

Interview:

Europe needs political debate

Henning Meyer, Managing Editor, Social Europe, the journal of the European left spoke to New Europe about the importance of the European political debate.

Much of the discussion about the future of the EU centres on the issue of "European demos" - does it exist, or do we have only "25 separate demoi"?

This highly depends on what aspect of 'demos' you prioritise or look at. The German constitutional court famously decided in 1994 that there is no such thing as a 'European demos' because from a national and cultural viewpoint they did not detect a sufficient degree of compatibility to recognise a coherent group one could call 'European people'. This legal perspective suggests that the EU today attempts to politically organise 25 different demoi and even raises the question whether the EU per se can be democratic without a demos.

I think, however, that this view largely omits what unique political construct the European Union is. It is not a nation state and it does not pretend to govern a nation or one people. The EU is the most sophisticated and advanced supranational institution on the planet and as such it has to be looked at from a different angle. 'United in diversity', the credo from the Constitutional Treaty, characterises, I think, quite well what the objective of the EU is and should be. There is certainly a strong aspect of unity (and demoi in that respect) in the EU for instance when all EU citizens elect their MEPs to the same parliament. This in turn however does not mean that 'one-size-fits all' solutions for the whole EU area are always appropriate or desirable. This contrast does not make European integration necessarily problematic or obsolete, on the contrary. It is a great strength and a source of vitality that the EU can draw on such a wide

variety of cultural wealth for the best of all members.

And even if there is not one comprehensive demos, there is at least the clear tendency of shared values amongst the citizens of EU member states, proved for instance by the Pew Global Attitudes Surveys. These studies show very similar attitudes of EU citizens towards for example social standards and welfare that results from the distinct history Europe has experienced.

So, even if you deny the existence of one European demos, there is certainly much more to the EU than simply being an umbrella for 25 different peoples. The citizens of the EU are becoming aware of a European layer in their identity and we need to develop this further.

Let us come to the phenomenon of the European public debate (an issue closely connected to the previous one). The European integration process has its ups and downs, but regardless of them, would you say that we can see a gradual evolution of the European public political debate? Are the national debates ever more European, are more and more topics discussed from the EU perspective?

National societal and political debates are certainly not at a level yet that takes proper account of the importance of decisions being taken in Brussels. The reporting of EU topics in the media obviously differs considerably from country to country but generally national media coverage is much too little. In some countries with a relatively high degree of European coverage in their media, the EU often features as scapegoat for all sorts of political developments that go wrong. All too often the undoubtedly existing problems are exaggerated on a national level fuelling stereotypes towards the EU. This is very dangerous given the scope of the political challenges that lie ahead.



Henning Meyer

On a Europe wide level, a serious central debate being led in all member states simply has not developed yet. There are however ideas floating around of how to boost this, especially after the lost Constitution referendum in France and the Netherlands revealed that the EU urgently needs to communicate to citizens what it is there for and in what way it helps people to cope with contemporary social and economic challenges rather than being part of the problem.

Many of the current problems within the European Union are rooted in the lack of public debates. Developing these, from a national as well as from a European starting point, would make the tackling of some of the most pressing European issues much easier.

What is the role of media in this context? Mass-media and specialised journals...

The media plays a central role in developing a real European public realm in which these debates can take place.

something similar to a national media landscape in which mass media report on the big picture and more detailed debates are led in specialist media.

The European left is today probably less confident about its policy prescriptions than in the 1960s or 1970s. We can hear much talk about the "crisis of Social Democracy" and lack of new ideas. Isn't it because the European democratic Left tries to apply national solutions at the time when it needs European ones?

