stood topics like sovereignty transfers to Brussels and immigration indirectly linked to the English collective identity. The main problem was that mainstream political parties were, as often in the UK, very critical of the EU. This is not *per se* a bad thing, but if one goes as far as calling for a referendum on EU membership, as the Tories did for electoral purposes, it implies that the bright side of being part of the bloc needs explaining as well. The poisonous rhetoric used by UKIP strongly relied on assumptions such as that immigrants steal British jobs or that the Commission decides on everything by itself. This influenced the entire electoral debate. Now the UK government and the parliament have to decide what it is they actually want to put on the negotiation table and what they want to achieve; once again the general undecidedness gives a lot of room to the hard Brexiteers.

Another point was the misunderstanding of the functioning of the EU; it was not unusual during the Brexit campaign to hear interviews with MPs and national politicians or read articles about the EU that were erroneous, while British MEPs and EU officials were never involved. This low level of Europeanness in the UK is connected to the way Britain perceives itself in the world: more global than European. It has to be said that Brexit never was and still is not the main issue for the people in the UK. The voters believed in the attractive big picture consisting of sovereignty and prosperity as drawn by the LEAVE campaigners; now they realise that the devil is in the details. In addition to the lack of political orientation regarding the future relationship to the EU (custom union or a comprehensive trade agreement, the government has to take a stance on the Northern Irish border case and EU citizens' rights in general.

EU is the favorite scapegoat of Brexiteers and central European (and other) populists, but it would be too easy to assume that everything can be solved on EU level. A solution to identity the crisis Europe is facing currently, must be found at national level. Perhaps a 'populism' that would not only be 'against' something, but would offer a worthy outlook might do the trick.