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Discontent Is Europe's Main Threat

Sometimes films about Romans tell us much more about the current world than we would dare to admit. In Monty Python's *Life of Brian*, there is a scene where anti-Roman revolutionaries ask rhetorically: "What have the Romans ever done for us?" only to list, with increasing reluctance, the aqueducts, sanitation, roads, irrigation, medicine, education, wine, public baths and public safety.

For decades, the European Union has been cast – at least among its champions – as an undisputed force for good. Peace, prosperity, democracy, social progress – all wrapped up in a neat technocratic bow. But today, many European citizens are channelling their inner Judean People's Front, grumbling: "What has the EU ever done for us?" The grand project of unity and stability is now viewed in many quarters as an out-of-touch overseer, blind to the grievances of those who no longer feel they belong. The "Romani ite domum" moment of Monty Python fame is being transformed into a growing continental cry of "Eurocrati ite domum": Brussels bureaucrats, go home.

This discontent is not merely rhetorical. It is reshaping the European political landscape with alarming speed. The numbers tell their own story. Support for hard Eurosceptic parties – those proposing the demise of the EU or questioning basic European principles, such as the primacy of European law over national law – reached close to 15% of the vote in national legislative elections in 2023. If we add the softer Eurosceptic parties, the vote in that same year for parties opposed to further EU integration stood at 28.5%. Today it is very likely to be around one-third of the total vote. In four countries – Hungary, Italy, Poland and France – Eurosceptics command or approach an outright majority. They already govern or participate in government in Hungary, Italy, Slovakia and the Netherlands, play kingmaker in Sweden, and are the largest party in Austria and Poland. Given the current trend, they will soon be knocking at the doors of power in many other European countries. And the profile of their voters matters. The strongest surge of support for Euroscepticism is found in the hard right, whose electoral weight now stands at 25% of the electorate and exceeds that of the 1930s; a historical parallel that should give us pause.

What explains this widespread discontent? Traditionally, the rise of discontent has been based on cultural explanations (Norris & Inglehart, 2019); on the revolt of individuals – often men, often ageing, often white, often with low levels of education – who increasingly feel ill at ease with a Europe that is far more cosmopolitan and diverse than the one they grew up in. These are people who, according to sociologist Arlie Hochschild (2018), feel like strangers in their own land. Territorial explanations also abound. The battle lines pit thriving, globalised cities against stagnating towns, suburbs and rural areas (e.g. Rodden, 2019). However, one explanation that is gaining significant traction is that of long-term economic stagnation and decline. Many places in Europe are stuck in what is increasingly known as a development trap. As defined by my colleagues and myself (Diemer et al., 2022), a place is in a development trap when it is unable to retain its economic dynamism in terms of income, productivity and employment, while also underperforming its national and European peers on these same dimensions. There are 60 million Europeans living in places where the GDP per capita in real terms today is below that of the year 2000. About one-third of the EU population lives in places that have been falling slowly behind. The incidence of development traps is particularly strong in France, Italy, Greece and Croatia, though they can be found in virtually every country in the EU.

And, in contrast to what happens, for example, in the US, when a place in Europe falls into a development trap, it stays trapped for long periods of time. Economic stagnation has become a structural feature in many parts of Europe. People living in these places that increasingly "don't

matter” (Rodríguez-Pose, 2018) are driving the rise of Euroscepticism. The Eurosceptic vote is a consequence of a reaction of communities in which individual losses are strongly identified with collective losses. It is fundamentally linked to the geography of decline (Rodríguez-Pose et al., 2024); to places that have witnessed considerable economic, employment and demographic decline over the long term. The Great Recession of 2008 may have ignited the fuse of their reaction, but the discontent has roots that are far deeper.

So, what is to be done? Can this growing Euroscepticism – the gravest threat to the European project since its inception – be stemmed? Many advocate that, if the driver is cultural, there is a need to engage in cultural wars. But engaging in *Kulturkampf* is a dangerous game; one that risks deepening the fractures already running through European societies.

A more pragmatic response lies in tackling long-term economic decline. Many of the voters that have shifted towards Eurosceptic positions live in places that have fallen through the policy cracks: too rich to attract the attention of the European cohesion policy; too static and unglamorous to be at the centre of national policies. Yet, these places still have significant economic potential that remains untapped (European Commission, 2024). It is not as if the drivers of the industrial revolution and of much of the prosperity during the 20th century have lost their economic mojo overnight. The problem is largely territorial and requires a response of equal ambition. If concentrated economic decline continues unchecked, the political consequences will be seismic. This is no longer a debate about economics. It is about the very survival of the EU.

Yet, our decision-makers wring their hands over declining global influence, about competitiveness, defence, climate change, the digital transition. All of these, of course, are highly pressing concerns. We certainly need a more competitive Europe, able to defend itself and lead the fight against climate change. But let us not delude ourselves. All these priorities will become academic if Euroscepticism continues its march towards outright dominance. Without an EU that can survive in its current form, there will be no more competitive, more secure or greener Europe; there will be no well-functioning single market. There will simply be a very different Europe from the one that has been built over the last 70 years. If Trump’s acolytes seize even more power than they already have – or even just continue to reshape the political discourse, without even having to win – we will return to the fragmented continent of old; one involving national rivalries, illiberal regimes and greater economic irrelevance.

And so, we return to Rome. In Ridley Scott’s *Gladiator*, a frail yet wise and triumphant emperor, Marcus Aurelius, asks his most trusted general, Maximus Decimus Meridius, why he fights for the Empire. Maximus replies “I’ve seen much of the rest of the world. It is brutal and cruel and dark. Rome is the light!” On the other side of the Atlantic, events are already proving just how brutal and cruel and dark the world can become. The EU is imperfect, certainly. It is flawed and in need of reform. But it is also the most successful attempt at peace, prosperity and democracy the continent has ever known. And all the alternatives on the table are far, far worse. So, we must fight for it. And we must act fast. Rome is the light! Europe is the light!

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