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New Countries, Old myths

A Central European appeal for an expansion of European understanding

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Since the beginning of 20th century European integration, politicians rooted the idea of a cohesive European community within the context of a Western European historical and intellectual tradition. As former Soviet Bloc states accede to the European Union, a Franco-German narrative is no longer appropriate. Encompassing the history and tradition of Eastern Europe, with its own history of integration and radical political thought, will be a major challenge to a cultural unification of the European Union. Every political regulatory model looks to establish its own historical legitimacy, its own mythology. European integration is no exception. Times have changed since the first president of the Commission of the European Community, Walter Hallstein, boasted that the European Community did not have a mythology. In his book *Europa 1980*, he wrote: “The European Community doesn’t have a symbol, it doesn’t have a flag, a hymn, a parade or a sovereign. It doesn’t have any means of integration that appeals to the senses, the eyes, the ears. This is in accord with the style of our community, an objective style characterized by dispassionate hard work.” Times have changed. Today’s community now needs to take into account the experiences of no less than 27 member states.

Teeming with symbols

Today, when it comes to a discussion of a European constitution, the speeches of EU politicians are teeming with symbolism, noble words and historical references. Historical arguments, as justifications for European integration, are en vogue. “As a consequence, the instrumentalization of the past, for the purpose of legitimizing and consolidating the community, doesn’t just affect the nation states,” observed political scientist Fabrice Larat as early as 2005 in the *German Law Journal*. Larat speaks of a European *Acquis historique*, composed of a collection of values, norms and convictions derived from common historical experiences. With the help of these norms

and convictions the Union attempts to evaluate and regulate the relationships between the member states and third-party countries – and sometimes to control them.

What do these principles consist of? Let us take a look at Robert Schuman's 1950 founding declaration of the EU outlined a series of fundamental values upon which European integration was to be built: German-French reconciliation, peace, stability, economic growth.

The political reconciliation of France and Germany formed the basis of a declaration which was interpreted as the beginning of a new philosophy, one that maintained that European integration was possible and would constitute a special moment in world history in which the nation-state being transcended. For the new member countries, entering the EU with their own historical experiences, the idea that the model of a unified and peaceful Europe is to be traced back to German-French reconciliation, is arrogant simplification of European history under the political dominance of France.

From Münster to Maastricht

Consequently, there is a series of elements of the established EU mythology whose anachronistic character has been revealed by the expansion of the European Union to include Central and Eastern European countries. Let us take the Peace of Westphalia for example, the treaty that put an end to the bloody religious wars of the 17th century. In Europe it is frequently interpreted as the first step on the road to European integration which did not happen until the second half of the 20th century. From this perspective, the development from the Thirty Years' War to the European Union appears as a logical process, beginning with premodern, Christian Europe, through the modern concept of a sovereign state, to today's EU as a post-sovereign and post-national organization.

This concept is questionable in a number of respects. According to this interpretation, the Peace of Westphalia is seen as an event that led to a definitive break in the concept of a Christian, universal order in foreign policy. This was replaced by an order of secular, sovereign and absolutist states. However the post-Westphalia order was far from immune to the attacks of strong states. The Poles can testify to this, with their country being divided no less than three times during the second half of the 18th

century. And in the 19th century European order gave rise to colonialism and nationalism, which later resulted in two world wars.

European integration was designed to provide a remedy for ills, which, as Former German Foreign Minister Joschka Fischer stated in his 2000 Berlin Humboldt University address, must mean taking leave of the kind of nation-state that had plunged Europe into two world wars. In other words: European integration doesn't just provide an answer to the 17th century demand for the secularization of political life, it is also, and above all, a reaction to the failure of the idea of a sovereign nation state in the 20th century.

The established interpretation of a transition from premodern to modern Europe and finally to the post-national concept of European integration is derived from the specific historical experiences of France and Germany as the leading European nation states of the 19th century. The belief that the development of Germany and France is representative of collective European development remains dominant to this day.

