

“Political Economy of ‘Authoritarianism’ and ‘Right Wing Populism’. May, Orban, Szydło, Le Pen, Gauland/AfD ... – the EU between a crisis of legitimation of neoliberal ‘reformers’ and different authoritarian ‘right wing forces’”

This paper should serve for the preparation of the workshop and support the discussion there. Its structure corresponds to the questions that have been asked and to the agenda of the final program. We abstain from including information about parties and statistics illustrating problems and developments. But in order to provide a much-needed basis for our discussion, we enclose the RLF study “A love-hate relationship. Far-right parties and the European Union” and we also refer to our blog <http://stocktaking-scenarios.blog.rosalux.de/> → see tag “right wing populism”.

I. Making clear what is at stake in this debate and in which terms the underlying issue can be most clearly discussed

The concept of „right-wing populism“ is not helpful for analyzing the current rise of an ideology and a policy which is aimed at changing/strengthening the existing hegemony resp. power relations in the interest

- of the reactionary sectors of the middle classes,
- of nationalist-conservative forces ,
- of nationalist-neoliberal forces ,
- of essentially nationalistic and/or of religious fundamentalist forces

The main agencies of “right-wing populism” try to win over the ‘middle segment’ of the society and those social and political organisations claiming to speak in the name of this middling segment of society, resp. “the ordinary people”.

In their claims to set the “correct” values, norms and rules these forces are authoritarian from their very beginning. In its concretely realized forms so-called “right-wing populism” is more or less open to fascists.

So-called „right-wing populism“ has developed in parallel to the ascendance of the big corporations and the relative autonomization of finance capital as a specific quality of highly concentrated and centralized capital which constitutes the economic basis for the agency of capitalist oligarchies¹. It has been undergoing a specific development since the beginning of globalization in its ‘neo-liberal’ capitalist forms. Since 1986 (adoption of Single European Act), the development of the EC resp. EU has been dominated by the political model of neo-liberalism. It has been connected with deep changes of societal structures, in the direction of mounting social inequality, a crisis of conservatism, of parliamentary democracy resp. of political representation, as well as with the destruction of social security systems, and with rising global competition and global problems

¹ On the basis of capital owners simultaneously co-operating and competing in the spheres of production and finance, a special kind of capital – finance capital – has emerged. These capital owners organise forms of co-operation with their managers, their partners ‘within the state’, ‘in politics’ and in civil society, in the judiciary, in the military and in the ‘security sector’, in consulting and accounting, in science and in culture, in the media and among the lobbyists. These forms of co-operation, or rather the capital oligarchies underlying them, reproduce themselves as such via the appropriation of the fruits of a third party’s labour (primary exploitation) as well as through redistribution and dispossession (secondary exploitation). Their property rights are guaranteed by the impersonal legal systems of a modern state which is in the possession of the monopoly of organized violence.

The three decisive questions currently are the following:

- Will the so called “right wing populists” be able to reduce and to abolish individual liberty, individual rights, as well as collective social and democratic rights – in order to dictate new rules to society with its members – especially in relation to ethnic minorities and other forms of “otherness”, and will they be capable of implementing these new rules by making use of public and private instruments? What does their development mean for the trans- and international relations, for the developments within the EU and of the EU? Which are the consequences this will have for emancipatory and solidarity-oriented agents?

These questions are closely connected with another one: Why has been the left unable to use the global financial crisis and the amalgamated crises with it for getting into a political offensive? (see IV.)

II. What has been the emergence (in a social, an economic, and a cultural sense) of the issues indicated and made use of by so-called “right-wing-populism” in the EU with its member states since the beginning of the years 2000?

On the one hand, nationalist and other reactionary forces had not disappeared from European societies in any moment of time. On the other hand, these forces have been provoked and promoted by neo-liberal economic developments, by the processes of “European unification” and of “globalization”, as they have been promoted, as well as by certain modernization processes of society (gender relations, opening of possibilities for more individual life styles etc.). While this emergence resp. development of deep societal and global changes² have been taking place, the EU

² These may be summarized by the following points:

