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Pressing Juice out of the Brussels Cabbage Poland and the European Union

Where we are

Let us begin with a paradoxical observation. The founding myth of European integration is about peace. The European Union was designed to be a 'peace machine'. And yet, all over Europe we are witnessing a new wave of nationalism and xenophobia. In some northern Member States (but also in Poland) there is a proliferation of hostile discourses about southern nations portrayed as 'lazy' and 'irresponsible'. One Finnish MP could not even refrain from suggesting on his blog that what Greece really needs is a "military junta". On the other hand, there is the corresponding self-image of 'responsible' nations, 'net payers' to the EU budget. In the south, especially in Greece, there is a growing anti-German resentment. Both, in the north and in the south there is a rapid growth of hostility against immigrants, with Greece and the Netherlands perhaps in the vanguard. In France and the Netherlands there have been discussions about borders in the Schengen zone being 'too open'. And the right-wing governments of Sweden and France expelled Roma immigrants from their territories, ignoring their rights as EU-citizens.

It is important to note that this new wave of nationalism is a truly European phenomenon. Not because of its scale, but due to its origins. It is neither a 'remnant' of a distant past nor a simple 'backlash' against the European integration. It is a perverse effect of the present mode of integration through austerity. Crisis and austerity policies have made people across Europe feel vulnerable, bringing about conflicts about redistribution of wealth and burdens on the continental level. Thus, there is more to this new nationalism than just a return of something which had been repressed. We are not going to understand the extent of the problem if we misread it simply as a spectre of the past. Europe continues to produce and reproduce nationalism, and this time it is not nostalgic defenders of old identities, but cold technocrats and skilful managers of austerity, which are currently reinforcing nationalism in Europe. As Friedrich Nietzsche has been frequently quoted in this debate, I am glad to add one aphorism more: "And also this parable give I unto you: Not a few who meant to cast out their devil, went thereby into the swine themselves."

Nationalism as it exists in Europe today should be treated at its root and it is rooted in the false universalism of austerity-oriented integration. If this point is missed, there is a risk that the more integration we achieve, the more disintegration we produce as a result. It is a good moment to stop and think, not only about the pace, but first of all about the direction of the integrating efforts. The transfer of power between national and European level will not help if it goes hand in hand with social disruption. In order to achieve a more perfect union, we need to fight the crisis (or rather the crises), and not only redistribute its (their) burdens.

What is this crisis about? Volumes have already been written about it, and volumes still will be written. But to understand the challenge inherent in our predicament we need no more than two observations. First, the current situation is a complex result of the overlapping of two major factors: the impact of the world economic crisis that began in the United States in 2008 on the one hand and long-term effects of some fundamental flaws in the construction of the eurozone on the other. And it is easier to find a remedy for the former than for the latter. Second, there are a number of those fundamental flaws, and some of them are much easier to solve, both economically and politically. A genuine, sustainable solution to the crisis must address all of those flaws, starting with the most difficult one.

The most important problem with the single currency is that it is responsible for the persistence and deepening of trade imbalances within the eurozone. As some countries have a current account deficit, while other enjoy a surplus, this results in a zero-sum game. It is this current account deficit,

not the budget deficit, which is responsible for the piling of debt, both private and public, in the affected countries. The right-wing's preferred solution, 'better competitiveness', may be achieved only at the price of a social disaster as well as enhanced competition in lowering social standards among Member States. And if you tend to think that although it might be painful, 'Europe is worth it', please rewind to my above diagnosis of the cause for the new wave of nationalism.

Oddly enough, neither the current policy nor any of its mainstream alternatives even remotely touch the real problem. Austerity is not working and cannot work, but the same is true about the 'smarter' version of austerity as advocated by *The Economist* and realised by the tandem Hollande-Ayrault after the acceptance of the 'rapport Gallois': short-term stimulus plus long-term reduction of unit labour cost. Even the 'Green New Deal', some elements of which are also implemented in France by the green-red coalition, does not address the origins of the eurozone crisis. (It has its merits, nevertheless. Policies such as the poverty-sensitive home insulation programme or the idea of progressive pricing on electricity will come to fruition, come what may.) Important steps have been made to reform the eurozone, and the function of the European Central Bank is evolving mostly in a good direction. But the major problem of the trade imbalance remains intact.

Small steps, pragmatic adjustments and faith in a 'functional spill over' have proved their usefulness in furthering the process of integration many times. But it is no longer so. Today, Europe needs a quantum leap and no amount of small steps will be able to add up to such a leap. But before we prepare to jump, we should carefully choose the direction.

Ways ahead

Apparently the most obvious solution would be political federalism, which is not really a new solution, though it may have its merit. Since long we have known what needs to be done; now it is high time we did it. Yet although achieving a genuine political federation in Europe to 'complete' the Economic and Monetary Union may be an important part of a plausible solution, it is not the solution itself. First of all, it fails to address the new challenges unearthed by the current crisis. As the saying goes: one shouldn't put the cart before the horse.

