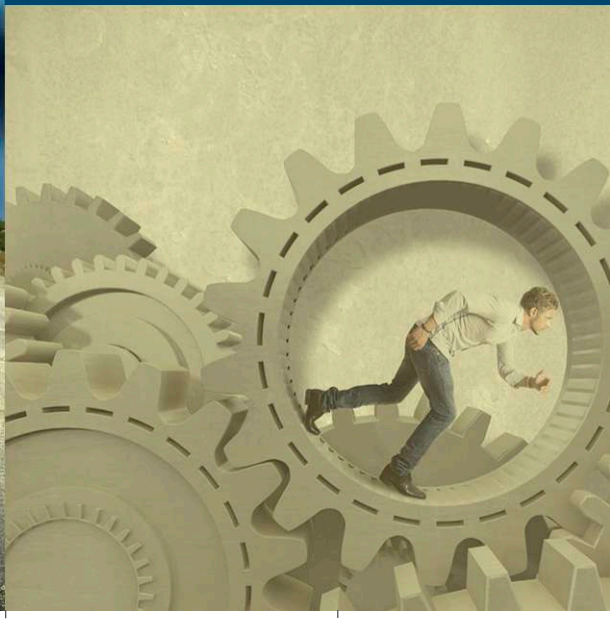
Europe and the Spectre of Post-Growth Society



Piotr A. Świtalski

Debates
at the Council of Europe
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COUNCIL OF EUROPE
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Introduction: Europe and the crisis of values

By the end of 2013, Europe started to see light at the end of the tunnel with regard to overcoming the most serious crisis it had experienced in many decades. In public discourse, economic and social pressures have overshadowed the other dimensions of the crisis, including societal values. The fact is that Europe has been facing its most serious crisis of values since the fall of communism, a crisis aggravated by the fiscal and economic weaknesses of recent years. Obviously, some of the social tensions underlying extremist political behaviour can be attributed to economic hardships. However, the crisis of values would appear to be more than simply an effect of the recession. In addition, the developments in and around Ukraine in November and December 2013 showed that the question of values could once again assume a geopolitical dimension.

Europe is primarily perceived as a political project. It is in fact a political project that was born of history. The founding fathers of the European Union had one basic ambition in mind, which was that Europe should be freed once and for all from the spectre of national rivalries and wars and be liberated forever from oppressive regimes and ideologies. In this respect, the European identity was shaped by a common desire to turn away from the dark sides of European history and, judged on this basis, the project has been highly successful: Europe has experienced an unprecedented period of peace and stability, and the Nobel Peace Prize awarded to the EU in 2012 was clear recognition of the success of the European project.

However, besides being a political project the European identity is above all about values that are the foundations of political institutions and economic co-operation, and this applies to a bigger family than the EU. Europeans have every reason to be proud that Europe is perceived as being synonymous with democracy, human rights and the rule of law. Indeed, it has built the most advanced and effective system for upholding these values.

The recent crisis has had a serious impact on the vitality of the European model of democracy. As observed by Amartya Sen (2012), the crisis of Europe is a crisis of democracy. Many people have lost confidence in democratic institutions at all levels: European, national and local. Electoral absenteeism is one of the most deplorable symptoms of this disease, and populism, demagoguery and political extremism are on the increase. Political institutions are being held hostage to personal wars, and majoritarianism has led to a temptation to abuse political power. It is a very sad reality that, 20 years after the fall of communism, Europe must face the fact that in certain countries there are still people who are considered political prisoners and that European institutions are powerless to deal with this phenomenon. Millions are deprived of basic political liberties such as freedom of speech or assembly, while elsewhere oligarchic circles manipulate political and public life. The outcome of elections is heavily influenced by different interest groups.

The European model of tolerance, understanding and mutual respect faces serious challenges. Rising xenophobia, discrimination against Muslims, anti-Semitic rhetoric and intolerance towards lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) minorities are serious blows to the European identity. Openly anti-Semitic politicians are to be seen in some parliaments. Muslims have become the minority most discriminated against in many European societies, and anti-gay legislation has been passed in a number of countries. Hate speech is rife, and not only on the Internet.

