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A Provocation on Populism

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Abstract

European democratic backsliding is often discussed as an Eastern pathology rooted in a failed post-socialism. Such discussions ignore the illiberal record of the post-war West: unpurged fascism, Italy's exclusion of its Communist Party, French populism, to name a few. Of course, most pressing currently is the radical right's recent record gains in *western* states. The essay argues that Euroscepticism and illiberalism are structural to European integration itself, visible from the ECSC's technocratic disregard for Belgian miners through De Gaulle's "empty chair" and decades of British resistance to political Europeanization. Respecting East West historical differences, nevertheless the provocation explores the common thread of mainstream parties' failures including a conflation of market liberalism with democratic governance. The essay closes on a discussion of the consequences of Germany's selective invocation of EUropean values toward the war in Ukraine versus in Gaza. From the perspective of European "values," such selective application only fosters the illiberal condition. Illiberalism is not a failure of the European mission, but what that mission becomes whenever its bearers stop expecting to be held to it.

Keywords: Euroscepticism, populism, illiberalism, Europeanization, European values, democratic backsliding, East West.



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Those who lead the country into the abyss
 Call ruling too difficult
 For ordinary men.
 [Die das Reich in den Abgrund führen
 Nennen das Regieren zu schwer
 Für den einfachen Mann.]

Bertolt Brecht *Kriegsfibel* (1955)¹

Eastern and Western Illiberalism

In the case of Europe, democratic backsliding and Euroscepticism are often ascribed to the East and to a continuing legacy of authoritarianism in post-socialism. The Western Europeans could scold the Eastern for holding on to a politics of the past, for not modernizing sufficiently, not integrating well enough. However, if we review the history of post-war West European politics, we can see that this is not an example of any exceptionalism. While Stalinization acted to align all the political systems in Russia's sphere of influence with Moscow's aims, undermining post-war processes of self-determination in the states of East and Central Europe, the states of Western Europe should not be hailed as freed from the recent history of fascism. The Iberian Peninsula was never *liberated* from fascism. Strong paternalist and culturally conservative nationalist leaders dominated the West, exhibiting authoritarian tendencies in their approach to governance. German and Austrian denazification was superficial. Populism and jingoism were in the toolkits of the leaders of France. At U.S. insistence for decades under the *conventio ad escludendum*, Italy excluded its Communist party (PCI), its largest political party, disenfranchising roughly 30% of the population. Cold War bipolarity generated illiberalism on both sides of the Iron Curtain, not by coincidence but because both blocs subordinated domestic political liberalism to bloc discipline. The entry in 2004 of the post-socialist states into the European Union did not bring a new dynamic, rather it added more factions into the already existing illiberal aspects of European governance. They are not exceptional; their illiberalism proves them to be good Europeans.

A focus on political parties and elections could lead us to recognize that there is a specific East European experience; the European East in the 1990s did pass through a set of structurally similar experiences with the collapse of state socialism. Ivan Krastev and Stephen Holmes have given that specificity a name: the "imitation imperative" that followed 1989, in which the East was asked not to build institutions of its own but to copy the West's, and whose resulting

demoralization, sharpened by the demographic hemorrhage of emigration to the very West being imitated, supplies Eastern illiberalism with a genealogy the West never had to live through.² The claim deserves to be taken on its own terms. But a distinct genealogy is not the same thing as an exception. Western illiberalism has its own genealogy too: fascism unpurged, colonies lost, a coal-and-steel technocracy that never asked its miners' consent; and a different origin story for a shared outcome is not evidence of Eastern exceptionalism; it is evidence that illiberalism has more than one road into Europe. The Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) supplies the sharpest current instance of this claim. For a decade its strength was read as a lingering Eastern pathology, evidence that the former GDR had not fully arrived in liberal democracy. By March 2026 the AfD had posted back-to-back record results in two western states, Baden-Württemberg and Rhineland-Palatinate, at nearly 19 and 20 percent respectively, its best showings ever outside the former GDR. A party invoked for years as proof of the East's incomplete Europeanization is now simply popular in the West too. The pathology, it turns out, was not only regional. Eastward enlargement in 2004 promised a transnational union of neoliberal democracies living in borderless prosperity. But then populist right parties achieved greater gains in direct governing in the East than the West and Euroscepticism took off in all the countries that had entered the Eurozone around 2007. The promises of prosperity proved empty and the governing abilities of democracy suddenly seemed more difficult than anticipated.