- Aiming at “gains from globalisation” the EU has had to improve the political, social and economic conditions for the TNCs and for other global players and realise a broadly accepted societal compromise ensuring its own political unity, internal security, and social coherence. On the other hand, it has had to respond to its “alliance responsibilities”, i.e. to realise control over the neighbourhood and at the same time to acquire or maintain a capability for global military action.
- In parallel, confident and economically relevant powers have been and are still arising in the very neighbourhoods of the EU. Such powers are now gaining leeway by building their own alliances among themselves and/or with powers like China. These powers partly build on seemingly powerless subaltern movements (especially of wage earners and farmers), which in the end seem to lead to the emergence of new variants of capitalism.
- On the other hand, especially in the countries of the centre, new ideological and cultural upheavals are emerging and expanding, specifically calling for political alternatives to the established powers. As relevant left wing political alternatives are, until now, systematically blocked, these calls seem to be met ideologically by right-wing populism, by forms of fascism and by religious fundamentalism. At the same time political systems, state administrations and society at large themselves seem to be generating a growing propensity for violence and repression.
- These developments, in turn, serve to reinforce the trend towards a ‘new security paradigm’ with an underlying tendency to make openly repressive and even military instruments for more ‘security’ politically legitimate and acceptable as such. Even more generally, social concerns are increasingly met by authoritarian and exclusionary responses, as recent social security reforms in several EU member states clearly have shown.
- Ideological and cultural upheavals are more and more taking place under the hegemony of different kinds of fundamentalism. State governments and civil society structures themselves have begun to generate a growing propensity to violence and repression. This tends towards leading to a new ‘security paradigm’, in the form of a tendency to accept openly repressive (and even military) means as politically legitimate for more ‘security’.
- Social concerns are increasingly met by authoritarian and divisive responses, as social reforms in several EU member states recently have shown. These institutions together with the IMF determine neighbourhood policy principles and they do in fact ‘recommend reforms’ to neighbouring countries. A certain historical welfare state compromise still appears to be centred on the middle class and this leads to crucial social questions being ignored or treated merely as questions of charity. Immigrants are systematically

has adopted its Lisbon strategy, and it has realized an enlargement which has been reinforcing social inequality, under increasing economic imbalances and regional disparities.

While marginalising global problems, especially the ecological crises and the rising conflicts at a global scale, and while forcing militarisation, the EU and its member states have been exposed to the global financial crisis. It therefore has transformed into an economic and into a 'Euro crisis' and even into a crisis of the EU. But the societal conflicts and violence in the neighbourhood of the EU have turned explosive and therefore have pushed people to migration and to simply trying to escape.

III. What is the current state of these problems in the EU and in its member states?

The on-going piece-meal management of these crises has changed the EU itself profoundly and sustainably³. It has been taking place in connection with the destruction of social and democratic standards, as well with an exacerbation of all the existing social, economic, cultural and political

excluded from this compromise. But migration and escape from conflict have become a key reality defining the social issues of today.

- The relationship between the EU and its neighbours has been determined by changes of statehood and democracy within the EU, as well as in its neighbouring countries. This affects the development of an "EU statehood", as well as the on-going processes of state building (as e.g. in the USSR successor states) in a decisive way, leading towards a more or less destructive 'restructuring' of states from without or from within (with Iraq and Turkey as opposite examples), or straightforward state destruction (as in Somalia or Syria), and the impact of separation movements (Kosovo, Crimea), making statehood itself a major stake in an international struggle for power, with destructive (often deadly) consequences for the populations concerned. The war on hegemony in the Near East fought in Syria now not only blocks all possible solutions to other major problems of this area, it also tends to deteriorate the overall situation of crisis in the Southeastern neighbourhood of the EU.

- The privatisation of the public sphere is more and more affecting the administration and security services provided by governments, and this, again, leads to changes in the relationships and the exchanges between states. These on-going processes of privatisation and liberalisation purport to seek a redefinition of democracy, which further diminishes the admitted leeway of democratic politics, while effectively excluding any real participation and incorporation.

³ These changes can be summarized by the following points:

- the EU and the Eurozone have been further moved in the direction of the neo-liberal paradigm of economic policy, which continuously destroys real economic potential,
- EU law has been changed in the same direction,
- EU institutions have been changed, the financial architecture and the institutions of the Eurozone have been "improved" in an, at the very least, rather contradictory way,
- a new Union method which is systematically undercutting democratic controls has been more and more put to use,
- a new type of Association Agreements and free trade agreements have been signed,
- inequality and poverty have increased, a humanitarian crisis is developing, new zones of exploitation are being tapped,
- solidarity and social fellow-feeling as elements of social and territorial cohesion are diminishing or vanishing,
- democracy has been destroyed in many respects and is still under pressure of further destructive processes,
- in the very neighbourhood of the EU violence and dislocation are taking an explosive turn, thereby also affecting the EU itself,
- repression, surveillance, and militarization are increasing within the EU, the co-operation with NATO has reached a new quality.
- Germany has come out clearly to dominate within the EU, while
- the EU is constantly declared to be in a state of emergency or exception, and leading governments are acting on this basis, neglecting or transgressing its existing legal bases,
- the very existence of the European Union is more and more questioned by reactionary and nationalist forces. The significance of Brexit goes far beyond being a simple example for that broadening tendency of wishing for the traditional nation state to come back.

