

Tanja Dückers*

Europe in Crisis

Seven years ago I had a curious, depressing experience: as a reporter for *Die ZEIT* I attended World Youth Day in Cologne. Just a few weeks earlier Pope Benedict XVI had become leader of the Church; he travelled to Germany for the first time since his election for the occasion. Since I'd left the Catholic Church some years earlier, my point of view in Cologne was purely journalistic and sociological – I wouldn't be cheering for the Pope. I didn't know beforehand that at World Youth Day I'd learn more about nationalism and attitudes to Europe than about the Pope – who provided not much more than an active backdrop to the event – and the state of Christianity today. Beyond all Christian ideals of equality, humility and modesty, in Cologne the meaning of identity and national consciousness pressed itself into the foreground with the impetuous vehemence of youth; this was the dominating experience. The atmosphere was in fact no different than at a mass gathering before a giant screen for the World or European Championship football. Here young people with blue, white and red flags chanted 'Vive la France', there breaking teenage voices shouted 'Bella Italia!' further back under a sea of red and white flags there were raucous calls of 'Polska!' Flags waved at each other, figures wrapped themselves in them from head to toe, headbands and wristlets bearing national badges and emblems were worn. There is no doubt that in these few days many young people learned more about geography than about fundamental theology. Alongside the very obvious importance of national identity for the global pilgrim I was struck by a tendency to the particular and region-specific: those from Bavaria held aloft a Bavarian rather than a German flag, those from Cracow had written 'Kraków' on their Polish flag, those from Rio de Janeiro waved the flag of Rio and not that of Brazil. In the midst of this sea of flags I suddenly discovered something exceptional; a rare, endangered flag species. It fluttered all alone: yellow stars on a background of the same blue as the night sky of Cologne. In the middle of all those Stars 'n' Stripes, Ordem e Progresso, the red-and-white and the black-red-and-gold, there it was: the flag of Europe. There were hundreds of thousands of flags there, but I saw only one flag of Europe, one transnational symbol – and this was just a year after one of the most important events in post-war history – the 2004 enlargement of the EU to the east, by which the bipolar world order of the Cold War was finally done away with. The guardians of this treasure were French. "You're the only ones here with the flag of Europe," I told them. They were eager to respond, apparently glad of their secret complicity with me. "That's right. No one knows where we're from, which is a bit of a problem. They give us funny looks and some of them say ... dumb things about the EU, but to tell you the truth, I dunno, it probably sounds strange, but ... actually ... we like the idea of Europe." There followed an anxious glance over the shoulder, in case someone had overheard the heresy they had just spoken.

This sobering experience is now seven years in the past. I have the impression that not a great deal has changed in terms of the popularity of the idea of Europe. People seem to be seriously afraid that their countries are being co-opted by 'Brussels'. 'Brussels' has become synonymous with hypertrophied bureaucracy while the impression persists that most opponents of Brussels have little idea of the administrative procedures that are unavoidable and necessary for a transnational community such as the EU. What bothers me personally is the resounding rejection of Brussels the city, a place I have visited several times and enjoyed not least for its countless wonderful chocolate shops and other culinary highlights. These are things whose sense of the joys in life bear little relation to the picture of 'grey, bureaucratic Brussels'.

* in collaboration with Anton Landgraf, Berlin, June 2012.

New nationalistic impulses

Since I attended World Youth Day the emphasis on the nationalistic and particular in Europe has continued to grow. There are numerous examples that attest to this, including the success of political parties such as True Finns, Sweden Democrats, the Polish People's Party, Jobbik in Hungary and Partij voor de Vrijheid [the Freedom Party], the right-wing populists led by Geert Wilders in the Netherlands.

Owing in no small part to the financial crisis and the crisis surrounding the euro, critics of globalisation and Eurosceptics have gained new impetus in a way that casts in a light of foreboding the expressions of nationalism I experienced at World Youth Day. For what in Cologne might yet have been explained as a cultural phenomenon, as a yearning for national clarity in a world that is ever more complex, has since become associated with manifest economic interests.

