

Does Europe Need Political Disruption? *

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Nationalists will leave their mark in next year's European elections, while established parties show no sign of stepping up and correcting course. New transnational movements like Volt Europa can bring much-needed disruption to a system of old nation-state politics. It is not too late to turn things around for this continent.

The return of nationalism to Europe – what went wrong?

Nationalists are on the rise in Europe. The victories won against nationalists in the Austrian presidential election of 2016, and the Dutch general and French presidential elections of 2017 turned out to be nothing more than small battles won in a large-scale conflict that is being lost. In Austria, the nationalist FPÖ is now in government. Geert Wilders' party came in second in the Netherlands. Marine Le Pen lost the presidential run-off but is waiting for her chance to challenge once more a president who still struggles to find partners for European reform.

Viktor Orbán undermines liberal democracy in his pursuit of 'illiberal democracy', and the Polish government is in a row with the European Commission for undermining judicial independence. Meanwhile, 100 years after the end of World War One and on the 100th anniversary of Polish independence, the Polish president marches alongside nationalists who carry fascist and racist banners – a day of commemoration in European unity was overshadowed by divisive forces that believe in superiority.

The nationalist-populist Italian government is going it alone when it comes to migration and an unsustainable budget that will not solve Italy's problems and risks another financial crisis in Europe. Moreover, in Germany, a country often admired in Europe for its political stability, the seeds have been sown for discord and a breakthrough of nationalists. Chancellor Merkel has announced that she will not run again for leadership of her party and that this will be her last term as Chancellor; a new party leadership that sets out a new direction of the Christian-Democrats might well lead to dispute with the Social Democrat coalition partner and consequently open up the possibility of re-election. The far-right AfD, the leading opposition party in the Bundestag that is now also represented in all the 16 regional parliaments, would be well-positioned to take advantage of that scenario.

But the rise of nationalism is not the problem; it is the consequence of a problem, a series of problems, three of which I believe are the most critical:

First, a Europe that is not capable to act. Millions of young Europeans are without a job, and nation-states have failed to do something on their own, while the potential of an integrated European labour market and of preparing Europeans for the future of work has not been unlocked. Europe is also leaving regions alone in managing refugee flows in an effective and humane way. Europe would still not be able to act effectively, if it was hit by another financial crisis, with all the devastating effects for the economy and living standards of Europeans. And would Europe be able to defend itself – on its own – against large-scale cyber-attacks or threats to its territory?

Second, a Europe in which the voices of Europeans are not heard. Too often, decisions that affect Europeans' lives are taken by heads of government and ministers meeting behind closed doors to make bargains, instead of in open debate in parliament. Europeans' participation is by and large limited to elections.

Third, a Europe, in which those who believe in Europe, defend the Europe as it is instead of fighting for a Europe how it could be. Defending Europe's status quo instead of advocating change was and continues to be a losing strategy: to praise the end of roaming charges and

introduction of free Interrail tickets, while millions of young Europeans are unemployed, to celebrate reforms of the eurozone, while the currency union is still not equipped to deal with another financial crisis, all the while wasting billions in tax payer money to finance 27 separate national militaries and their bureaucracies. Incremental reforms are better than nothing, but they fade in comparison to the monumental challenges Europe faces. If we believe that we can win those over who have become disenchanted and critical of the EU by pointing to what we have achieved, then we will continue to see nationalists gain ground.

Can a political earthquake be prevented at the European elections?

As the European elections in May 2019 approach, wishing to roll back the very same forces that have torn apart this continent twice (or three times, if we include the Balkan wars of the 1990s) requires more than what is currently being done. It requires more than spending a bit more money on voter mobilisation or making pompous speeches about Europe without backing them up with action afterward.

It requires tackling the above challenges: building a strong political Union that is capable to act, one that empowers its citizens, as citizens of a European parliamentary democracy that enables participation beyond elections. And it requires those who believe in Europe to break out of defence and be courageous again, like those who dared to believe in European unity when Europeans had just reduced each other's countries to rubble – to win Europeans back with concrete policies, backed by evidence, and inspire them with a bold, positive vision of Europe in the world.

The crux is this: doing the above takes time. Time we do not have until May 2019. The doors for reform of the EU were open, but have now closed until at least after summer 2019 and for longer in case of re-election in Germany. Governments paralyzed by the advance of nationalists were afraid to go through the door. And there are no credible signs of established parties correcting course.

Rhetoric alone, without action, is not credible – to give two examples from Germany: if, say, Friedrich Merz, contender for Merkel's succession in party leadership, advocates bold reforms of the EU publicly, only to clarify to party friends in private that he does not support this, then this undermines trust. If, say, Martin Schulz, the Social Democrat candidate for the German chancellorship, stirs up hope with the prospect of a decisively pro-Europe campaign (not very different from Macron's presidential campaign) for the German Bundestag in 2017 only to let his supporters down, then this leaves many behind who doubt the party's European ambitions. It shows how pro-Europeans either try to score points with pro-Europe rhetoric, without intending to follow through. Or how they cannot muster the courage to commit to a platform for positive European reform in the first place.

