

European Politics between Technocracy and Populism

Ömer Carullah Sevim

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WRITTEN BY

Ömer Carullah Sevim

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Introduction

'Democracy has not gone out of fashion, but it must update itself in order to keep improving people's lives.' Those are the words of David Sassoli [*former president of the EU parliament*][...] And I feel pride that citizens from every corner of Europe have brought to life his vision of a vibrant and modern European democracy[...] Different stories, different languages, different identities; but one shared future to build on[...]"

These are the words that Ursula von der Leyen (9 May 2022), the president of the EU commission, stated in the EU parliament on this year's Europe day. She continued:

"This is the image I want us to celebrate on 9 May. An image far more powerful than any military parade going up and down the streets of Moscow as we speak. And I want this image to remind us to never ever take for granted what Europe is and what it means. Europe is a dream. A dream that always was. A dream born from tragedy. But today, that dream shines brightest not only here in this historic place. It shines brightest in the hearts and the minds of the people of Kyiv and Kharkiv, of Odesa and Mariupol... it shines brightest in the eyes of all those young Ukrainians who have found refuge in Europe – a home away from home[...]" She then concluded her speech with the following words:

"72 years ago, war in Europe was replaced with something different, something new. First a community, today a Union. It was the day when the future began. It is a future that we have been writing together ever since – as architects and builders of Europe. And the next page, dear Ukrainian friends, is now being written by you. By us. By all of us together. Slava Ukraini. Long live Europe."

One could argue that if Hannah Arendt, who herself was a victim of the Nazi regime and a Europe at war, could see this conference and hear von der Leyen's words, she would applaud this speech wholeheartedly. It would be correct to say that Arendt's political thought against totalitarianism is in complete conflict with Putin's Russia. However, on the other hand, the current state of European politics also deserves a criticism from Arendt's perspective. Taking her ideas as a starting point, I

argue that today's Europe is in danger of falling into a sort of creeping totalitarianism. What is this danger? Ironically Nigel Farage, the Brexit party leader and a former member of the European parliament answered this quite clearly in his response to Guy Verhofstadt, a strong opponent of Brexit:

"In fact, there is only one real nationalist in the room and it's you [Mr Verhofstadt] – because you want flags, anthems, armies, you are an EU nationalist" (RT, 13 Jun 2018). In his last speech before Brexit, he elaborated on this perspective: "My mother and father signed up to a common market, not to a political union, not to flags, anthems, presidents – and now you even want your own army" (Farage, 29 Jan 2020).

In this context, I argue that the European Union is caught between right-wing populism on the one hand, and technocratic neoliberalism – with its own identity politics – on the other. Although the first of these is seen as being a manifestation of Euroscepticism and the second as reflecting the establishment of the European Union, they have similar problems in essence. In other words, these two are faces of the same political regime. Technocratic neoliberalism represents the European establishment, aka the political regime. Right-wing populism is ultimately a response to this. In this regard, these two should be read together. Sometimes, it is said that the rise of the far-right in Europe threatens pan-European ideals (Gottlob and Hajo, 2020). However, taking far-right populism's resurgence as the problem, not the symptom, would be misleading. Beyond their interrelation, it should be noted that both sides offer different kinds of identity politics. In this regard, it can be said that they clash over the question of European identity. Both sides base their politics on an imagined idea of Europe and 'European-ness'. This problem, can ultimately only be understood through philosophical inquiry in order to transcend the specifics of the political attitudes of the day. In this respect, Hannah Arendt's understanding of politics can help us to better understand this situation. Moreover, today's European politics, especially Europe's response to the refugee crisis and Russia's war in Ukraine, offers important clues in this regard.

