

EU: United we fall, divided we stand?

Despite the hyperbole surrounding Europe's impending doom, pro-EU forces still hold the upper hand. What's needed now, is a robust debate about the way forward, **writes Luuk van Middelaar**



Luuk van Middelaar,
political theorist and
historian

Will Hungary be expelled from the EPP?

Did Hungary's Prime Minister Viktor Orbán finally go too far? In an early escalation of the European election campaign, the Hungarian government launched a poster campaign with photos of billionaire George Soros and Brussels chief Jean-Claude Juncker, accompanied by the claim that EU migration plans “threaten Hungary's security”. Orbán has been bad-mouthing the Hungarian-American philanthropist for some time now, but bringing the European Commission president into it is something else. Juncker is a member of the same transnational political party, so this was an attack against Orbán's own Christian, conservative family. Will the European People's Party, with Merkel's CDU as its most powerful member, finally expel Hungary's Fidesz from the club?

Until now, the EPP leadership has supported him even though Orbán has defiantly put democratic freedoms in cold storage and violated rule-of-law principles in his own country since 2010. Keeping an open dialogue has remained the core refrain – including for EPP lead candidate and Commission presidency contender Manfred Weber (CSU). But patience with Orbán is running out. After letters of protest by 12 national member parties from nine countries, the EPP will vote next week (20 March) on whether to exclude or suspend Fidesz. Would Orbán secretly welcome expulsion?

Ideological power struggle

With his provocation, Orbán has in fact taken the debate to where his Italian ally Matteo Salvini wanted it to be: an ideological standoff between cosmopolitan elites and the self-proclaimed spokesmen of the people. Unfortunately, the other camp is falling for it with their eyes wide open.

French President Emmanuel Macron, in the afterglow of his national contest with Marine Le Pen, is happiest appearing on the European stage in the guise of a white knight combating the dark forces of nationalism – a rhetorical figure he could not resist in his [Open Letter](#) to all Europeans citizens last week.

Then there are the well-intentioned panic stories about the imminent end of European civilisation. In the manifesto [“Fight for Europe – or the wreckers will destroy it”](#), Bernard-Henri Lévy and 30 eminent authors, including Mario Vargas Llosa, Herta Müller and Orhan Pamuk, write that the forthcoming elections “promise to be the most calamitous that we have known” and that “Europe as an idea” is being attacked by “false prophets who are drunk on resentment”. [George Soros has been equally melodramatic](#): if sleep-walking pro-European voters do not wake up quickly, the EU will end up suffering the fate of the Soviet Union in 1991: implosion and oblivion.

A distorted view of reality

The EU is under pressure both internally and externally. But this kind of caricature merely strengthens the forces it is attempting to fight. If you brandish “the legacy of Erasmus, Dante, Goethe and Comenius” (Lévy & co.), people will run faster in the other direction. What is lacking is a sense of proportion and a feeling for democracy. Take the [polls](#) ahead of the European elections (dates as of 8 March). There is no nationalist power grab. The biggest group remains the conservative EPP (with 177 out of 705 seats, including, for the time being, 11 for Fidesz), followed by the Social Democrats (131) and Liberals (95) – the old guard. Including the Greens (42), pro-European forces have a clear majority. The anti-EU parties may win 25% to 30% of the seats; a considerable increase, but not dominance and (unless pollsters are getting it completely wrong) not a blocking minority.

Two main factors explain this “disappointing” result for them:

- Firstly, anti-EU parties, riding a wave of anti-establishment feeling (which often intensifies during European elections) already scored well in 2014; for Le Pen’s (then) National Front, it will not get much better this year. Only the German AfD and the Italian Lega of Salvini, which scored a breakthrough after 2014, will continue to grow.
- Secondly, Brexit means the departure of a loud and large contingent of British EU-critics, who now make up about half of the eurosceptic seats in Strasbourg.

Divided parliament better reflects public view

A key question to ask is whether European democracy is well served by a Parliament which applauds “more Europe” en bloc? And could it not also have advantages, as a perceptive commentator in [De Tijd](#) noted, that the Christian-democrats and social-democrats will for the first time not have a majority, meaning that the Greens, Liberals and other Conservatives can challenge both the centrist consensus and the culture of backroom deals?

The European Parliament's main political weakness is its remoteness from voters and the absence of substantive opposition. Conversely, a troublesome and rowdy Parliament could reflect the political mood and the conflicting passions of the population far better. Our national democracies are also full of clashes – between spenders and savers, between fence-builders and Samaritans, between Russia-bashers and those who can understand Putin.

Only through robust debate can the Parliament develop into a visible arena and thus – perhaps counterintuitively – gain more public authority as a European forum.