Europe is not coping well with managing its diversity, and some fatalists see this as the curse of European geopolitics: too many widely differing nations squeezed into too little space. Some politicians have begun to warn of a return to fragmentation and the re-nationalisation of European politics. Intolerance can quickly turn into violence.

The key component of the European identity, which Europeans are so proud of, is the rule of law. Indeed, Europeans have developed a strong catalogue of rule of law principles. Nevertheless, a virus is spreading throughout Europe, with devastating repercussions for the health of democracy and human rights: the virus of corruption. This virus, to which no country seems to be immune, is capable of mutating, rendering our remedies to combat it powerless. As a result of corruption scandals, several European governments have recently been brought down. Furthermore, the justice systems of many European countries are subject to growing criticism. In some instances, this is still mainly due to political control over the administration of justice, but in most cases it has to do with inefficiency. The continuing high number of applications lodged with the European Court of Human Rights is testimony to the lack of public trust in the functioning of national systems.

The human rights protection system based on the Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms is a joint achievement that Europe can be proud of. The European Court of Human Rights is pivotal to this system. With the accession of the EU to the Convention, currently pending, this system will soon become even stronger. However, with the changing identity of our societies we are faced with new challenges, mainly the relationship between collective and individual rights. Resolving the increasing tensions between majorities and minorities, as well as the rights of groups and the sovereignty of the individual demands new efforts.

This relationship goes far beyond national or ethnic issues. It transcends cultural or religious dimensions and it has implications for many aspects of human rights.

The assault on European values cannot and should not be underestimated. It is legitimate and logical that the attention of politicians and political institutions is now focused on overcoming the recession and boosting economic growth in Europe. Some believe that once Europe is back on the path of growth many problems of a social nature will disappear. This belief is based on a tried and tested approach. But growth, which is seen as the most effective instrument for solving political, social and economic tensions, has become something of a fetish. It is quite a natural tendency to believe that once people have good and secure jobs, become wealthier and once again aspire to career opportunities, they will become more self-confident and thus more tolerant, more liberal and more empathic. Coupled with sustainable growth, political, social, ethnic and cultural divisions will lose their significance, according to this perception. But even if it is true that Europe needs growth like a fire needs oxygen, it would be totally naive to believe that growth is a panacea that can cure our societies of all their dysfunctions.

Some economists predict that human productivity in Western societies will stop increasing. Growth in Western societies will be exposed to serious "headwinds", they say, including those resulting from demographic trends, and Europe will not be spared from the effects of these factors. Demographers forecast that Europe's population will stop increasing, and may begin to decrease. Europe also suffers from rising income inequality, which inhibits economic growth. The environmental sensitivities of European societies are high, adding to the technological costs of production. Taken together, this means that the era of unlimited economic growth may soon come to an end in Europe, and Europeans may become members of the first post-growth society. Perhaps the current prolonged economic crisis is only a sign of a much more strategic challenge, and economic growth will no longer be a miraculous formula to be used when addressing societal challenges. Already now pundits predict that the return of economic growth in coming months will not produce tangible impacts on social issues; the link between economic growth and family incomes has been broken. For the first time in more than 250 years new generations will not enjoy better living standards than the previous generation.

The crisis has turned Europe into a scapegoat: it is mentioned whenever certain politicians have to explain difficulties and tough decisions and it is rarely seen as the solution. More and more often, "Europe" is associated with the European Union and for many reasons it is assumed that the future of the EU will determine the future of the whole continent. What is significant in itself is that today, more than 50 years after the Treaty of Rome, European politicians are asking themselves the very existential question of why we need Europe. Why they are doing so is clear: the economic crisis has shaken confidence in the European project. Paradoxically, much of this is the fault of pro-European forces. We took Europe for granted, but, like every beautiful and noble idea, it needs constant nurturing. All those concerned (not only politicians) need to talk about this in order to give the European project renewed meaning as circumstances change and new challenges arise.