Revisiting Hannah Arendt

The rising wave of populism around the world has brought Hannah Arendt back into the forefront on intellectual efforts to understand this phenomenon. Following the election of Donald Trump, her book *The Origins of Totalitarianism* entered the bestseller lists (Williams, 2017). Indeed, Arendt still has a lot to say regarding the rise of the far-right. However, she should be read not only in terms of the relationship between populism and totalitarianism, but also in the context of the basic principles of her political theory. Such a reading will give us important clues about what is happening today. In this context, it is necessary to briefly revisit Arendt's concepts of public space, freedom, and public action. At the same time, we should look at the place of truth in her philosophy.

For Arendt (1998), people are born with limitless possibilities and they can realize freedom through participating in the public space. Only in this way can public action that opens the space for 'limitless possibilities' occur. In other words, the unleashing of freedom is possible through public action in the public space. In this regard, public action is the realization of the unexpected via action and speech. In Arendt's narration, the Greek polis is the ideal example of the

public space. People who had met their basic biological needs in the private space would encounter, act and speak with each other in public space (Arendt, 1961).

In an ideal public space, it is not the absolute truth that dominates politics but the communicative power, which is generated through the interrelated public action(s) of political actors. This communicative power forms subjectivities in a positive sense in Arendt's thought (Allen, 2002). The key point in this regard is that the absolute/metaphysical truth does not dominate the polis and the public space. It is in this respect that she criticizes Plato's political philosophy, with Arendt blaming the demise of Greek public space on the philosopher. Plato considered truth as the element that should govern politics, consequently making politics the realm of experts and technocrats (Timponelli, 2017). In this regard, Plato marked an important shift in Western thought and gave power to absolute truth by taking it from the plurality of public space according to Arendt's reading of him (King, 2011). This idealism would prove to be the root of totalitarianism according to Arendt. The truth occupied the place of plurality. When it comes to today's European politics, the same perspective dominates.

Between Technocracy and Populism

In the last 20 years, we have seen the rise of far-right parties and political figures in most European countries. In fact, some have come to power, such as Sebastian Kurz's chancellorship in 2017 in Austria. Many others have gained the power to set the agenda, to steer mainstream politics, through their growing success at the polls. In France, Marine Le Pen has increased her vote rate to 42%, up from 34% five years ago. Besides, we see that right-wing populism has become mainstream in some EU member states such as Hungary and Poland.

Polyakova and Shekhovtsov (2016) attribute the rise of right-wing populism to the low affiliation of left-wing parties with the lower classes. According to this view,

far-right parties fill the vacuum left by a left that is no longer able to connect with the working class. Another view says that the rise of nationalism is a response to the loss of the meaning of the nation-state in Europe (Glaser, 2018). Monbiot (2016), on the other hand, says that in the neoliberal era, people's choices are expressed through consumptions, and as the consumption power of the masses has decreased, their sense of ability to choose has also decreased. All these explanations point to the fact that many Europeans no longer feel a need to engage politically. The far-right reflects this sense of loss by appealing to the politically excluded positions of the masses, thus offering them the chance to engage in politics as a group.



French far-right Rassemblement National (RN) party presidential candidate Marine Le Pen holds a press conference in Paris, France on April 24, 2022. French far-right presidential candidate Marine Le Pen on Sunday conceded defeat and said that the number of votes she received represents a "victory in itself." (Francois Pauletto - Anadolu Agency)

Since the 1980s, neoliberal ideas have become the predominant mode of political thinking amongst the political elite in Europe. For Margaret Thatcher, there was no alternative to neoliberalism. Charles Falconer, a member of Tony Blair cabinet, stressed the depoliticization of decision-making mechanisms (Glaser, 2002), a key feature of neoliberalism's emphasis on expertise and technocratic competency. EU countries started to give political power to neoliberal technocrats after 1980s along similar lines of thinking (Gallo, 2021). In other words, with the neo-liberalization process, politics began to lose meaning. For example, in the cultural realm, "ideology" has become an insulting concept (Glaser, 2002) and economic and political decisions are left to the dominance of the market (Monbiot, April 15, 2016).