Nevertheless, Euroscepticism, populism, and illiberalism are not unique to the East, rather they are structural to the European and democratic projects. Brexit, its combination of Euroscepticism and populism, destabilized the EU, sending a shock through the system. 2020 Brexit reminded us that there are longer histories of Euroscepticism and populist nationalist resistance to a transnational union of semi-sovereign states. Europe, like democracy, is not a static thing to be dismissed with skepticism; it exists. If we step back from specific party analysis and look broadly at histories of transforming governance, Europe, the EU comes to appear not as a place; rather, we recognize it as discourse that makes certain actions possible and others impossible. Jarosław Jańczak's essay in this issue names the stakes of that recognition precisely: whether the EU is Westphalian, a bounded territory with a sharp inside and outside, or imperial, a center whose norms thin out toward a periphery it does not fully govern, or neo-medieval, a polycentric field with no center at all. My own suspicion is that the EU's members would prefer the first model to describe themselves but the second describes their actual conduct, and the third

may be the best we can hope for. We speak better of Europeanization and democratization as unfolding processes, and from the start of the post-war era, Euroscepticism has been attendant to if not constituent of Europeanization just as populism and illiberalism have been to the functioning of the post-war democratic order.

The ValeUs project takes as a goal the exploration of Eurosceptic formations and their impact on the transnational union's stability. We ask what factors contribute to the strength and endurance of their appeal? To what extent have presumably common values (e.g. liberal democracy, freedom of expression, a right to travel) celebrated as European promoted or supplanted national loyalties? Are European values stable? Are the Eurosceptic attacks on EU values a way to dupe people into undermining their own interests? Or do they actually represent a dissatisfaction with the process of Europeanization?

Brexit, as it pulled one of the major European states and economies out of the project of Europeanization certainly gave impetus to the EU to fund the ValeUs network. The move to leave the EU died down after Brexit, but since 2020 the European right has shifted its tactic. The European populist right has learned to work together aspiring now not to a dismantling of the EU but rather to a transformation of the neoliberal transnational union into an illiberal Europe of Nations.

Since ValeUs began we have been in a series of consequential elections including the European Parliament elections in June 2024, in June and July the two rounds of the conflicted French parliamentary elections, the resurgence of the right in the Austrian election in September, of course the re-election of Donald Trump in November, and in December the contested Romanian election. 2025 seemed to accelerate the process, the precipitous German elections in February that jolted the country to the right, the June jolt in the Polish presidential elections, and the election of Andrej Babiš in the Czech Republic. Each of these elections contained considerations of the state of democracy, warnings against illiberal tendencies, and concerns about intensification of Euroscepticism. Each of these elections has seen candidates running on platforms focused on dire warnings about threats to democracy if the other party gets in. "You must vote for me because the other guy is much worse" was the primary argument of the center left and not a well-articulated counter platform that drew enthusiastic support from voters.