Advocates of political federalism suggest that the major problem is the old-fashioned attachment to nation-states defending their dubious sovereignty, which, however, is a misperception. Nation-states and European institutions are playing the same game (of austerity), i.e. no transfer of power between these two 'levels' is actually supposed to change anything. By focusing on nation-states, advocates of political federalism evade the real issues such as the shifting balance of forces between capital and labour, the internal trade imbalances and the dismantling of social security nets in many European countries brought about by austerity. In the present situation, a political federation would only further empower European leaders and technocrats who already proved incapable of creating a broader and bolder vision.

Another obvious solution would be the exact opposite. If the eurozone proved fundamentally flawed and the European leaders cannot afford to repair it properly, should we perhaps seek refuge in national currencies? National currencies have their merits: they proved more resilient to the crisis, more adaptable and are thus maybe more sustainable. Yet, although *having* national currencies instead of the euro would have several merits, *a return* to national currencies would create serious instability, regardless of whether we are speaking of a spontaneous breakdown of the eurozone or of a 'controlled' dismantling. It would further enhance divergences between different European economies. It would be perceived as a 'step back', and as soon as the European integration is perceived as reversible, other such steps may follow. It would create an atmosphere of economic nationalism, and any form of European solidarity would need to be rebuilt and justified anew.

Even though it is highly probable that one of the solutions described above will be drawn upon, these are not genuine solutions. Let us proceed with two genuine solutions, even though they are highly improbable in the present present circumstances.

First, we can imagine a return to national currencies accompanied by new means of coordination of European economies. One step back, two steps forward. Instead of the Economic and Monetary Union we can imagine a European Clearing Union, based on the idea of an International Clearing Union developed by Ernst F. Schumacher and John Maynard Keynes in the 1940s. Member States would use national currencies within their borders and a special currency – why not call it ‘euro’ – in their exchange with other Members States. Economies with a substantial trade deficit would be obliged to devalue their currencies, while economies with substantial surpluses would pay a special tax, reinvested in trade-deficit economies. This way, trade on the continent would be roughly balanced and we would avoid a race to the bottom regarding social standards that inevitably accompanies the search for ‘competitiveness’.

Another way to create a more perfect union would be federalism, but not a purely political one. We need to put first things first. And the most important challenge is not a transfer of power, but the reclaiming of citizenship. In recent years, many Europeans saw their social citizenship diminished. It must not be so. If the Union is to survive, it must protect and enhance social rights already gained by people in the framework of nation-states, not to destroy them. A genuine social and economic federalism must start with another ‘transfer’: the definition of social citizenship on the European level. What rights and entitlements should every European citizen enjoy? What level of social security is the Union obliged to deliver?

When we begin with citizenship, the rest will follow. A federal budget needs to be big enough to guarantee these rights, as well as an adequate level of redistribution among regions. I would like to add two more tasks. First, scientific research, especially in fields such as new drugs and ecological technologies. Second, the transition to a low-carbon economy all over the continent. There is no ‘scientific’ way to calculate how big it should be, but if the federal budget in the United States amounts to no less than 20 per cent of GDP, this may be a good hint for what needs to be done in Europe.

Neither of these scenarios seems feasible at the moment, but it is worthwhile to consider them anyway. It is good to know how far away we are from any sustainable solution to the present crisis (or crises). And, being aware that the present crisis does not provide momentum to make a necessary quantum leap, perhaps we should look for a better motivation for change. I believe there is such a goal: to prevent climate change. Most Member States agree it is the crucial challenge. To be more precise, only twenty six out of twenty seven do agree. The opposing camp consists of just one country: Poland. That is why it is so important to understand the character of the Polish bond with the Union. Enter Poland.

Poland's place in Europe

In some circles, Poland currently has the reputation of being a country blessed with a pro-European government. Foreign Minister Radosław Sikorski was even included by *Foreign Policy* on their list of ‘The 100 Global Thinkers’ ranked 85 – higher than Jürgen Habermas (88), Slavoj Žižek (92) and Martha Nussbaum (93). His speeches in Berlin (28th November, 2011) and Oxford (21st September, 2012) were received as a strong pro-European, federalist voice. It is a grave misperception, but to understand it, you need to understand the character of the European debate in Poland.

There is a paradox in Poland's bond with the Union. Although there are no eurosceptic parties in the Parliament, Poland's pro-Europeanism is very thin, not to say minimal.

At the time of accession, there was a debate between those in favour of joining the European Union and those against. Most of the population, as well as most of the political class and the Catholic hierarchy supported the accession. The accession was supported not only by the then governing post-communist Democratic Left Alliance, but also by parties in the opposition: Civic Platform as well as Law and Justice. There were only two eurosceptic parties in Parliament: the left-wing populist Self-Defence and the nationalist League of Polish Families. These parties

disappeared from the political scene after the snap election in 2007. Within a couple of years, Polish society learned and appreciated the advantages of EU-membership: the flow of funds (structural funds, subventions for farmers), the possibility of labour emigration and geopolitical stability. It is very 'banal nationalism' that is keeping Poland strongly within Europe. But the bond is shallow and contingent on the experienced benefits of membership.