contradictions and problems in and of the EU. Accordingly, it has also increased fears among many people to lose their income, wealth and social status. It thereby has induced a crisis of conservatism, of representation, and of the welfare state

While the left wing forces have been and still are unable to launch an initiative based upon emancipation and solidarity, the agents of so-called “right-wing populism” (and also of new forms of authoritarianism and male chauvinism) have risen in number and diversity – and they have increased their political momentum. Their impact is still rising and it is linked to an increase of violence within the societies. There is a tendency towards a certain linkage between this so-called “right-wing populism” and the recourse to a rather moderate conservatism which will in the end reinforce the tendencies towards authoritarianism. The danger of authoritarian “right-wing populist” political forces has reached a degree, where the possibility of their “coming to power” in central member states of the EU can no more be discounted.

IV. Political conclusions

The central challenge for the left wing forces is and will be to search for possibilities to act politically in an effective way. This starts with initiative which will be feasible on the local level, within the municipality, constituting the left as an attractive living force, capable of helping the weakest, of working on specific projects concerning the everyday life of “ordinary people”, of effectively dealing with any kind of threat emerging from anti-emancipatory forces – by organising communication and co-operation of people and groups on specific problems and aims, while at the same time building and strengthening solidarity. This should be connected with a radical left critique of the form and the mode of ongoing globalisation, of the really existing European Union. and their agencies, especially addressing those based within their “own” country. Being in a political situation of strategic defensive and having been unable so far really to address the causes of the different crises and problems, we should have a closer look at the still and newly on-going political activities of emancipatory agencies and agents ‘in the field’. It is and will be a crucial question, how to strengthen and how to connect these activities and, especially, how to bring them in a way together that the EU institutions would be forced to act against capitalist oligarchies and against the reactionary anti-emancipatory forces – in the interest of those who wants a decent life for everybody.

We have found three interrelated (or at least inter-relatable) fields of action with regard to which such a perspective may be developed:

- the struggle for active local and regional development,
- the struggle to maintain and democratize the public sphere, in particular public finance,
- the struggle for democratic, social and ecological standards – in particular for minimum social security to defend people against poverty, for protecting basic rights, for fighting against on-going ecological destruction.

The on-going as well as the emerging and coming defensive struggles are (resp. will be) about defending democratic, social and ecological standards in order to prevent further projects of the capitalist oligarchies, especially economic and “security”-oriented mega-projects, further deregulation and privatization of the commons, of nature and of the public sphere – and, in this connection, free trade and investment protection agreements such as TISA. One of the crucial arguments in favour of them is the promise of “growth”, while in reality reinforcing the development of destructive production and consumption patterns and the driving processes of commercialisation. It will be of central importance to become capable of demonstrating that there are viable alternative perspectives and that the forces needed for the fight for them, as well as for their realization can be effectively mobilized. This will have to do with local and regional problem-solving in the housing economy, with the supply of food, energy and social services and with the transport sector, as well as with certain sectors of the construction and agriculture industries. Such perspectives of significant change may then begin to seep into the everyday life of citizens who could actually start to challenge the reigning social consensus – as employees, residents, users, consumers, customers, or even as

socially, ecologically, politically committed people, with their forms of organization and association. This task is made even more urgent by the on-going rise of those “right wing populist” forces, which has begun at least to develop the power for blocking any real political alternatives by propagating reactionary pseudo-alternatives.

This strategy-building of the left wing forces – from individuals refusing competition and ecological destruction to their common social, cultural and political initiatives and to organisations including, trade unions and political parties, and state institutions – would require building local and regional alliances as well as constructing supra-regional, European, and transnational networks between these alliances. As a logical next step, they will have to focus again on the preservation, democratisation and expansion of the public sphere, as well on the introduction and implementation of democratic, social and ecological standards and, finally, on the struggles to open possibilities for an alternative local and regional development. But for making the existing possibilities to act in these directions really possible, i.e. to combine and to multiply the actions of the different emancipatory forces struggling for alternatives, the issue of comprehensive solidarity modes of living has to be put into the centre of the work for developing programmatic left wing ideas and conceptions, as well as the corresponding long-term strategies of political action. The explanation for this is easy: the mode of living is complex and concerns all aspects and dimensions of societal reality. But only the massive individual human desire to live together with everybody in a decent life and in an intact nature, as well as the individual and collective will to overcome the reasons for preventing that, challenge the societal conditions and dominant social relations.