Even if they wanted to, traditional parties would have a hard time coming together for bold reform, because they are being obliterated throughout Europe: in two major EU countries, Italy and France, this has already happened. And in Germany the signs are clear for everyone to read: both the Christian Democrats and the Social Democrats are crumbling away, the latter at a much more alarming speed than the former.

In short, there is little that can be done to prevent a surge in nationalist votes in May 2019, because doing so requires reforming the EU, which takes time, or at least making a credible promise to voters to do so after the elections – unfortunately, both time and credible promises for European reform are in short supply. But it is too early to give up.

To re-energise Europe, embrace a new way of doing politics

There are hopeful signs of change in the European political landscape, a change this continent desperately needs. Volt Europa, a pan-European, progressive political movement, may well be part of that change. Launched in 2017 on the day article 50 was triggered by the UK to initiate Brexit, the movement is a response to the rise of populists and nationalists. But it is also a response to traditional national parties seemingly incapable of tackling challenges like climate change and unemployment – leaving a generation behind disconnected from politics. Volt was born out of the acknowledgment that it was time to act, for citizens to take up responsibility and work together across borders for a shared future.

Despite the obstacles in the way of a new pan-European political movement – from a lack of visibility and funds to a legal system designed for nation-state politics – Volt Europa has the potential to disrupt and bring energy to a political system that is outdated.

First, Volt runs for the European elections on a single political platform that addresses the three challenges identified above:

- Fixing the EU, by creating a strong political Union, making Europe an economic powerhouse, and building a just and sustainable Europe
- Empowering citizens by strengthening the European Parliament and giving Europeans the opportunity to participate in decision-making beyond the elections, through citizen assemblies, digital platforms and participatory budgeting
- Offering Europeans a new vision for Europe, instead of managing decline

Second, in a time of deep ideological divides, Volt attempts to move beyond old political battle lines. The movement identifies as neither left nor right. It seeks to develop policies using evidence and best practices, while being guided by a set of values: equal opportunity, liberty, sustainability, justice, human dignity and solidarity. It is an effort in listening to new ideas and a pragmatism of embracing policies based on their merits, not which political camp they originate from.

Volt's approach is timely, because it speaks to those citizens who do not identify with one ideology strongly enough to join political parties that do, and therefore keep at arm's length from involvement in politics at large. The majority of those who join Volt have not been active in politics before, but felt the need to take up responsibility. If Volt can involve these citizens and organize them for change, then that in itself is helping revitalise democracy on this continent.

Volt's approach is also timely, because the answers to the defining issues of our times cut across the left-right spectrum. The defining issues are not whether we need more or less government, not of collectivism or individualism. The key question politics must deal with in the 21st century is a new one: how to deal with the challenges and opportunities of an interconnected world.

Will the answer be isolationism, the belief that it is best to shield oneself from what is out there? Or will it be shaping the world around together with others? How to deal with the challenges from climate change? How to deal with companies that operate globally? How to deal with a global economy that does not work for all?

The new divide is breaking up those traditional parties that attempt to be both isolationist, often with recourse to the same nationalist rhetoric of their competitors, and at the same time open for shaping the world together with others – but leaving behind the sense that the approach is incoherent, if not opportunistic. Volt places itself firmly on the side of those who want to shape

the world together, find common answers to cross-border challenges and embrace opportunities from cooperation.

Finally, Volt is well-suited to be the movement that can deliver in the long-term. First, it is building a people-powered movement that is rooted locally while transcending borders physically and digitally in pan-European exchange. At the heart of its way of working is community organizing: bringing people together and empowering them to achieve a shared purpose, whether it is local communities solving local issues or Europeans working together on European solutions. It is a movement that runs for election as well as a movement that can affect change outside of parliaments with and through communities. And the movement is not geared to be – or become – dependent on a few leaders. Rather, it is a movement building up leadership of the many.

It is also, at this point, the only political movement that is organized in a truly pan-European way. It is one organisation, with a single political programme, one set of values, common rules, one branding. It is not like existing party families, not an alliance of national parties that agree on the lowest common denominator to gain political power, but will go separate ways when convenient. While national parties must find allies in other countries to have the political clout to do something in Europe, as a unified continent-wide political force, Volt can focus on gaining the trust and support of citizens everywhere on this continent.

Beyond its policies and positive vision for Europe, then, Volt contributes to European society through a new way of doing politics: evidence-based, empowering those who want to take up responsibility, and organising them locally as well as transnationally.

In the short-term, even if the European elections will likely see nationalists win an unprecedented share of the vote, May 2019 can become a turning point: the moment where citizens who said it is time for change, were heard. A new movement like Volt can bring that much-needed wake-up call to those in power.

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Daniel Matteo's article is the first of a series of articles with which we want to stimulate the debate about a pro-European strategy for the upcoming elections to the European Parliament. The importance of these elections is of historic proportions: they can decide on whether the European project will be continued, improved, disrupted or even aborted. The urgency of the elections has given birth to new movements like VOLT or Pulse for Europe, young pro-European idealistic movements whose ideas and/or strategies may not be undisputed, but who deserve a place in an open-minded European debate. This series of articles will offer them a chance to introduce their ideas alongside those of other players and analysts.