In order to unsettle ourselves, there is no need for us to look for historical parallels. (Dr Christoph Butterwegge, a political scientist who studies poverty, compares the current situation with that after 1929 and believes that ideologies of the far right will gain in strength.) Even if we succeed in averting a fundamental economic crash, many people will continue to fear unforeseen consequences of the euro crisis – and anxieties about social decline will persist.

In empirical terms at least, these concerns are entirely justified. According to a study published recently by the OECD ('Growing Unequal?'), in the Federal Republic of Germany income disparities and the proportion of poor people in the population is increasing far more rapidly than in most other industrialised countries. Steps to reverse social injustice could also be understood by many as a demand for a stronger state and a general enhancing of things nationalistic.

A fear of social decline has come to dominate in the lower middle classes above all. According to new studies by McKinsey and the German Institute for Economic Research (DIW), the middle class has shrunk dramatically; this trend is expected to continue. And those who no longer belong to the middle classes (between 70% and 150% of the average income in a state) have in most cases gone not up but down.

While on the one hand the government promotes processes of economic globalisation and internationalisation, on the other a widespread response to these fears of decline – which are justified and in no way paranoid – is a flight into nationalism, a patriotic introversion, a search for security in the familiar and the regional. This reaction arises out of a concept of 'home' that is anchored in the late-Romantic nation-state thinking of the nineteenth century.

In contrast to this the transnational eurozone appears as an abstract political construct which only a few citizens can warm to. As long as this transnational project continued to promise economic benefits and a few practical concessions – as concerns holiday traffic, for instance – it was accepted all the same. Since the beginning of the debt crisis, which threatens not only the single currency but also the entire project of European integration, this acceptance has been on the wane. Brussels is now proving synonymous not only with a megalomaniac monster authority but also with economic failure. Diffusion in the common European area affects more than national identity; it affects savings deposits, too. What, then, could be more obvious than a renewed interest in the nation state?

The Euro crisis and nationalism

The debate surrounding the euro crisis is increasingly characterised by the theories of Eurosceptics. Thilo Sarrazin complains that the euro has made it possible for economically weaker member states to take on interest rate loans at historically low levels, with the result that Spain, Greece and Ireland can sanction pay increases that further reduce their competitiveness. Germany, meanwhile, cannot afford to support in the long term states that

are less successful economically than she is, Sarrazin claims. But this would mean that Greece, probably also Spain and Italy and perhaps even France would have to leave the eurozone. What would remain then? A kind of E-mark for Germany and Austria, which the Finns and the Dutch would perhaps be allowed to join.

It is astonishing that conservative Eurosceptics spare so little thought for what such a national restoration might mean for the German economy. Up till now German businesses have benefited greatly by the single currency. In addition to low wage growth the low exchange rate for the euro has facilitated a German export boom over many years. If the Greeks did not exist, probably the Federation of German Industries would have to invent them.

The collapse of the single currency area would also mean the failure of the integration of Europe – with unforeseeable consequences. The economic and administrative calculations of the Eurosceptics care little about political consequences, however. Sarrazin's contemptuous declaration that the euro can be understood as the remission of a debt for the Holocaust – and he has no interest in such sentimentality – is no coincidence. This way of thinking fits the self-image of a sovereign nationalism that chooses its allies according to their economic usefulness and does not concern itself with questions of society and morality.

Chauvinistic ideologies are now common throughout Europe. Whether True Finns or Sweden Democrats, what unites them is an unwillingness to meet the debts of weaker states. They promise the frightened middle classes that in future not a cent will be wasted on economic losers. Instead they demand a revival of the old nation state.

Only in Germany have the Eurosceptics yet to organise themselves along party-political lines, the efforts of certain figures including Hans-Olaf Henkel, former president of the Federation of German Industries, notwithstanding. Their views meet with broad approval among the public. According to recent surveys, a majority of Germans are in favour of excluding Greece from the euro zone; if the Greeks sink, then that's their problem.

The fact that right-wing Eurosceptics are still unsuccessful in Germany in terms of party politics may be because the Federal Republic has so far got off extremely lightly in the crisis. In many other EU states, however, this retrogressive development is already far advanced.