In other words, neoliberal technocracy "rationalizes" administration, while populism engages in politics through the so-called homogeneity of the masses who cannot make their voices heard. In one, the power of the rational (of the market), in the other the

power of the masses is envisaged. Both appeal to the 'reality' of two different truths. Gallo (2021) states that "technocracy and populist nationalism are inherently intertwined. Both claim to know and strive to enact what is 'good' for the country, which is defined as 'the elite' in one case and 'the people' in the other". In short, it is the destruction of the public space in the Arendtian sense. The public space has moved away from being a place where differences can find representation and where human potential can be realized and has been left to the dominance of "truth". These two idealist understandings of politics appear as the two driving poles of European identity politics.

Identity Politics in Europe

Europe is not a continent in the geographical sense. Rather, it can be thought of as the north-western part of Afro-Eurasia. However, historically, where borders begin and end has been constantly changing. In this context, Europeans have constructed an identity through opposition to Asians, broadly conceived. First the Trojans, Phoenicians, then the Turks and Russians appear as the 'other' of Europe (Pocock, 2002). According to Pagden (2002), Europeans were aware of themselves as Europeans since the 4th century BC, and from the 16th century they began to see themselves as superior, not in an ethnic or racial sense, but rather in terms of their political system and set of beliefs. Relatedly, since the Enlightenment, Europe has seen itself as a community in possession of universal values (D'apollonia, 2002). However, on the other hand, it has always been incapable of maintaining its own internal peace (ibid.). One of the most tragic consequences of this was the Second World War.

After the Second World War, the foundations of the EU began to be laid. The first steps were taken with the thought that trade relations would bring peace (ibid). Although it can be understood as a geographical and commercial union that emerged in the post-World War II period, the values that it historically saw as part of its identity quickly became the foundation of the EU. European identity is, in theory, built on values. In other words, it is not the union of countries that coincidentally

share the same geography, speak the same language, and are part of the same race. This situation radically distinguishes it from other regional unions and pacts.

In other words, the EU project produces citizenship based on neither a common language nor common geography. At this point, values come to the fore. These values are considered universal values, not merely local cultural values. Even in their own eyes, Europeans often fail to live up to these universal ideals (Bauman, 2004).

Both far-right populist and centrist parties base their politics on European identity. Two important events that have dominated European politics in the last decade give us important clues in this regard. These two events are the EU's response to the refugee crisis that started in 2015 and the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine. In the first of these, the EU seems to be far from following a common EU policy, and in the second, it seems to have responded very quickly, and mostly unified. However, we see the same reflex as the basis of the two opposite reactions. In other words, we see that the answers of the European Union to the Ukraine crisis and the migrant crisis emerge within the framework of identity politics. It was the rhetoric of populist politicians that was decisive in the migrant crisis. In Russia's occupation of Ukraine, we see that an identity politics, in which the central parties are decisive, has been activated.

The Refugee Crisis and Far Right Populism

It is worth remembering that although far-right parties are labelled as 'Eurosceptic', the idea of European values occupies a very important place at the centre of their discourse. Although the discourses of all are not exactly the same, generally speaking there is a common view that 'Easterners', especially Muslims, threaten Western values. For Victor Orban (Reuters, 3 Sep 2015), it is 'Christian European values' at stake; for Wilders (Osborne, 2017) from the Netherlands, it is the values of 'freedom'. For example, unlike many right-wing politicians, Geert Wilders has taken a pro-LGBT position and presents Muslims as a threat to

those freedoms. In this context, even the concept of 'homonationalism', which expresses a combination of nationalism and LGBT activism, has been derived. This concept marks the emergence of LGBT rights as a part of Western nationhood (Dhoest, 2020). This form of nationalism offers a ground of legitimacy to Islamophobia.

In this context, the 2015 refugee crisis has been an opportunity for populist politicians. Right-wing populist politics, acting with the claim of representing the working class, has chosen migrants as the main

enemy. Many EU member states have also acted in accordance with this understanding. The refugee crisis has been mainly dealt with through a security lens and as a border protection issue for the European Union.