To be sure, the success of Donald Tusk in Poland, the massive protests in Germany against the AfD, the election of Alexander Stubb in Finland, the pro-European success in

Moldova all point to alternative potentials at work. No doubt the growing strength of illiberalism is a justified cause for concern. The success of Donald Trump in the US, of Giorgia Meloni in Italy, the AfD in German regional and parliamentary elections, of Geert Wilders' PVV in the Netherlands, of Robert Fico in Slovakia, Karol Nawrocki in Poland, and so on are ample reasons for us to consider the health of our democracies with real concern. However, the tactic of focus on the authoritarian illiberalism of “the other guy,” fostered opposition candidates with little actual platform or message other than an attack on their opponent. There are real challenges the electorate faces that the Great Recession and the Pandemic intensified. The established political class bears responsibility for the economic and social difficulties but does not have real responses to those challenges. Brecht’s lines are not decoration set at the top of the page: the leaders who led the country into the abyss called ruling too difficult for ordinary men, and an established political class that inherits deindustrialization, demographic decline, and a generation of stagnant wages and answers with technocratic shrugs is making the same excuse in a milder key. Traditional party candidates have struggled in the discussions of the European political scene against the rhetorical strategies of the populists. They begin to adopt the strategies of populist parties, hoping to capture some of their electoral success. But ultimately the attempt by center right politicians like German Chancellor Merz to counter the populist AfD by ventriloquizing many of their positions – well, it hollows out the actual politics of the conservative parties; they become the ventriloquist’s dummy.

Western Euroscepticism

The first moment of Euroscepticism appeared with the European Coal and Steel Community. When in 1952 the ECSC treaty was ratified it created the High Authority as a technocratic entity beyond the control of national politicians to accomplish the liberalization of the coal and steel market. The opening of borders for trade however shifted the conditions from a scarcity to an overproduction of coal. The High Authority of the ECSC responded with the most ‘enlightened’ model of liberal economic thought of the moment. It focused on supply and demand, production and overproduction, put market over national and citizens’ interests. It closed mines, especially in Belgium, and slowed steel production. Such technocratic solutions to the market problems, the singular focus on balance sheets and supply chains and not on the human or political cost resulted in the emergence of the first Eurosceptical positions, especially

among the Belgian coalminers and the Italian "guestworkers" who suffered the most displacement and impoverishment because of the soulless bureaucrats. This crucial moment sets a pattern that Hooghe and Marks would later name the shift from permissive consensus to constraining dissensus: elite-driven integration proceeds unchallenged until its costs land on populations with no say in the bargain, at which point consent gives way to resistance.³ While the history of the EU often turns back to the ECSC as a milestone in Europeanization, this moment is one in which the project of Europeanization experienced significant resistance. The European Economic Community, having absorbed the ECSC and the High Authority had to respond and reasserted national interests to appease voters. By 1959 the national divisions in the EEC resulted in dynamic that is familiar to this day. Viktor Orbán's grandstanding, before Hungarian voters ended his sixteen-year rule in April 2026, paled in comparison to Charles de Gaulle's outright attack on European supranational organization. The famed Europeanization of small steps used to describe this era proves to be rather than a process of harmonization toward unity, a Europeanization of small stumbles, pratfalls, and disharmony.

If I remain a bit longer considering the history of Europeanization, the emergence of a structure in the post-war era of a Europeanization process constituted through skepticism and anti-democratic action, there is one other moment that I would draw our attention to and that is the late entry of the United Kingdom into the continental project. This entry came after two earlier applications, after Britain had lost its colonies, and largely at a moment in which Britain sought to limit the role of the European Community to economic liberalization. Britain joined the EEC in 1973, conducted a final "stay" referendum in 1975, and then with the 1979 election of Margaret Thatcher spent over a decade making sure that the UK had a special deal and putting the brakes on Jacques Delors's struggle to overcome the "Eurosclerosis" of the 1970s. Thatcher sought at every turn to limit his attempt to strengthen the European Parliament, countering attempts to build political Europeanization via democratic processes with assertions of national sovereignty and a railing against EU bureaucrats. Such ability to infuse Europeanization with skeptical anti-democratic dynamics makes the machinations of Jarosław Kaczyński seem dilettantish.