In this country the sometimes dramatic consequences of the economic crisis have been observed from the sidelines only. But now it is not only in Greece and Spain that there is a worrying increase in unemployment. In the middle of July the International Labour Organization (ILO) warned of a momentous rise in unemployment throughout the eurozone. If political and economic countermeasures are not taken, there is a real threat that millions of jobs will be lost in the next few years. An ILO study warns that the number of unemployed in the euro zone could increase from the current 17.4 million to around 22 million. The highest rate of unemployment in the OECD countries is in Spain (24.6%), followed by Greece (22.5%). But the rate is in double figures, too, in Estonia, France, Hungary, Italy, Portugal and Slovakia. The study goes on to state that more than a third of the fit-for-work population of the eurozone is either unemployed or excluded from the labour market, while long-term unemployment, too, is on the rise.

A new wave of emigration

Whoever is able to leave an area where hopelessness prevails, does so. Thus in recent years hundreds of thousands of Portuguese have emigrated to former Portuguese colonies Angola and Brazil. Recently, prime minister Pedro Passos Coelho encouraged unemployed young teachers to leave for Portuguese-speaking countries where there is a shortage of teachers. Meanwhile the media speak of the greatest exodus of all time; this will make a telling difference in a country strongly affected by migration.

At the same time the Portuguese, most of whom are young and well-educated, are often unprepared for the situation that awaits them abroad. SCP, the Portuguese trade union for the construction industry, warns that many migrants are 'brazenly exploited' in France and Germany and often have to scrape out a living as 'slave labour'. Yet many Portuguese prefer to leave their homeland. After years of crisis and numerous cost-cutting resolutions and reforms, they no longer see a future.

The Lisbon daily *O Publico* reported that around two thirds of those in employment have to get by on a monthly net salary of between 310 euro and 900 euro. Around one fifth of the population lives on the poverty line and the official rate of unemployment is already 14%. It is expected that the economy will shrink by around 3% this year, while taxes and living costs will increase further.

In countries of eastern Europe such as Latvia, Romania and Hungary incomes have declined by up to a third and tens of thousands have lost their jobs, while taxes and living costs have risen rapidly.

The results of the latest census, published in March 2012, show how fundamental the consequences of the crisis are. To general surprise the National Statistics Office in Bucharest found that some 2.6 million fewer people live in Romania today as compared with when the last census was conducted, in 2002. No one is able to specify where 12% of the population has disappeared to within these few years. Presumably many people have moved to Italy, France or the USA in order to find work there. Many eastern European countries currently demonstrate a similar development to that of Romania. In the past two decades Lithuania has lost approximately half a million inhabitants from a population of just 3.5 million.

For those unable to emigrate, all that remains is migration within one's own country. In Romania, in the last ten years the proportion of the population living in rural areas has increased while the number of inhabitants in cities has fallen – an occurrence practically unique in recent European history. But it is doubtful that subsistence farming will provide a way out of the crisis.

Political desintegration

Economic problems have been accompanied by political disintegration that encourages authoritarian and nationalistic forms of rule. At the beginning of February this year Romania's president Traian Basescu appointed as the new prime minister his head of secret services Mihai Razvan Ungureanu, causing political scientist Cristian Parvulescu to write in the social liberal daily *Adevarul*: "That an active spy has made it to the top of the government tells us a lot about the state of democracy in Romania."

In Hungary developments towards authoritarian rule are even further advanced, and this causes an occasional stir in western Europe, too. It is little known that the government of Viktor Orbán pursues a radical course not only in terms of its ideology but also in its taxation policy. Hungary has the highest rate of value added tax in Europe – 27% – and then there are a fair number of other, new taxes and indirect taxes. When these effects are totalled up "the real disposable income of lower income groups is shown to have sustained an average loss of up to 30% in two years", according to Budapest's *Pester Lloyd* newspaper.

The economic crisis has affected minorities most of all. At the same time they have become the target of overt racism. In Hungary numerous attacks on the homes and settlements of Roma have been registered in the last few years. A brutal attack in the village of Tatarszentgyörgy, which is about 50 kilometres south-east of Budapest, caused a particular sensation. The perpetrators fire-bombed a house in which a Roma family were sleeping and then shot the father and his four-year-old son in cold blood as they attempted to flee their apartment. Not long afterwards the same village saw the first large-scale march of the fascist Hungarian Guard movement. According to surveys 80% of the population is hostile towards Roma.