The remaining eurosceptic voters may be choosing for Law and Justice, though they are not a truly eurosceptic party. Contrary to the conventional perception, when it comes to Europe, between Law and Justice and Civic Platform there is a difference of style, but not of substance. Law and Justice made gestures to show the public that they are the true defenders of Poland's sovereignty, but their real policies were different. They support the intergovernmental rather than the communitarian model of the European Union, demand European solidarity (especially if it means funds for Poland), and have a very limited understanding of human rights (without women's reproductive right, rights of sexual minorities and workers' rights) or environmental policies.

This is more or less the policy of Civic Platform nowadays. Civic Platform's government has been sticking to the 'British protocol' that limits the application of the Charter of Fundamental Rights in Poland. Poland has opposed the proposed EU-regulation on property rights of civil union between citizens of different countries; the Polish deputy minister of justice explained to his European counterparts that our constitution commands 'the promotion of marriage'. Poland did not join the group of eleven countries choosing 'enhanced cooperation' to introduce a European Financial Transaction Tax. And, most importantly, Poland on several occasions vetoed efforts to agree an ambitious European climate policy. There is no reason to assume that a hypothetical Law and Justice government would do it differently.

When one reads closely the famous Berlin speech by Polish Foreign Minister, one can see it is a faithful expression of this policy. The most important passage reads as follows:

"The more power and legitimacy we give to federal institutions, the more secure Member States should feel that certain prerogatives, everything to do with national identity, culture, religion, lifestyle, public morals, and rates of income, corporate and VAT taxes, should forever remain in the purview of states. Our unity can survive different working hours or different family law in different countries."

The idea of a symbolic transfer of power from nation states to the European level is offset with major setbacks in crucial policy areas that require deeper harmonisation (taxes etc.). There is also a clear defence of Polish exceptionalism with regard to human rights issues, hidden under such labels as 'national identity', 'culture', 'religion', 'lifestyle', 'public morals' or 'different family law'. (*Nota bene* neither religion nor lifestyle is currently 'in the purview of states' and hopefully won't ever be!)

Both right-wing parties treat the European Union essentially as a 'reluctant cash machine'. There is even a Polish idiom "wyciskanie brukselki" – "pressing juice out of the Brussels cabbage," which describes the most desired skill of a Polish statesman with regard to Europe.

It is different on the other side of the political spectrum. The parties identified as being on the left (Democratic Left Alliance and the Palikot Movement) treat the European Union not only as a reluctant cash machine, but also as the source of ready-made norms, values and solutions. They take everything that comes 'from Europe' for granted. This was made very clear in a recent debate on the fiscal compact. The Civic Platform government decided that it needs to be ratified by Poland, even though some ministers had voiced reservations about the treaty. Law and Justice took the role of the defender of national sovereignty, but also criticised the treaty as "a law bad for Europe, written under the pressure of the crisis, rating agencies and banks." The parliamentary left was more than enthusiastic. The Palikot Movement praised the government for making the right decision, while the Democratic Left Alliance criticised it for not being bold enough – according to them, the government should not only have the fiscal compact ratified, but also prepare a blueprint for joining the eurozone.

In western Europe, there are left wing parties that wanted (or still want) to reject the fiscal compact and those that accept it, although more or less reluctantly. But I know of no other example of a European country where the left is more enthusiastic about austerity than the right. For Poland's parliamentary left, if something comes 'from Europe' it commands unconditional enthusiasm. Rejecting or even criticizing anything construed as 'European' is out of the question. We may call this model a 'Europe copy-paste'.

Thus, no major political force in Poland is able to contribute to the European debate on Europe. The same must be said about the mainstream media: the debate is very shallow at best. Poland may, however, be instrumental in achieving a European breakthrough, if it changed its position with regard to climate policy. And I do not mean by this a simple deference to the European consensus. Poland is indeed a country heavily dependent on coal, and perhaps incapable of making the necessary transition on its own. The best position would be to support a more ambitious climate policy on the European level and demand more money to help Poland in the necessary transformation to a low-carbon economy. This might seem egoistic, but this time it may well prove a very constructive kind of egoism. If it is true that climate change is the last challenge able to mobilise richer countries to share their wealth with others in order to deal with the climate crisis together, and if it is true that climate policy may be a good focus of a common European identity, then it is also a good starting point for the demand of continental solidarity. Urgent transition to a low-carbon economy should be a common effort: no Member State should be left without support. And if we secure a budget big enough for this task, we may find ourselves on the path of deeper integration again... Perhaps there are too many 'ifs', and I am tempted to add another one: the next round of climate talks (COP-19) will take place in November 2013 in Warsaw, which may be a good occasion to explain a couple of things to the Polish government. But we should not lose time...

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