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Fewer Europeans trust the EU

Dismal economies spark radicals' mischief, populists' wins

By: Dalibor Rohac - November 26, 2013

Aspecter of populism seems to be haunting Europe. While the trend is not winning elections yet, London Financial Times' Gideon Rachman fears that "anti-establishment radicals do not need to capture the position of president or prime minister to gum up the system. Even if traditional pro-EU centrists continue to lead most national governments in Europe, their room for maneuver at EU summits is greatly reduced if populist parties are making big gains back home."

It is certainly the case that a diverse bloc of anti-establishment political groups have been gaining momentum throughout the European continent since the beginning of the debt crisis in the eurozone's periphery. In last month's election in the Czech Republic, two new populist parties recorded striking successes, displacing the traditional incumbent parties — most notably the right-wing ODS, which once led the country's transition from a planned economy to capitalism.

It is true that neither of the new Czech parties has an explicit anti-EU bent — perhaps because the Czechs have consciously saved themselves a lot of trouble by opting to stay out of the eurozone. However, it is difficult to find any other common trait among most of the emerging populist groups across Europe than the idea that something has gone wrong with European integration. Ranging from Marine Le Pen's Front National and Geert Wilders' Party for Freedom, through the United Kingdom Independence Party and similar organizations, to extreme leftists like Syriza in Greece, they differ widely in their policy platforms, membership demographics and their attitudes toward immigrants or multiculturalism.

To the extent the new euroskeptic populism is going hand in hand with xenophobic, anti-immigrant or nationalistic ideas — even in some of the parties that label themselves as "free market" — it is only natural to share Mr. Rachman's concerns. However, regardless of what one thinks of the true nature of the new euroskeptic forces, the broad centrist consensus that is driving Europe's journey toward a political union is under attack for very good reasons.

After all, it was the political mainstream across Europe that elevated the European integration project to the status of a new faith. More and deeper integration has been long seen as desirable by anyone claiming respectability in political circles on the Continent. Yet, while European economic integration has certainly had many merits, over time the lack of critical thinking about the EU led to hubris and overreach.

The monetary union, trapping a diverse set of countries in a system of fixed exchange rates with no obvious exit mechanism, is an example. By lowering the borrowing costs of governments, the common

currency encouraged the accumulation of fiscal imbalances on the eurozone's periphery. When these turned into full-fledged debt crises in countries such as Greece and Portugal, mainstream European politicians responded again in a predictable way — by instituting a centralized European mechanism for bailing out countries in financial distress — much to the dismay of taxpayers in countries that had traditionally kept their public finances in order.

The growing disconnect between European electorates and political elites is not a rhetorical trope invoked by populists, it is depressingly real. According to a Eurobarometer Poll conducted in the spring, only 29 percent of Germans trust the EU, in contrast with roughly 57 percent who tended to trust it back in 2007. A large majority of Germans also support devolution of EU's power to member states and a reduction of Germany's contribution to the EU budget. Sixty percent of Germans would like to see national parliaments empowered to block undesirable EU legislation.

The “anti-system” political groups are thus catering to electorates that find themselves increasingly ignored by the centrist political parties, which are committed not only to keeping the European monetary union afloat — for which there may be good reasons — but also further deepening of political integration in Europe, implicitly assuming that they know better than the average voter.

The current economic mess in Europe suggests that they do not. Fortunately, there is a middle ground between the current groupthink of European elites and its populist — and oftentimes rather unsavory — alternatives. Such middle ground would involve European leaders having an honest and open-ended conversation about the costs and benefits of the institutional status quo in Europe and prospects for a devolution of what is becoming an increasingly rigid and centralized system of governance, a direct result of the prevailing integration paradigm. If mainstream politicians don't talk about these problems and seek ways to fix them, “anti-establishment radicals” will.