Skepticism and illiberalism arise in the process of Europeanization as a result of the interplay between national electoral politics, prone to populism, and the weak sovereignty of transnational organizations. If the 1990s in the wake of the breakup of the Soviet Union

compelled some form of expanded collaboration and drive to European unification in the triumphalist West European states, this decade of cooperation in which the EU emerged was an exception, more akin to the immediate post-war era of continental projection onto an ideal of European sovereign parliamentarism, a project of economic, political and cultural unity. The initial fervor dissipated by the end of a long decade and the actual difficulties of treaty based transnational agreement moved the European movement back to its structural “baseline.” It is not only Europeanization; all treaty based unions that emerged in the post-war era, the United Nations, the Council of Europe, NATO, and the Warsaw Pact among others struggle with this conflict to the point where some, like the Warsaw Pact were swept away already and others are threatened by the multi-polar non-aligned world to be swept away in the present.

Europeanization and Human Welfare

In considering the appeal of populist leaders in Europe (and the US), we often acknowledge that facile promises of political equality in representational democracy ring hollow for large segments of the population. Whether the correlation is direct or indirect is a point for study and debate. Representative democracy does not seem to be representing people’s interests across broad sectors of European society. Politicians from liberal centrist parties have a difficult time contending coherently with deindustrialization *and* farm closures. Urban elites exhibit disregard for rural experience, while out-migration from the countryside alters the urban space itself. Cuts to the social welfare state impact education, health care, pensions, housing and the general response from the established parties is more neo-liberal cuts to social services. And as neighborhoods in cities and regions in the countryside decline, the elected representatives have a hard time to even go into them for fear of being shouted down, hit with eggs, or worse. There are real genuine causes for grave concern for our political order: mis/dis-information fostering hate speech and political polarization, violence against journalists, the use of techno surveillance to track and intimidate opposition, new laws and the misuse of existing ones to limit civil society, public demonstrations classified as dangerous, excessive force used against demonstrators, NGOs faced with increased financial restrictions and bureaucratic hurdles, the undermining of checks and balances, the fostering of unitary and authoritarian executive branches, the use of the legal system to undermine political opposition, and populist leaders who foster a polarizing xenophobic heteronormative political environment in order to build an oppositional movement.

There is a common discourse of populist parties across Europe: ethno-nationalism and closed borders as antidote to the effects of neo-liberal globalization, a call to make their respective countries great again by (re)turning to national values.

Viktor Orbán's own fall in April 2026 tests this claim directly. Sixteen years of illiberal governance survived European Commission criticism, infringement proceedings, and withheld funds; it did not survive voters whose wages had not moved. Hungarians did not so much reject Orbán's civilizational mission as stop believing it paid the bills.

Mainstream parties seek to staunch the bleeding of their numbers to the populist parties. They spend a great deal of energy on how to respond to these threats and many of the responses they suggest rest on banning parties and censoring speech. But that does not halt the decline or work against the appeal of the populists to promise a better future by resorting to a lost idyllic past. Populist parties may never be able to achieve the promises of their platforms. But the promises have an appeal. Perhaps the response the mainstream parties need to develop to Euroscepticism, to populist electoral success, and the illiberalism of various key EU states rests within their own ability to respond to the real concerns of the electorate.

Pundits are anxious about the state of liberal democracy, but one question I would ask is whether we are worried more about capitalist liberal markets or about a system of checks and balances, fair proportional representational systems, the protection of citizens and human rights? In the wake of the breakup of the Soviet Union, triumphant politicians and World Bank advisors generally elided any difference between capitalist free market ideology and principles of democratic governance. The post-Cold War peace dividend quickly got used up in an assertion of imperialist neo-liberalism with the Trans-Atlantic alliance more likely to prop up dictators and squash liberation struggles than to place democracy over free market interests of the West. In our considerations it would do us well to separate concerns about capitalism from the concerns of civil and human rights. Ayhan Kaya's essay in this issue offers the case against that separation: his interlocutors in Dresden and Rotterdam do not experience deindustrialization and cultural threat as two problems but one, and Kaya makes a strong case that a right-wing populism fluent enough to fuse them will not be answered by an analysis that keeps them apart. I take the point, but I do not fully concede it. That populist voters experience the fusion does not mean the fusion is correct; it may mean only that neoliberalism has been a very effective teacher of a lesson plan: markets and rights rise and fall together. Careful attention to who developed this lesson first will

show that the mainstream parties taught first and populists merely adapted it with different villains.