One thing is certain: only in unity can Europe face the challenges resulting from this paradigm shift. Europe as a concept is therefore of significant strategic importance. As we know, historically European integration proceeded on two tracks. The defining element was economic and political integration, as reflected in the model of the EU. However, Europe is bigger than the EU and the European agenda is bigger than the economy and politics. The Council of Europe is the embodiment of the second track of European integration, and both facets of European integration are needed to provide responses to present and future challenges. If Europe is in fact the solution and if "more Europe" is needed, we also need it through the Council of Europe. It is obvious that one cannot revive the fine spirit of Europe without first proving the benefits of closer economic co-operation. The European project can regain credibility if it manages to put Europe back on the path of stable and sustainable growth, but it must be accompanied by a restoration of faith in European values. More political investment is needed in the Council of Europe, the guiding role of which is crucial to achieving this.

As stated earlier, the European identity is bigger than the economy and Europe is more than the EU, so we need to revive the idea of pan-European co-operation based on specific values. Can the pan-European dimension be attractive when Europe is increasingly identified with the EU? Some experts say that the EU is like a leviathan, and it will have to institute and develop new powers, including in the fields of human rights and democracy. It has the necessary political and economic instruments to have a much bigger potential impact when it comes to persuading states to apply European standards and uphold values. However, even a strong EU cannot shoulder the burden of fostering a European identity on its own. Whatever its geographical scope, it cannot go it alone. Europe needs a bigger coalition: we need the Russian Federation, Turkey, Ukraine or Switzerland in their respective leadership roles.

In many countries, some people perceive the European identity as a threat to the values that make up their nations. They fear that the European instruments and European institutions serve the purpose of projecting external values that could damage the cohesion of their own societies. They keep forgetting the fact that Europe is and will remain multicultural. European standards are not aimed at imposing cultural homogeneity and there is no political agenda behind them, but common standards can make Europeans feel much more comfortable about their lives in this age of globalisation. Europe's harmony depends on how strong these values can be.

Human rights, democracy and the rule of law are mentioned like a mantra when defining the European identity. Values will be the key issue in a post-growth society. Tzvetan Todorov (2008) has put forward the thesis that justice is the primary European value. Hence a post-growth European society will preserve its harmony only if it is able to find a stable institutional and legal framework for the principles of justice. Justice is deeply embedded in the European identity and has many facets, the functioning of courts being just one. However, all other values must contain a strong component of justice: democracy must be just, the economic system must be just and the rule of law must be just. We must be prepared for the increased demand for justice when approaching the post-growth age. Already now, the demand for justice, both in its retributive and distributive dimensions, is growing. Justice will be the organising value in the Europe of the post-growth age.

One of Europe's great paradoxes is that we declare our regional identity on the basis of values, which by our own definition should be universal. Zygmunt Bauman (2004) explains that this is very European. We believe in our capacity for discovering values and then in our responsibility to convey their universality to other civilisations. The political dilemma today is: does this approach make sense in an increasingly globalised world? Will discussions on the European identity lead us to defensive reflexes against the influence of other civilisations? Will it lead to the concept of "fortress Europe" in a global world? Will it produce a syndrome of a detached, idealised but irrelevant European island? These scenarios are most probably unfounded, since Europeans have always been open to the world and have tended to spread their consciousness across the globe. Nevertheless, there is one conclusion that Europeans must draw for the functioning of their institutions: a European identity based on values is increasingly exterritorial. Motivated by this perspective, Europeans must remain open to countries in their neighbourhood and beyond who want to live by European standards.

We sometimes hear that the European soul suffers from *akrasia,* by which is meant a tendency to know what should be done combined with a persistent reluctance to actually do it. In times of such crucial tests, it becomes imperative to prove that this diagnosis is wrong – provided that we are sure what to do.

Based on presentations at Subotica (Serbia) in May 2013, Pristina (Kosovo)[1] in December 2012 and Podgorica (Montenegro) in June 2013.

This publication is based on several talks and on my presentations held at sessions of schools of political studies from 2012 to 2013. The views expressed in this essay are purely personal, but the thrust of these contributions reflects the strategic explorations conducted within the Directorate of Policy Planning at the Council of Europe Secretariat. The Directorate is responsible for providing day-to-day support to the schools.

