



So Much for EU Democracy

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In the course of the Realeurasia project, I have become a regular consumer of the television news in two EU countries. Especially since the “migration crisis” of Summer 2015 it has been fascinating to compare the main evening news in Hungary (M1) at 7.30pm. with its German equivalent, the *Tagesschau* at 8.00pm. The differences are immense, both in what gets reported and in the accompanying evaluative tones. Lately the hot weather has featured prominently on the Hungarian channel. The editors in Budapest have not hesitated to give prominent coverage to inflammatory incidents at public swimming pools in Düsseldorf and Essen, in which it is alleged that recent migrants have created havoc among local bathers. Needless to say such incidents never feature in the *Tagesschau*.

On July 2nd, however, the hot weather was replaced as lead item in both countries by fresh political news from Brussels. There was a surprising degree of consensus. Viktor Orbán and other leaders of the Visegrád states (the V4) boasted that, after weeks of machinations, their position had triumphed. The nomination of Ursula von der Leyen, until now German Minister of Defence, to succeed Jean-Claude Juncker as head of the Brussels Commission suited them very well. In recent years the V4 countries have been largely ostracized by most “old EU” members. The *Spitzenkandidat* of the conservatives in the EU elections, the Bavarian Manfred Weber, had suspended Orbán’s Fidesz party from the parliamentary grouping. As for his main rival, the Dutchman Frans Timmermans has made no secret of his contempt for the V4 over many years. When these candidates did not come through, old-EU social democrats joined many conservatives in crying foul – the nomination of von der Leyen, in their eyes, was a shameful concession to those V4 countries where democracy and rule of law have been steadily eroded in recent years. Though the evaluative tone differed, for a change the Hungarian M1 *Híradó* and the German *Tagesschau* reported the same story.

In the equivalent elections of 2014, the leaders of the two main fractions in the Strasbourg parliament were Juncker and the social democrat Martin Schulz. They fought a long but basically friendly campaign: Juncker won and claimed the top job, while Schulz became President of the Parliament. The third top job, Chair of the European Council, went to a suitably

qualified Pole, Donald Tusk. Admittedly Tusk had no electoral legitimacy, and his nomination was in fact opposed by the elected government in his own country. Still, when the dust had settled it seemed as if the EU was making some progress towards more transparent forms of democracy, whereby politicians present their programmes to the public on the campaign trail and are thus entitled to claim legitimacy on the basis of electoral results.

Contrast that with what is happening in 2019. For months, the German Chancellor Angela Merkel committed herself to supporting her conservative ally, Weber. When the candidacy of this folksy but rather inexperienced Bavarian encountered opposition, above all from France, Merkel embraced the loser, Timmermans. But he is the sort of social democrat who likes to fraternize with George Soros, the principal *bête noire* of Hungarian nationalists, which meant that for Orbán he was out of the question. At this point the V4 leaders showed that they too have some muscle. The result is the recourse to von der Leyen, a conservative Europhile who has been keen to increase Germany's NATO contribution. She has come under increasing pressure in recent years in Berlin for her inability to manage the vast procurement contracts of the Ministry of Defence (cynics in Germany suggest that this is now her best chance to exit her present post without grave embarrassment).

From the point of view of political anthropology, it is instructive to compare these developments in Europe with China. According to its own self-representation, the EU is pioneering new forms of democracy, in line with Enlightenment traditions of the *société ouverte aux talents*: our parliaments are free and democratic at every level, and the top jobs go to those who have earned them transparently on the basis of their outstanding individual qualities, honed through a pluralist party system. China under communist rule is held to exemplify the antithesis of these ideals: elections here are mere ritual and the political elite reproduces itself through impenetrable cabals of princelings, as in the old Soviet Union.

This is the myth. But note that Ursula von der Leyen did not campaign in the EU elections. She herself comes from a political dynasty: her father was the *Ministerpräsident* of a major German state before relocating to Brussels, where Ursula was raised as a true European. The second key job, that of European Council Chair, has gone to the young Belgian liberal Charles Michel, whose father used to be a member of the European Parliament. Another top post (arguably the most important of them all), that of President of the European Central Bank, has been given to the supreme neoliberal Christine Lagarde, Managing Director of the International Monetary Fund and the most elegant figure in managing global austerity for almost a decade. Like that of von der Leyen, her professional and personal record is by no means flawless.

It is hard to imagine a clearer demonstration of what so many EU critics have alleged for decades: the central institutions of governance in the EU cannot claim anything comparable to the democratic mandates of national governments and their parliaments. This is the path that

has led to Brexit. Instead of adopting genuine reform, the debacle of 2019 leaves democratic governance in Western Eurasia weaker than it has been for a very long time.

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