
OPINION: THE EU MUST RESPECT THE NATION-STATE

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The EU needs unity where such things as the single currency require it. But it also needs to have respect for the diversity of nation-states and their importance for democracy, says Boris Kalnoky.

Once upon a time, when talk turned to the subject of Europe, it was technical issues about the way the EU worked that were most likely to come up. For example, butter mountains and milk lakes created by Brussels' agricultural subsidies were to be reduced by means of other subsidies paid to farmers for not producing butter and milk. Who could understand all that? But we didn't have to; we could leave it to the technocrats.

All this changed when Europe agreed on common external borders and a single currency. At this point things became political, and the tone became poisonous.

Because money and borders are what actually constitute a state. Hardly anyone really understood the revolutionary consequences back then. A transnational entity took over functions that, until then, had constituted the essence of the nation-state. For the nation-state, little more remained than the role of a provincial administration within a much larger political entity.

Reduced self-determination

European citizens were not given the opportunity to digest this change because it was not really discussed or raised in public discourse before the decision was made. It was only gradually that many realized, "Oops, something serious has changed here." Citizens still elected their governments, but these governments, and therefore the voters, had less and less scope to determine their fate as a society. Many people felt that the EU meant less self-determination.

It is possible to pinpoint precisely the moments of shock when this insight dawned on people. The euro crisis from 2009 onward showed the Greeks that they had no chance of finding any other way out of their plight than the one stipulated by the EU. And the 2015 refugee crisis showed that the stronger EU members were prepared to force societies that did not want any immigrants to let them in simply by instituting a binding refugee redistribution quota through a "majority decision."

This attempt to exercise transnational power against the will of national parliaments and their voters was a wake-up call for those wanting to keep on determining their countries' future paths themselves.

Short period of freedom

And that applies above all to those of us in the eastern part of Europe. We have enjoyed freedom as a society for just a short time, after shaking off the yoke of the transnational entity referred to as the "Eastern Bloc" 30 years ago. We do not want to again give up this freedom to make our own decisions. The resistance to accept refugees by Hungary and other countries in the region has shown the limits of "integration:" Europe is not yet really a "union." The refugee quota policy failed.

How much transnational unity and how much national freedom does the EU need to prevent it falling apart while giving individual societies enough liberty?

Boris Kalnoky writes for several German-language publications

There are areas that require unity because, otherwise, things cannot work. For example: the euro. Those who have it can no longer pursue their own monetary policy. Accepting this requires maturity, or there can be explosive consequences. The same goes for common external borders. People who fail to understand that irresponsible domestic budgetary policy or weak border protection can have serious repercussions not only for their own country but for the entire EU must learn, or else leave the Schengen area or eurozone.

Brussels must show more respect for eastern Europe

It now seems clear that this learning process is not yet over. The logical conclusion is that the EU should not assume even more of the core functions of nation-states without first clarifying the implications in the realm of public discourse. Common unemployment insurance, a European minimum wage, European taxes, a European army with sworn loyalty to the blue flag, majority decisions in which stronger national coalitions can oppress weaker countries □ without the possible negative side effects for individual countries being accepted by those countries' societies, such radical steps will at some point end in political explosions. This could, in turn, lead to a weakening rather than a strengthening of Europe.

The EU's motto is "unity in diversity." In political trench warfare, it is often forgotten that "diversity" refers to nation-states. Terms such as "national" and "nation-state" are sometimes used as insults by advocates of a more integrated Europe. There must be much more respect for the diversity of nation-states in Brussels' discourse.

The nation-state is the framework in which democracy can function best. Historically, the EU is mostly associated with prosperity; indeed, it began as an economic union. The frequent talk about the EU standing for solidarity and democracy, while the nation-state stands for nationalism, is ideological nonsense. The EU is a marketplace where democratic member states represent their interests and enter into political trade-offs or compromises according to jointly agreed rules. But they all fight constantly and ruthlessly for their national interests.

And that's a good thing. Because those interests are those of voters and citizens. That is democracy.

Boris Kalnoky, born in 1961, is a Budapest-based Hungarian correspondent for the German daily "Die Welt" and other German-language media.

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