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Introduction

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Every network needs a form to think in before it has an argument to make. ValeUs began with the provocation: a short essay, unburdened by footnotes, meant to provoke rather than to settle. A provocation does not ask to be believed. It asks to be discussed. That the network is still discussing, several years on, that the discussions have only gotten livelier, is the only evidence a provocation needs of having worked.

This issue collects work at different distances from that origin. Some pieces here are still provocations in the strict sense, and say so. Others have grown into something else: sustained argument, archival reconstruction, doctrinal repair. The mix is not an editorial oversight. It is the record of what a provocation is for. You throw a claim into a room and wait to see what kind of essay comes back. Sometimes what comes back is another provocation. Sometimes it is decades of drafting history rebuilt from the ground up. Both are the network working as intended.

Two questions have organized most of what ValeUs has argued about. When we look outward, at the EU's conduct in the world, the argument has been decolonial: what does it mean that a project built by former empires calls its own conduct values rather than power, and what does it cost the people on the far side of that conduct when the EU declines to notice the continuity? When we look inward, at the EU's own member states, the argument has been about populism: why does illiberalism keep finding purchase inside a union that names liberal



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democracy as a founding value, and whose illiberalism, exactly, are we talking about when we say so?

The essays gathered here sort cleanly along that division, though none of them stays quietly on one side of it.

On the external side, Mohammed Bamyeh's contribution asks the question the network has circled since its first meeting: whether the EU is becoming an empire without yet admitting it to itself, and what it costs the world when a union with no imperial history of its own inherits the unfinished business of the empires that built it. Jarosław Jańczak takes up the same question from inside EU studies, testing the Westphalian, imperial, and neo-medieval models of European geopolitics against a continent whose members disagree, sharply and along old lines, about whose colonial past counts as the EU's own.

Mikhail Minakov's contribution works the same seam from international law, and does the most patient archival work of anything collected here. He returns to the drafting of the 1948 Genocide Convention and shows that the instrument's narrow definition, demographic groups, physical and biological destruction, was not a conceptual refinement of Raphael Lemkin's original concept but a political bargain: the states that struck cultural destruction from the draft were, without exception, the states whose own conduct at that moment the fuller definition would have named, from Soviet deportations to American and Canadian residential schools to French colonial doctrine in Algeria. Minakov argues that the Convention's two standing complaints, that it is too narrow and that it has been rhetorically inflated, are not opposed positions but symptoms of the same original mis-specification, and he proposes a recovery of Lemkin's fuller concept through the philosophical category of a form of life: inherited, plural, and destroyable along more than one root. He tests the reconceived criterion against Ukraine, Nagorno-Karabakh, and the Indigenous peoples of the United States, and insists on applying it symmetrically even where that costs the states whose conduct the argument otherwise favors. It is the volume's most technical essay and its most quietly radical, since it asks the law to become what it was drafted to be rather than asking for a new law altogether.

Timm Beichelt's contribution works both sides of the divide at once, and asks the question this introduction has been circling from the start: when does EU critique remain a legitimate feature of a democratic polity, and when does it curdle into the Euroscepticism that wants to dismantle that polity altogether. Beichelt maps scholarly critique of the EU across four

arenas, international order, economic and social policy, democratic accountability, and identity, and finds that in three of the four, critique has actually mellowed as the EU addressed the deficits scholars once named, leaving a wide gap between measured academic assessment and the harder Euroscepticism of populist politicians. The identity arena is the exception, and the one Beichelt treats with the most care. Here critique has sharpened rather than settled, propelled by a post-colonial literature, Hans Kundnani's included, that reads the EU's silence about what Europeans did to the rest of the world as continuous with, not opposed to, the peace and progress story the EU tells about what Europeans did to each other. Beichelt does not resolve the tension. He argues that EU scholars face a genuine dilemma here, one that cannot be reduced to a common denominator, since the same critique of migration policy can come from a post-colonial left and a nativist right using strikingly similar language toward incompatible ends. It is a fitting hinge for this issue, since it names in scholarly terms the same difficulty the network has been living with in practice: knowing which criticism of Europe strengthens it and which is simply preparing its dismantling.

On the internal side, Dániel Mikecz gives the network its most detailed case study, a frame analysis of how Viktor Orbán manages to run against Brussels and for Europe in the same breath, without his own voters noticing the contradiction. Ayhan Kaya supplies what a provocation cannot: years of fieldwork among the actual supporters of Europe's populist right, and a patient account of what a slogan sounds like from inside the person who believes it.

Randall Halle's contribution keeps faith with the network's original form. It is still a provocation, and it still owes footnotes to no one, but the hope is that its argument, that illiberalism is symmetric across Europe's old East and West and that the mainstream parties losing ground to populists have mostly stopped expecting to be held to their own stated values, earns something more than the reflex disagreement a provocation is designed to invite.

Read together, external and internal, the essays make a case the network has not yet made in one place: that Europe's trouble abroad and its trouble at home are the same trouble, differently dressed. A union that has not settled what it owes to its own colonial past will keep producing the conditions under which populists tell a more coherent story about betrayal than the mainstream does. Whether that case survives the arguments still to come is, as it should be, not for an introduction to decide.