The Budapest opinion research institute Political Capital warns that the hatred could spiral out of control. In the Vienna daily *Der Standard* the institute's director Krisztian Szabados predicted that "ethnic conflicts will be aggravated further by the economic crisis, which will have grave repercussions for policy". Extreme right-wing movements such as Jobbik, the political wing of the Hungarian Guard, are gaining ground rapidly.

Although the position of the Roma in Hungary is particularly difficult, it is hardly unique. In a report on the position of Roma in Europe, the EU Commission recently used the following dramatic words: "The discrimination, social exclusion and segregation to which Roma are subjected serve to reinforce each other" which in turn "results in higher mortality and lower life expectancy". In many European states discrimination against Roma has taken on forms that once would not have been thought possible in the 21st century. In Romania there have been repeated acts of violence against Roma in recent years. Several municipalities in Slovakia have built 'noise-mitigation walls' around Roma settlements. In Hungary a representative of the extreme-right Jobbik party called for the transporting of Roma criminals to concentration camps. In small Hungarian towns Roma have been victims of series of murders.

In other countries, such as Kosovo, Roma eke out an existence on society's rubbish heaps. Yet only a few decades have passed since the genocide, when half a million Roma were murdered by the Nazis, often with the active support of the local population, not least in south-eastern Europe. Every second or third Roma family which should now be deported from Germany, lost relatives in the concentration camps.

The way that a society treats its minorities is an indicator of the extent to which buttresses of society such as human rights and tolerance have been established within it. These qualities are devastatingly lacking in the way that most European governments treat the Roma. Germany is no exception to this, even though the deportations ordered here proceed smoothly and 'cleanly' – circumstances that make the scandal all the more depressing.

A further indicator is provided by the treatment of refugees. The discussion surrounding refugees in connection with the revolts in Arab states provided a foretaste of this. The thousands of migrants who landed several months ago in Italy triggered a hysterical discussion on whether border controls should be reinstated in Bavaria and Austria. The debate surrounding migration continued alongside the re-nationalisation of European politics, which has emerged since the start of the currency / financial crisis. The governments of EU Member States insist more and more on their respective national interests – or what in cases of doubt they consider to be so. The turning of the mood against refugees goes down well before elections – and in Europe there is always an election going on somewhere.

"Immigrants who live here threaten my personal way of life and my values." As a recently published study by the Friedrich-Ebert-Foundation (FES) entitled 'The Devaluation of Others' testifies, it can be presumed that this statement would meet with the approval not only of Horst Seehofer, chairman of the Christian Social Union of Bavaria (CSU), but with that of many other Europeans. The FES study concluded that group-related misanthropy, derogatory attitudes and prejudice towards what is perceived as 'foreign' or 'other', are widespread in Europe. Derogatory statements meet with least agreement in the Netherlands and most in Poland and Hungary. Concerning xenophobia, Islamophobia and racism, the FES study found only minor differences between countries. Obviously Europe is united in its rejection of foreigners. "About half of all European respondents are of the opinion that there are too many immigrants in their country," the study claims.

About half categorically condemn Islam as a religion of intolerance – in this regard the Netherlands is no exception. Prejudice and rejection are prevalent even in countries of eastern Europe where the proportion of Moslems in the population is low. Islam, it seems, is under general suspicion. Above all in Germany and Poland a majority has declared Islam incompatible with its own culture.

The study warns expressly of a rise in right-wing populism, claiming that many people who are not fundamentally uninterested in politics feel themselves abandoned by politicians. The complaints of these people are directed not at established parties but at immigrants, Muslims and weak social groups. This chauvinistic attitude – bound up with business-oriented pragmatism – seems to be ever more dominant in Europe, and not only when it comes to social minorities.

The European identity problem

It seems that Europe is in danger of generating a transnational identity of the kind hitherto characteristic of nation states: by the separation of those who apparently do not belong, be they minorities, refugees or economically weak. But such a selective exclusion produces a community that is obviously inconsistent with the self-image of the European Union, which likes to describe itself as an “area of freedom, security and justice”.