In this regard, Hungary's Orban stated that "the supply of immigrants is limitless" during the 2015 refugee influx (The Irish Times, Sep. 5 2015). According to this perspective, the threat is the rest of the world as a whole and not only the refugees accumulating on the borders of central Europe. The same understanding is seen in other European border countries. Although they are not exposed to much refugee pressure, other Baltic and Visegrad countries, follow very harsh policies regarding refugees. For example, at the end of 2021, Poland declared a state of emergency on its border with Belarus, despite the fact that the number of refugees gathering on the Polish border was relatively very low. Although they were not faced with a significant influx of refugees, Lithuania and Latvia started to build walls on their borders. The "Protecting European borders" perspective was not only seen in the policies and discourses of border countries and populist leaders. For example, Ursula von der Leyen described Greece

as the "shield of Europe" against refugees (Rankin, 3 Mar. 2020). The Prime Minister of the Netherlands, Mark Rutte, warned the EU by recalling the fate of Roman Empire, which could not handle its own migration influx (Chadwick, 27 Nov. 2015). While all this is going on, it is difficult to find an example that falls within the framework of humanitarian values despite the thousands of people who have died on European borders and in its territorial waters.

What stands out in the context of the refugee crisis is the influence of identity politics. At its base, identity politics is based on who is in and who is out; it needs an 'other'. As mentioned above, Europe has a history of defining itself through various outsiders. Regarding the refugee crisis, the right-wing populists' anti-immigrant discourse points out who should be kept out of Europe; aka, who represents a threat. Although it is not yet considered as mainstream, this anti-immigrant / European-protective discourse has had a significant impact on mainstream politics. Therefore, it can be said that populists understandings of politics are more than just a concern for the future. Today, it has the power to strongly effect EU policy.

The Russian Invasion of Ukraine and the European Establishment

According to some, the EU's quick response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine had a quality that increased the integration of the Union (Wunderlich, 2022). In the short run, this may be true. However, in the long run, this is just another face of identity politics that, importantly, has its limits. In this regard, there are two remarkable elements in the EU's response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine. The first of these is the acceptance of millions of Ukrainian refugees by the EU in a very short period time. Amongst Western media in the first days of the occupation, there was a shock that could not accept that such a war could be waged on 'white Europeans' (Mitrovica, 2022). The rapid reception of Ukrainian refugees can be explained with reference to this idea of defining "who is in".

The second is that we see that the EU quickly has constructed what can best be referred to as a 'war discourse'. From one perspective, it can be said that, with the war, the EU has achieved a level of unity that

it has been striving towards for years. In particular, the war in Ukraine has presented Europe with an opportunity to strengthen its own sense of common European identity against a Russian 'other'. Rather than being a result of realpolitik, war is coded as an idealistic war of good versus evil. Von der Leyen's speech quoted at the beginning of the paper clearly presents this. However, this point of view is the direct result of the above-mentioned position in which Europe considers itself historically superior and an identity politics which is based on this position. On the other hand, it can be said that any country that goes to war wants to build its own moral discourse in support of their actions, with Russia being no exception to this. However, the EU's discourse is not only on to demonstrate the legitimacy of its actions vis-à-vis Russia, but also that it possesses the universal good. In this regard, some of the steps taken by the EU with the self-confidence of being on the side of 'good' are remarkable. For example, although the legal basis is complicated, EU countries

have decided to stop the broadcasts of RT and Sputnik, media organs associated with the Russian state, throughout the Union (Cabrera Blazquez, 2022). Let's remember the refugee crisis for a moment, despite the rights promised by the conventions regarding refugees, the EU failed to develop a humanitarian solution. At the same time, while von der Leyen was talking about the dream of Europe that "shines brightest in the eyes of all those young Ukrainians who have found refuge in Europe", this 'dream' became a nightmare for the Syrian migrants who was drowned in the Mediterranean. Contrary to what has been observed in the last decade with the migrant crisis, the image of a migrant-friendly "civilized" Europe has easily been deployed against Russian "barbarism".