In the beginning , the Enlightenment

Another historical point of reference frequently cited in narrative of Europe's integration is the Enlightenment. EU commissioner Günter Verheugen stated in a 2005 interview with *Internationale Politik* that he was "in favor of everyone in Europe living according to their own identity, but that we must have something in common regardless of whether we are Christians, Jews, Muslims or of no faith: a clear commitment to the achievements of the European Enlightenment. There is no way around this."¹ For the former French prime minister Jean-Pierre Raffarin, Europe essentially begins with the Enlightenment: "Europe is an idea that has been searching for happiness and justice since the epoch of the Enlightenment."² The "Enlightenment" is defined as a variant of political and intellectual developments in France during the 18th century. This analysis fails to take into account the fact that there was never just one Enlightenment encompassing the whole of Europe but a variety of different forms of the Enlightenment happening side by side. In her 2004 book *The Roads to Modernity*, the US philosopher Gertrude Himmelfarb named three

¹ Interview with Günter Verheugen: "Europa muss Weltmacht werden" *Internationale Politik*, January 2005, pp 34-43.

² *Rzeczpospolita*, 15.1.2004.

different Enlightenment traditions that play a role in European thinking: the French Enlightenment of reason, the British Enlightenment of social virtue and the American Enlightenment of freedom. So there is not just the one “European Enlightenment” from which we can derive practical conclusions for the European Union. It is only the French enlightenment that made a conscious attempt to establish itself as an antithesis to Christianity within the European tradition. Activists who draw upon “Enlightenment” values when opposing public religious symbols are evoking only the French tradition, and ignoring that this is in conflict with the British, and American traditions.

A Question of War and Peace

The third model providing a historical legitimacy for European integration is rooted in WWII. There is a consensus agreement that this experience is the main motive for the adoption of the integration project in Western Europe in the 1950's.

Even though the memory of WWII has faded considerably in Western Europe, integration is still the international legal community's democratic response to the recurring threat of new forms of radicalism in Europe. No state and no society in Europe can consider themselves immune to such dangers, although it is frequently assumed that there are specific nations and regions of Europe (i.e. Eastern Europe), which are at greater risk because of their history. These dangers can take a variety of forms, from populism to rightwing nationalism. From this perspective, European integration is a form of institutionalized vigilance that guards against the recurrence of the past. However, since a series of countries from beyond the former “Iron Curtain” have joined the European Union, this interpretation of integration no longer suffices to generate a strong and sustainable sense of community. It fails to incorporate the new member countries' deep-seated experience of communist totalitarianism, which, alongside national socialism, was decisive in forming historical consciousness in this part of Europe.

However, a simply expanding the Western European framework to encompass experience of communism is not so easy. When the Latvian Foreign Minister Sandra

Kalniete stated that communism was a criminal system on a par with national socialism, she was confronted with a massive wave of opposition.³ The demand is gradually being raised in the West that “it is no longer permissible for the Union to exclude the traumatic history of its youngest members for reasons of pure political opportunism. The time has come to finally acknowledge this history, even when it is sometimes hard to admit that its only hallmark is the suffering of the victims. Where people were caught between two totalitarian dictatorships, good and evil inevitably existed side by side.”⁴

Accordingly, it is not simply a case of the new member states conforming to the European Union’s *Acquis historique* – far more, this should be extended to take into account their specific historical experiences. This applies, as Fabrice Larat outlined, not only to Soviet imperialism, but also to integration projects such as the Warsaw Pact or the Council for Mutual Economic Assistance (COMECON), a regional trading block.

However, what is to be done in the case of a problem that goes beyond a conflict between different forms of recollection? What when history is required to provide the justification for different approaches to a far more fundamental question – namely the question of a different philosophy in dealing with the common public space? In this case, should it arise, it would appear that a simple extension of the *Acquis historique* would hardly be capable of resolving the conflict.

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³ [footnote needed]

⁴ Reinhard Veser writing in the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 1.3.2005