

A Politics Beyond Fear

Article by Karolina Wigura

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The May 2019 European elections saw gains for right-wing Eurosceptics across Europe, though these fell short of the populist take-over of the European Parliament anticipated by some. Polish sociologist Karolina Wigura locates the success of illiberal forces in their ability to channel the pervasive sense of fear regarding the future. Nevertheless, political tendencies across the spectrum are trading in fear of different shades: fear of diversity and cultural change, of technology and robotisation, of climate breakdown and environmental catastrophe. Europe's future and that of democracy itself, argues Wigura, depends upon moving beyond this politics of resistance driven by fear to a positive vision built upon hope.

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by Green Wave



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Many feared a populist surge in the European parliament, but the EU elections in May 2019 did not bring one. The European People's Party (EPP) and the social democrats (S&D) did lose their majority, but this does not automatically mean a Eurosceptic-dominated European parliament. Illiberal politicians, dubbed Eurosceptic by some, gathered 173 seats – 19 more than in the last EU elections five years ago, but relatively not so many given that there are 751 members of the European Parliament in total. Matteo Salvini, Marine Le Pen, Jarosław Kaczyński and Viktor Orbán, united by their opposition to 'open society', may be stronger now but they are also more divided.

The EU elections are a pan-European phenomenon in which the result is determined according to local characteristics. Results unclear on the European level take on more vivid colours at the local level. Le Pen's victory is an important signal about the state of French politics. As is the high result of the Greens in Germany. In Poland, the winner of the EU elections was Jarosław Kaczyński's Law and Justice party (PiS), with a large advantage of 7 points over the biggest opposition political group, the European Coalition. This confirms a larger trend in which PiS has been gaining popularity in the past few years while its opposition has consistently failed to convince voters.

The strength of illiberal politicians today is often ascribed to the current political crisis, but these events are rooted

in a longer process which has been taking place in European culture over the past few decades. This essay seeks to examine the trend which has been evolving deep under the surface of politics – to a large extent in the collective unconsciousness – and connect it to remembrance, emotions, and the fundamentals of the European project.

One of the oldest European questions about politics concerns emotions. British philosopher Thomas Hobbes concluded that political stability is based on a delicate balance of fear and hope. Not every kind of fear is equal. When Hobbes wrote his *Leviathan*, he argued that the most rational type of fear is the fear of death, which he associated with the atrocities of the English revolution. A stable political system, Hobbes argued, should be built on a foundation of rational fear, originated in the experiences of the past and coupled with hope for a better future.

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Fear matters also for contemporary Europe since it is exactly this emotion which has played the crucial role in the European project since its emergence after World War II.

For decades, the European project was based on a particular kind of fear: fear of the past. This was often expressed by two German words, *nie wieder* (never again), which served to warn against repetition of the totalitarian and war atrocities of 20th century Europe. This fear led the dominant European political culture to treat every kind of ethnic nationalism with suspicion. In order to prevent a return to the past and loss of democracy, the liberal order was strengthened and was perceived as the bedrock of European values: rule of law, constitutionalism, and division of powers.

A few decades later, however, fear of the past began to evaporate. This happened for various reasons, among which generational change is perhaps first and foremost. For years, efforts were made to transmit memory to those born after 1945. Testimonies were recorded and remarkable museums were built, such as the House of European History in Brussels or the Polin Museum of the History of Polish Jews in Warsaw.

French philosopher Paul Ricoeur warned a few decades after World War II that an excess of memory may result in its shallowness. In Poland, many young people wear t-shirts emblazoned with an anchor, the symbol of the Warsaw Uprising. For a few hours every year they imagine being equal to the heroic participants of the event over 70 years ago in 1944, without knowing the actual dramatic experience of those who fought poorly armed and slept for weeks in underground channels. Romanticised images of revolutionaries like Che Guevara provide another example of this trend. Digitalised memory cannot replace personal experience.

When fear of the past faded in Europe, it left a yawning void. Quickly, however, it was replaced by another kind of fear: fear of the future. The sources of this fear were of many kinds: the loss of the welfare state, the disintegration of the EU, the lack of opportunities for young people in the labour market. But perhaps the most common face of the fear of the future was that of a Syrian refugee, often conflated with the image of Islamist terrorism. In the recent Eurobarometer, migration and terrorism were pointed out as the biggest concerns of EU citizens, more important even than losing jobs.

The emergence of the fear of the future as a dominant European emotion was best understood and played on by illiberal politicians. In fact, they were the only political force capable of embracing it. On the other side of the political spectrum, for months or even years liberal democrats were unable to embrace the emotional changes in European culture.

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After the EU elections, one question will be at the heart of politics in Europe: who will produce a more credible narrative about the future? And, closely linked, what type of emotion will become the fundament of this narrative? Will it be the fear of the future as suggested by the illiberal, Eurosceptic politicians, who blame multiculturalism, refugees and social-economic threats? Or will it be fear of populism, nationalism, and ultra-conservatism, presented as the biggest threats by liberal opponents?

The first would produce a kind of closed society, undermining the achievements of Postwar Europe; the second, a more open, federalist European community. Both would likely continue a polarisation between supporters of those two alternatives. Some possibilities of gathering again around one emotion also exist. The Greens, for example, stress fear of climate change, extinction, and loss of biodiversity. This type of emotion could produce a community more conscious of environment and careful in using resources, whilst not stressing so much other ideological aspects. In any case, the shape of the political community in Europe will ultimately depend on the emotion which gains the dominant role in the coming years.

Those seeking not only to win elections but also to make an important contribution within the five-year EU Parliament term must not only concentrate on fear. Now is the time to look for other political emotions. More strategies are needed as well as a broader vision of what defeating illiberalism means for the future. In the year of the 30th anniversary of the democratic breakthrough in Central and Eastern Europe, it is worth remembering that this achievement was mostly possible due to another emotion pointed at by Hobbes: hope for a better future.

What are the pillars of a coherent political narrative which counters that proposed by illiberal, Eurosceptic politicians? Are the old parties' values of social-democratic solidarity and liberal-democratic freedom capable of tackling the resurgence of identity politics? Or do they need to evolve towards a new narrative fit for the challenges of the 21st century? The upcoming five years of the European Parliament's new term will be decisive in answering these questions.



Karolina Wigura is a sociologist, historian of ideas and journalist. She heads the political section of the Polish weekly magazine *Kultura Liberalna* and is an assistant professor at Warsaw University's Institute of Sociology.

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