



Europa im Krisenmodus: eine Herausforderung für die europäischen Gesellschaften

L'Europa in tempi di crisi: una sfida per le società europee

L'Europe en mode crise: un défi pour les sociétés européennes

Summary

Villa Vigoni

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« We gain nothing as a Union, if we travel to China one member state at a time »

Our seminar started off on a self-critical, yet proud European note. Looking back on the process of European integration, which started in the 1950s, enormous progress has been achieved. This said, it is also clear that today, more than ever, the European Union is facing internal challenges and external threats as the world has become a more dangerous and unpredictable place in 2023. We attempted to address – at least briefly – some of those fundamental challenges and changes. We have done so by inviting representatives from four leading European member states and by bringing together agents from a broad variety of political, economic and cultural backgrounds to discuss the key concepts of European solidarity, sovereignty and the future of democracy.

Following up, I will try and suggest a few guiding lines that underlie the discourses we touched upon.

The notion of European values is probably one of the first connecting points to mention. What makes the European Union more than just a common market are its shared and praised principles: The Rule of Law, Human Rights, Democracy, Freedom and Equality.

Facing an international context where the respect of basic rights is far from being evident, the first task within the European Union would be to make sure it sticks to its own values. If principles such as The Rule of Law or Human Rights run the risk of becoming examples of empty rhetoric in European members states, it will be even more difficult to defend a shared sovereignty in the name of said values on a global scale. The Russian aggression against Ukraine made shockingly evident that protecting fundamental rights in the European Union might also signify military action to defend them to the outside. Putin's violation of international law has shown to the entire world that its order can be easily put out of balance – by Russia and other authoritarian regimes following its example.

But are we Europeans ready to defend our values? When it comes to a common European defence, solidarity among member states and citizens is crucial. But the trend in society is a different one. Polls show that



citizens perceive an increasing fragmentation of society. This goes hand in hand with the success of populist parties promising easy solutions to complex problems.

To sum up: We have a fragmented society, increasing external threats and we struggle to build a European identity based on shared values. This lack of identity prevents us from standing together as a European Union.

The fragmentation in the European Union happens at a horizontal level, with each member state putting its national interests first, for instance when it comes to Energy politics or trade interests. But fragmentation also concerns vertical phenomena within the societies of the different member states. What was mainly a question of socioeconomic indicators in the 20th century has become a question of reference systems in communicational spheres. Different groups in society and different generations have almost no overlap in the way they perceive what is happening in the world. A gap which is only being increased by individualized algorithms. We might have noticed this difficulty in understanding and listening to each other already on a very small scale during our conference.

Solutions to avoid fragmentation come with major challenges for institutions as well as civil society, which both urgently need to improve their interaction. But how to communicate correctly, how to translate complex procedures to a broader public? Is simplification key or rather explanation? What to do in a society in which everybody can, at least to some degree, share their own opinions on social media platforms without ever entering a dialogue? Who is responsible for holding accountable (social) media? One step towards creating the base for a less polarized public sphere would probably be increased encounters of the sort we attempted, confronting members of society that rarely meet in order to discuss phenomena that concern everybody – and to do so in real life. Which leads to the question: whose job is it, to make this happen. Is it the media's?

And to add more layers to this question: What is the role of a journalist nowadays? How do journalists navigate a world dominated by communication while still ensuring qualified information?

A more systematical cooperation among media outlets on an international level, especially when it comes to facing challenges such as covering a pandemic or facing populist movements, might help to foster a mutual understanding among European journalists first, and among European citizens second. One needs to argue, of course, whether this reflects the role or duty of a journalist. Do media outlets have to advocate for the European Union and defend it? Not necessarily the European Union, I would be prompted to reply, but democracy and freedom.

The last and probably most crucial point we discussed : Defending democracy and the values associated with it, especially in a crisis, is not only task of institutions and media outlets, but also duty of each single citizen. In moments in which institutions, that are supposed to guarantee the separation of powers, are undermined – I'm thinking about the Constitutional Court in Poland under the PiS regime – responsibility lies within the people of a country. What became quite evident following this line of thought was that finding ways of democratic participation for citizens and/or communities is a complex but necessary and – on the long run – fruitful undertaking. Initiatives that ensure groundwork and contact between European citizens, also with regard to challenges such as climate change and migration, should be emphasized. This would also allow to render the abstract debate about European values more tangible for a broader public.