Over the past 20 years, in close partnership with the Council of Europe, 19 schools of political studies (SPS) have been established in countries in transition to democracy.[2]

1. All reference to Kosovo, whether to the territory, institutions or population, in this text shall be understood in full compliance with United Nations Security Council Resolution 1244 and without prejudice to the status of Kosovo.
2. The 19 European schools of political studies are (in order of their founding): Russian Federation – Moscow School of Political Studies; Georgia – Tbilisi School of Political Studies; Bulgaria – Bulgarian School of Politics "Dimitry Panitza"; "the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia" – School of Public Policy "Mother Teresa"; Bosnia and Herzegovina – School of Political Studies Bosnia and Herzegovina; Moldova – European Institute for Political Studies; Kosovo – Pristina Institute for Political Studies; Serbia – Belgrade Fund for Political Excellence; Romania – "Ovidiu Sincai" European School; Croatia – Academy for Political Development; Armenia – Yerevan School of Political Studies; Ukraine – Ukrainian School of Political Studies; Azerbaijan – Baku Political Studies Programme; Albania – Academy of Political Studies; Montenegro – School of Democratic Leadership; Belarus – East-European School of Political Studies; Tunisia – Tunisian School of Politics; Morocco – Citizens' School of Political Studies of Morocco; Visegrád (Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland and Slovakia) – Visegrád School of Political Studies.

Today, the model is well established and plans are underway to include western European countries as well as additional countries in the European neighbourhood.

The schools of political studies offer an open and impartial space where dialogue and exchange are encouraged among upcoming leaders involved in the political, economic, social, cultural and environmental spheres, as well as the media. In many countries, the schools bring together people who would otherwise rarely communicate with each other, for example members of opposing political parties or politicians and representatives of civil society.

Each school selects a group of participants (approximately 35) on an annual basis. The activities supported by the Council of Europe comprise a basic programme of at least three national seminars per year covering a broad and ever-evolving range of themes relating to democracy, the rule of law and human rights. Emphasis is also placed on developing practical leadership skills, for example in management, communication and public speaking. Throughout the year, the SPS and their network organise additional events, such as bilateral and regional meetings.

Each school's annual intake comes to Strasbourg to participate in the Council of Europe's World Forum for Democracy. As well as providing stimulating, youthful input into the Forum debates, their presence in Strasbourg affords an opportunity for the students to meet their peers from the other schools. For the Council of Europe, the schools function as a significant multiplier for the values, objectives and standards promoted by the Organisation. For the schools, the Council of Europe offers an umbrella that enables them to adhere to the high standards set by the Organisation, particularly in countries where they may be subject to political pressure. This "safety net" role also helps the schools attract young leaders from all sectors of society to participate in their programmes.

Recognising this mutually beneficial relationship, the Council of Europe Committee of Ministers has identified the schools of political studies as a priority area for the Organisation, and a continuous effort is being made to involve them further in the activities of other parts of the Organisation, for example standard setting, monitoring and capacity building.

A well-functioning network of schools is in place and serves as a platform for exchanges of experience between schools and for the organisation of bilateral and regional activities. Such exchanges facilitate informal, in-depth dialogue between countries in the same region (for example Russia and Georgia; Armenia and Azerbaijan; Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Croatia) and thereby can contribute to reconciliation in divided regions.

The network also facilitates opportunities for partnership projects and joint initiatives. Recent examples include: the Regional Academy for Democracy, which comprises the seven Western Balkans schools of political studies; the Eastern Partnership University for Democracy, which brings together the six schools of the Eastern Partnership region; and the Tunisian and Moroccan schools, which are joining forces to organise regional seminars in the Maghreb region (North Africa). Moreover, the Visegrád School, which brings together young leaders from the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland and the Slovak Republic, is the first genuinely regional school.

In recent years an ever-growing network of alumni has been developed and serves to strengthen co-operation and links both between current and past participants. Many of the schools' alumni attain high-level posts, either in their own countries or internationally, and are in a position to act as multipliers for the values that the schools, the Council of Europe and, ultimately, Europe itself represent.

In 2008, the directors of the schools founded the European Association of the Schools of Political Studies in order to strengthen ties, stimulate development and support the Council of Europe's activities to promote the schools' network. Endowed with a legal framework, the schools now have a tool that allows the network to communicate with a voice of its own.

This essay by Piotr Świtalski is a tribute to the schools and their valuable activities.