Meanwhile there have been many – mostly tense and misleading – attempts to define something like a European identity. As yet no one has come up with a successful definition. In my opinion such a determination is absolutely necessary. One can be a convinced pro-European without the corset of an identity with supposedly clear contours, without the formulation of questionable criteria of disqualification such as 'Islam does not belong in Europe' or this or that way of life or cultural product is a determinant of the European identity. In an undeniably pluralistic Europe, where different religions belong in the same way as different cultural influences, such criteria of exclusion can only lead to intra-European disagreement, separation and nationalism.

For me, the countries of Europe are something like a family whose members are very different. In geographical and historical terms they are inseparably linked – in their diversity, which should be accepted rather than belittled. There is a well-known sociological study which claims that siblings are more different from each other in character than two people on the street chosen at random, as each seeks within the confines of the family his/her own position, his/her niche within the familial constellation. Closeness and difference are really interconnected and interdependent. Perhaps we in Europe should consider this model in order better to understand and tolerate difference.

There is no viable and sensible alternative to a united Europe; in this respect pro-European forces and ideas should be strengthened everywhere, beginning with the education system. The young people at World Youth Day understood 'nation state' and 'Europe' as opposites – but it does not have to be like this. The particular and the collective could be understood as two ideal dwellings, something like a Russian matryoshka doll.

Release from the duty to remember or total oblivion?

I have always found it tremendously liberating (not only on a practical level) to be able to travel across Europe without having to show my passport – above all, in the knowledge that in this united Europe another war will not break out so quickly. The horrors of the two world wars and the bipolar world order of 1945-1989 into which I was born, horrors I came to feel with great intensity as I grew up in West Berlin – the amputated island city and front line of the Cold War – are for me reason enough to rejoice over the existence of a united Europe. I will never forget my fear as a child and adolescent of the Russian T34 tanks with their barrels pointed at us West Berliners at the Dreilinden frontier crossing. Not to mention those victims of the Wall who were forced to relinquish their lives just a few kilometres from the glitzy world of KaDeWe and the Ku'damm. Regrettably we have to assume that the terrors of the Second World War, the Cold War and the division of Germany are remembered less and less. Already surveys show that many young Berliners have no idea where in Berlin the Wall stood. Even if younger generations no longer grow up with the historical burden known by those before them, a 'full-stop policy' as advocated and promoted by Gerhard Schröder is indefensible and dangerous (not only in Germany) against a background of neo-nationalist

machinations. But the 'full-stop debate' Schröder proclaimed has met with a broad response in society. The fact that books such as Jörg Friedrich's 'Fire', the TV series 'The Sinking of the Wilhelm Gustloff' and the cinema film 'The Sinking' (Essen social scientist Harald Welzer made the just criticism that films such as 'The Sinking' always show the end of National Socialism – and never its beginnings – as a tragedy) have been so successful tells of a sometimes gentle, sometimes drastic reevaluation of the guilt of the Germans which is truly thought-provoking. Since Martin Walser made his speech at Frankfurt's former church of St Paul calling for release from the 'duty to remember', a mood has prevailed that one could characterise by the little word 'enough': 'enough atonement', 'enough talk of the Holocaust'. Suddenly a number of politicians are coming out with remarks that are understood by many citizens as 'successful provocation'. The current culture of remembrance is invested with a conspicuous need to be recognized at last as a nation of victims of world war. The call for the public ushering in of 'a different approach' to the past is continually intoned by politicians, those putative mentors of the nation. Into the bargain the major television networks have for years been producing (in series such as 'The Great Escape' and 'The Sinking of the Wilhelm Gustloff', to give just a couple of examples) the corresponding images, in which they suggest that the German people – with the exception of well-known senior Nazis – consisted only of the seduced, the deceived, the bombed-out, the violated and the sadistically murdered. Guido Knopp's TV series 'The Great Escape' – broadcast, incidentally, in the year of enlargement of the European Union to the east – concerns itself with German expellees only. So I like to call his series 'Knoppaganda'. At any rate, the new 'victims' argument is all the more irritating in the light of the failure of efforts to initiate historical revisionism made above all by Ernst Nolte in the 'historians' quarrel' of the 1980s. What we have now is presumably a kind of new edition under a different sign. This time it is less about making Bolshevism responsible for Hitler as rehabilitating the German perpetrators / witnesses / generation of the time. The term 'perpetrator generation' has gone out of fashion, by the way. Although no one yet dares speak of a 'victim generation', a silent consensus has settled on 'eyewitness generation'. Lately we have also heard 'experience generation', a term unsurpassed in its cynicism. Apart from this reevaluation of the role of the Germans, which in my opinion represents a mental preparation for forgetting, the joy over the mostly peaceful overcoming of a divided Europe (with the exception of Romania, where there were deaths) seems – in the face of economic and social difficulties brought in by new EU members – to have dwindled. It is highly regrettable and alarming that a large part of the citizenry of the EU now has little appreciation for the lifting of the bipolar world order – the first sign of problems with the 'newcomers' provokes a reaction of repulsion. Anyone who has lived in countries of eastern Europe for a longer time (I spent some time in Romania on a scholarship from the Robert Bosch Foundation and in Poland and the Czech Republic on other scholarships, while as a private individual I've visited almost all the countries of eastern Europe) is bound to have noticed the tremendous, practically unsurpassed pace of their turbo-capitalistic development. In an attitude that brings so little patience to bear, I see great danger for Europe. Its states can work cohesively only if Europe is accepted as a superstate of different time scales and states of development, with the greatest possible distribution of burden-sharing. The demand for political and economic homogeneity will never be realized; having said this, I would still maintain that endeavours to achieve, for instance, greater agreement in legal matters are in no way impracticable from the outset.