While understanding “authoritarianism” and “right wing populism” as repercussions of the political weaknesses of the left which leave them space within our societies, we need to ask ourselves and others the following four questions and discuss them in depth:

- Why did the neo-liberal ‘revolution’ in its triumph structurally weaken the left, in particular during the 1980s?
- Why, in the aftermath of the recent global financial crisis, which subsequently grew into a crisis of the euro and the EU, did the left generally remain in a strategical situation of the defensive?
- Why is it the case that the so-called “right wing populist forces” are profiting from the unsolved crises of European societies?
- Which are the causes behind the lack of solidarity provided by the left in the EU with the Greek left-wing government elected in January 2015?

These are closely interrelated questions, because the same institutions and people have caused and have profited from the corresponding processes and/or problems: ideologists, think tanks, politicians and the representatives of European finance capital. The left wing forces have proved incapable of effective resistance, because of being unable to empower themselves and the others for being able to see and to deal with the societal reality without any direct or indirect influence of a communist or social-democrat or other whatever leader. Dedicated organising and solidarity is still required. The left wing forces could have attempted to create the needed momentum by developing an attractive project and by offering organisational structures that appealed to people with a material and/or ideas-based interest in such a resistance: either, because these changes would or could have structurally improved their position in society, and/or because these changes would or could have enhanced justice in society.

So finally, we also need to talk about our history and our experiences. But these discussions could not take place in detachment from dealing with the current social reality, but in closest connection with current, on-going struggles against the ruling powers, for developing joint strategies in order to support the victims of the dominant policies, as much as to build renewed political forces of radical democratic opposition. Ultimately, this could provide the basis for further action, as well as for joint

political strategies, while at the same time countering the main agents of neo-liberal policies and stopping the advance of “right wing populism”. These forces tend to block the way for the urgently needed mobilization for resistance as well as for emancipatory struggles – simply by offering scape-goats for existing problems alongside with pseudo-solutions – which – in the end – always amount to reinforcing domination, repression, and violence.

Because the current individual and societal everyday life on all local, regional and national levels is in fact connected with the EU level in its specific relationship to the global one, an adequate in-depth analysis of the new dimensions of European politics will be a much-needed starting step into that very direction. And making use of existing networks and experiences of the left wing forces will then be required to go beyond this starting step, creating at least the beginnings of an innovative process of deliberation on how to confront the emerging constellation of crises and its more or less creative management (on the European, on the EU, as well as on the member state levels) in its multi-level reality. Such a democratic counter-strategy will have to begin by carrying the debate on European politics to the sphere of public deliberation within the member states, while aiming at common, solidarity-based reactions to these politics from above. Such initiatives can start this process well before it will be possible to have its claims articulated by more than one member-state government. And we may well make use of already existing trans-national networks of mobilization and alliances in order elaborate and to propagate alternative approaches to the problem management in opposition to all kinds of right-wing proposals – in struggling to make these alternative approaches prevail within the public of our respective member states, while beginning to change the strategic orientations of political parties, and, via their intermediation, also of a (hopefully) growing number of member-states’ governments.

This would still be far from building an effective strategy of transformation in Europe – but it would be a decisive starting point for really developing such a strategy – in the face of the crises of the EU, and in face of the global crises of which they are a specific element.

V. Questions for further research.

We see especially five questions to be addressed by further research which are closely interrelated:

The central question is a very complex one and has been accompanying us for years: why is the left so weak? (1)

This weakness is especially to be stated in relation to other agencies – and, therefore, the challenge is and will be to permanently analyse what the other social and political agencies (with their constitutive perspectives and interests) are doing and what they are achieving – especially with regard to economic policy and to the development of the economy. This brings us to the second question:

Who is why doing what, and with which consequences for the political conditions of these different – neoliberal, “right wing populist” and fundamentalist – agencies? Which are their specific theoretical bases, economic policies, and economic consequences? (2)

From here, we shall have to come back to ourselves – with our individual and political gratitude and behavior more or less marked by authoritarian populism – and ask the question: What does all this mean for the political conditions of left wing agency? How to improve the own political economy and economic policy of the left wing forces? (3)

Working on strategies means also working on critical scenarios for the political, and, finally, for the societal development. (This demands an on-going analysis of social structures, classes and social milieus. Accordingly, a close cooperation e.g. with sociologists and political scientists will be

necessary.) We shall have to enquire, which are the scenarios specific to the development of the “right wing populist” and fundamentalist agencies? (4)

While knowing about the deficits of their own capacity and fully aware of the central importance of the issue of “security” in dealing with different neoliberal and “right wing populist” and extreme right wing agencies, we shall have to enquire about the importance of economic theory, of economic policy and economy of “security”, inclusive of their relevancy for the questions (3) and (4).