EUropean Values, Selectively Applied

Populist parties advance their appeal largely through a negative critical divisive symbolic politics. They claim to be the bearer of better values, the true values of the nation. Where support for rule of law or human rights acts as a symbolic politic in place of actual governing, mainstream parties not only hollow out the various values-based treaties that bind the EU together, they undermine their own ability to respond to populist gains. Germany is the biggest economy in Europe, playing an outsized role in EU politics and is frequently celebrated as the country that has done the most to reflect critically on the catastrophe of its past. German politicians use the language of values forcefully and therefore offer an easy example.

When the German political elite supported Israel's war crimes in Gaza based on its recently recognized (2008) post-war obligation to protect the state of Israel, they did so selectively, contorting themselves into a position of persecuting Israeli anti-Zionist protestors in Germany as antisemites. Instead of acting on Germany's post-war obligation according to the Convention on Genocide, they chose an alliance with a far-right populist government while ignoring their obligation to right the wrongs of the greatest moral catastrophe of German history. The 1948 convention was a direct international response to the Holocaust and requires that the signatories take action on even a suspicion of genocide.

In taking this position, the German elites align themselves with a populist far right government of the type they reject in the EU as not supporting shared EUropean values. And when Germany needlessly threatened on behalf of Israel to impede the case of Genocide brought to the International Court of Justice by South Africa, Germany was met with swift condemnation from Namibia for its hypocrisy; the Namibians demanded that their former colonial power and perpetrator of genocide in their country finally learn from its past.

This is what a civilizational mission looks like once it is asked to apply to its own author. Mohammed Bamyeh's contribution to this issue argues that the EU is becoming an empire without yet admitting it to itself; Namibia's demand is what happens when the empire's most powerful member state is asked to admit it retroactively, for a mission already closed. The EU justifies itself in the world through the values it claims as EUropean; an empire, old or new, does

the same, and Namibia's demand is a demand that the EU's most powerful member state stop being permitted to treat its own imperial ledger as closed. Germany does not get to be the continent's conscience on Ukraine and its silence on Gaza in the same breath, not because the two cases are equivalent, but because a mission selectively applied is not a mission at all. It is a memory management strategy.

Chancellor Friedrich Merz defined the EU policy of the current coalition government based on demands that the bloc withhold funds and suspend voting rights from countries that violate key principles such as the rule of law. When the German political elite denounced Hungary for ignoring the suffering of the Ukrainians while actively censoring media reporting of the conditions of the civilians in Gaza, it makes its own argument for Euroscepticism.

The inconsistent application of European values such as rule of law or human rights does not just undermine German soft power and moral authority on the international stage, it exacerbates divisions in the EU itself. Whatever the solution to the problem of populism and illiberalism is, it cannot be found in finger wagging toward the East, while undermining the rule of law at home. The populist parties point to these inconsistencies, they capitalize on the difference in values. Populists succeed now in an environment of political division and extremist rhetoric. They thrive by demonizing the other side, undermining the very humanity of their opposition.

None of this is really three separate stories. It is one story: an established political class, East and West, mainstream and populist alike, that has learned to treat mission, civilizational, democratic, or values-based, as a substitute for being judged by it. Illiberalism is not what happens when the mission fails. It is what the mission becomes once its bearers stop expecting to be held to it.

In countries and across Europe, the response to populist illiberalism can only come when the mainstream politicians actually govern in the interest of, as Brecht might say, the common 'European.'

Notes

¹ Brecht, *Kriegsfibel*.

² Holmes and Krastev, *The Light That Failed*.

³ Hooghe and Marks, “A Postfunctionalist Theory of European Integration.”

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