A great, continuous interest in the 'other' would be desirable for Europe – sometimes one feels, in retrospect, that this existed only for a short time after the Changes of 1989. In Germany it was easy to observe how quickly the mood of joy and concern for others went into retreat with the emergence of the first problems between East and West Germans, and with the re-unification itself. It was this time (the mid Nineties, after the euphoria over the fall of the Wall had died down) that produced terms such as 'Jammer-Ossis' [moaning easterners] and 'Besserwessis' [know-it-all westerners]. These feelings of resentment have not been laid to rest yet. Europe critic Sarrazin has recently called the balancing of federal budgets into question: Is Berlin not the Greece of Germany? He claims in his new book

“Europe Does Not Need the Euro” that one might look at the balancing of federal budgets in order to learn more “about the imbalances in Europe”.

The situation can be transferred just as easily from a domestic German to a European perspective. All too often an interest in others consists only in a search for clues as to one's own roots. The best example of this is given by the many Germans who over the past twenty years have travelled to Poland or the Czech Republic on the trail of their expelled families. There is nothing wrong in this search; on the contrary, this interest is natural and the travels undertaken in its name lead to a cultural exchange. But for many eastern Europeans – and I know this from many conversations with Poles and Czechs – it is disappointing to learn that Germans understand their countries only as a mirror image of German history or look on them as places of their own preserved (dark) past while often taking little interest in today's Poland or Czech lands. This is easy to observe in Cracow: German tourists travel in droves to Auschwitz (there is absolutely nothing wrong in this, of course, but Poland has more to offer than its exhibition as a cemetery) but take no interest in the royal city of Cracow, an architectural and historical gem which today has a very lively, young cultural scene.

I have always understood the abolition of a divided Europe – which made great headway with EU enlargement to the east – to be a very important milestone, and I hope that this awareness will be preserved for some time to come. So I would like to close this essay with a poem that I wrote in May 2004, after the celebrations on a bridge over the Oder.

Frankfurt (Oder) – Słubice (on the day of EU enlargement to the east)

Frankfurt (Oder) – Słubice

Around us warm air and trucks

Perfume and carbon monoxide

We go there and back

there and back

through fragrance and stench

We are taken up with walking

There and back

in the human happiness of the bridge

The Oder as a new

mental state of aggregation

Even the puddles

glisten festively

until the next truck comes

The smells do not yet mix

They stand next to each other with legs wide apart

until the next truck comes
we run there and back
Over the Oder

© poem: Tanja Dückers

Translation from the German: Andrew Oakland

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Titles by Tanja Dückers

Hausers Zimmer (2011)

Fundbüros und Verstecke (2012)



© picture: Anton Landgraf



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