This question cuts across a few points I have mentioned before. The European left is in the uncomfortable position of being trapped in economic and societal circumstances that are increasingly difficult to shape and govern by national governments. If you believe in a political philosophy that advocates a minimalist state with minimal regulation then you do not have a big problem with this. On the contrary, this process then helps to build up what neo-liberals would see as unnecessary restriction of free market activity. If you however believe, as we do, that especially in the contemporary circumstances, efficient regulation is needed to make sure that society as a whole benefits from progress and not just a small part of it that sees economic profit as an end in itself, you need to find solutions of how to achieve this regulation beyond the scope of the nation state.

The political organisation to cope with these changes on a broader, European level is there, but the lack of the European public realm also leads to a lack of political debate and thus the development of timely and accepted policy prescriptions. European social democratic parties either simply do not know enough about each other or have not brought together their different political traditions to develop something worth being called a real Euro-

pean social democratic programme. And the Party of European Socialist has been too small and under-equipped to drive such a formation process and bring the different strands of European social democracy together.

So, I think we urgently need this European public realm in which all parts of European social democracy can participate and debate. By having these debates, we will generate a new awareness and lay the foundation for effectively moving towards a social democratic project for Europe, a 'social Europe' that is accepted by European centre-left parties and by Europe's citizens.

Do you think that European Social Democracy is able to find common ground for a common action? Currently, it is divided over the basic issues, such as the EU Constitution, right balance between competition and social protection, EU's transatlantic relations... Even more, these divisions often follow national boundaries.

As I said before, I think that creating a European and Europe wide realm for leading basic programmatic debates together with increasing the relevance and scope of action of the Party of European Socialists are the next steps needed to start a serious effort for a common European project.

And we need to do this now in order not to miss more crucial opportunities than we have already. Remember when at the end of the 1990's 13 out of by the time 15 EU countries were led by social democrats. We did not achieve a real step forward towards a more social democratic Europe and this was because this common European project, a common vision of a 'social Europe', had not been developed before. This sort of opportunity does not occur very often. We need to work hard now to be equipped with a real common vision when such a chance comes up again.

Environmentalism welcomes Parliament vote on transparency

The European Environmental Bureau and CEE-Bankwatch in a joint statement welcomed the demands of the European Parliament for stricter rules for access to environmental information from the EU Institutions. "This would also include better information about actions of the Commission regarding violations by the member states of the agreed EU law (infringement procedures)," the statement asserted.

NGOs also welcomed the insistence of the Parliament to

guarantee better public participation procedures on environment related decision-making, and to include policies, funding and banking activities. In this way, also the European Investment Bank, for example, would be forced to finally grant transparency and citizens influence on its decisions.

However, the Parliament rejected an amendment to implement the Aarhus Convention requirement to open up access to justice on the EU level for environmental organisa-

tions. A year ago, the EU ratified, in agreement with the same Parliament, the Aarhus Convention, which obliges its Parties to provide such access to justice. In this way environmental citizens' organisations would be able to ask Courts to intervene when a public authority is violating relevant environmental laws or refuses to apply them.

John Hontelez, Secretary General of the European Environmental Bureau said: "We are happy with the important

improvements the Parliament insists on regarding access to information and public participation. This will certainly lead to more environmentally sound decision-making by the EU Institutions. However, we are disappointed that so many Parliamentarians voted against giving environmental organisations a small measure of access to the European Court. They may have been encouraged to do so by the campaigning by Europe's chemical industry, which seems to fear that NGOs

could challenge certain decisions regarding chemical substances on the EU market. Giving such a right to NGOs would have brought some balance between the defense of private interests, of industry, and public interests, such as the environment and health. With this, the conservative side of the Parliament has done a serious blow to participatory democracy in Europe."

Magda Stoczkiewicz, Policy Coordinator for the CEE-Bankwatch Network, added: "It

is positive that 'banking' activities will be covered by the Aarhus regulation. That means the European Investment Bank - currently vastly un-transparent - will have to drastically amend its information policy."

The European Parliament earlier voted in second reading on a Common Position of the Council to apply the Aarhus Convention (on access to information, public participation and access to justice in environmental matters) to the EU institutions and bodies.