Despite all this, the following questions can be asked: Does the EU have to accept every single refugee that arrives at its gates? Cannot its abstention on this issue

be understood as an obligation to protect its own borders? On the other hand, can it not follow various policies in order to ensure its own unity of discourse against the Russian threat? The answer that needs to be given to these questions is the contradictions inherent in the EU's self-reflection as a unity of values. For example, the defence of freedom of the press, which is among the basic EU criteria, can be suspended as soon as it is deemed to be threatening to the EU. Likewise, the difference between the attitude towards Ukrainian refugees and the attitude towards Syrians shows the contradiction in values. It is clear that values do not determine policies, but rather policies determine how values will be used. This manifests as a kind of European nationalism established on an image of 'civilized Europe'. Right-wing populists and mainstream European politics, despite their mutual opposition, represent different faces of this reality.



Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky (C) poses next to (L to R) Germany's Chancellor Olaf Scholz, France's President Emmanuel Macron Italy's Prime Minister Mario Draghi and Romania's President Klaus Iohannis prior to their meeting in Kyiv, on June 16, 2022. It is the first time that the leaders of the three European Union countries have visited Kyiv since the beginning of Russian-Ukrainian war. (Ukrainian Presidency- Anadolu Agency)

The Death of Public Space

Contrary to Arendt's public space, the basis of Europe's politics today is the domination of politics by truth. The question is not about creating a public space where people can be political actors and freedom can be realized, but about which truth will dominate, neoliberalism or right-wing populism. Arendt advocates a politics dominated by plurality, not truth, under all circumstances. Every renunciation of this is a door to totalitarianism. In the case of the European Union, it has increasingly become the case that large numbers of people feel that their voices are no longer being heard. Against the nationalist discourses of populist movements that exploit this situation, another nationalist discourse is being built, as we have seen in the course of the war in Ukraine. The fact that this nation-state-like union maintains its unity through (a discourse of) values will only mean that these values will degenerate. This is evident in the way the far-right also embraces these values. According to Arendt (1961), the solution to this problem is a strong public space and ending the domination of truth claims in public space.

As a result, there appear to be two possible paths that Europe could take. The first of these is to design an understanding of politics that will create a contemporary reflection of Arendt's public space. In this space, the power of plurality, not the market, would be the key determinant. The other option is being the watchdog of the neoliberal centre. In this option, so-called universal values will only be valid as long as they are functional. The first calls for Arendtian politics, the second for a kind of nationalism, which has engendered the growth of the far right. It should be remembered that it was the neoliberal technocracy and the depoliticization of the decision-making mechanisms that created the vacuum in the first place that today is filled with different kinds of identity politics. It seems very clear that Europe has chosen the second path. The result will be a Europe that is more and more closed every day. In the short term, the first option seems risky. To some, it may seem unrealistic to insist on freedom of the press against Russian aggression and to pursue an immigration policy open to migrants. However, the current situation could very well lead to the collapse of European ideal, which claims to be based on values. On the other hand, these values will continue to feed a supremacist arrogance contrary to their lofty content.

According to Arendt, one of the consequences of preferring the plurality of the public space to the domination of truth is that the human being's potential to bring novelty to the world is the result of such freedom. In this way, the human being can reveal the unexpected, the surprise, and realize its endless possibilities (Kang, 2013). If the EU is to truly demonstrate that values make a political union possible, the path chosen needs to be changed. The starting point for this is to put aside the claim to have the truth. In addition, instead of suppressing differences it is to ensure that they meet in a healthy public space. This would also mean "re-politicization of politics". Only in this way, the human being can produce novelty or in other words, we can expect the unexpected. However, a neoliberal order that leaves the politics to the rational/truth of the market will feed different kinds of identity politics. In this context, the masses that feel excluded from political life will buy one imagined identity or another. Being part of a 'totality' will ultimately take away the opportunity of being an actor in a public space that will enable human potential to realize.

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