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The crisis of European identity and awakening of civil society

Martin Mycielski

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Abstract The EU is facing its biggest threat yet—a crisis of European identity. As member states fall into the hands of Eurosceptic and nationalist regimes, for many the future of the Union seems hopeless. People are disillusioned, failing to see the added value in the community of nations they once voted to join. Institutions are struggling, unable to regain their citizens' trust, or even to reach them at all. This new crisis requires a new way of thinking—instead of supporting the institutional machine, the EU must support the people. It needs to place trust in the awakening civil society, endorsing and funding grass-roots movements such as the Committee for the Defence of Democracy, which in a matter of days managed to ignite the biggest mass protests in Poland since the fall of Communism.

Keywords Europe | Identity | Democracy | Nationalism | Civil society | Grass roots | Protest | Movement

M. Mycielski (✉)
Wilfried Martens Centre for European Studies, Rue du Commerce 20, 1000 Brussels, Belgium
e-mail: martin.mycielski@kod.ngo

Introduction

From its conception as the European Coal and Steel Community, through the fall of the Soviet bloc and up until the beginning of the global financial crisis, the EU was largely portrayed as a utopian idea come to life, the ultimate accomplishment of Western civilisation. It was viewed as an eternally prosperous liberal democracy, the answer to the turmoil of the first half of the twentieth century and a definitive end to hundreds of years of destructive conflicts. With this creation from the brilliant mind of Robert Schuman, Western Europe was finally safe from war, poverty, political instability, and any struggles common to the Second and Third Worlds. Secure in their bubble, the EU's 'old' member states would only reach out to grab those that they deemed worthy to join them in their exclusive gentlemen's club. The EU seemed close to sci-fi writer and creator of *Star Trek* Gene Roddenberry's vision of the twenty-third century come to life (British Humanist Association 2016).

In any event, that was the idea sold to us Eastern Europeans throughout the 1990s and 2000s. A beautifully packaged, flawless product, with a simple slogan: 'Join us and be prosperous and worry-free forever'. This must surely have been one of the most successful—if unintentional—public relations campaigns in human history, with nations such as Slovakia, Lithuania and Slovenia completely buying into it, with more than 90% of their referendum votes cast in favour of joining the Union.

But putting the idea of the EU in marketing terms seems cruel and superficial. After all, it is so much more than a simple product. Its goal is not for one side to profit at the expense of the other. Its underlying concept is synergy—that the community as a whole is worth more than the sum of its parts. We pitch in a bit and get more out, especially if we had not been doing too well before. In business terms it would be a 100% safe investment. No risk, just profit. Or is it?

The breakdown

For a time we were all beneficiaries of this community concept. The product we had bought, the safe investment, was paying off. And it was paying off well: development funds and investors were pouring in, there were mind-blowing export opportunities, free movement—you name it. The best business idea? Producing metal signs with the European flag and the words 'Funded by the European Union'—every village in Poland had one.

But as born consumers we should have known better. Any product, even one with an Apple logo, has an expiry date. At the point when you least expect it, the product will start acting up, until it fails completely. At this point a Eurosceptic politician would conclude this metaphor, with a grin on his face, stating that the EU has done exactly that: it has crumbled under the weight of its overgrown ambitions and broken down as it was destined to do from the start. Except that... it hasn't.

But something has failed. The rising tide of nationalism, from populist powers gaining control of Poland and Hungary to the completely unexpected Brexit vote, is a symptom of a much deeper issue: the demise of European identity as a result of European self-gratification.

The enemy within

To paraphrase Petrarch, the EU has no greater enemy than itself (von Zimmermann 1808). The carefully cultivated—and largely deserved—belief in the image we ourselves created led us into a phase of self-indulgence. The more we believed in the Union's success, the less we felt we needed to do to maintain it, and while some of us continued to profit from it, more and more people were being left behind. By its own hands, the EU was dying, at least in people's minds.

We have all heard of 'the 1%'—first a theory, then a rough estimate, now a fact reported, among others, by Oxfam (*BBC.com* 2016): 1% of the world's population has as much wealth as the rest of the world combined. But in Europe financial inequality is not the only problem. There is also an inequality of European identity. This is the Brussels 'EU bubble', the hundred thousand officials, politicians and bureaucrats who now 'own' more EU identity than the other 509 million EU citizens combined.

As various mounting tensions in the nations of the EU have reached boiling point, the people have entrusted power to nationalists and conservatives. This change is not the responsibility of the poorest layers of society—it has been down to the most disillusioned. The two are not the same. The disillusioned masses, the aforementioned 'left behind', are not critical of the EU because of their material situation. They are not *per se* critical of the EU at all. As recently as 2013 Eurostat (2015a) showed that Poles had a life satisfaction rating of 7.3/10, 0.2 points above the European average, and Poland still leads the EU-enthusiasm rankings, with 72% having a favourable view of the EU in 2016 (Oliver 2016). In second place? Hungary.

This leads to the obvious question: how can people be content with their life, with a positive view of the predominantly liberal EU, and at the same time overwhelmingly vote national conservative parties, such as Jarosław Kaczyński's Law and Justice (Prawo i Sprawiedliwość, PiS), into power? The answer is both complex and simple. Of course the direct causes are many—from a general fear of both real and fabricated enemies in the public consciousness (e.g. Islamic State and refugees) to more tangible electoral cornerstones such as PiS's 'Family 500+' programme (a child subsidy scheme in theory, a simple cash giveaway in practice). And that is the simple answer: populism and smart political public relations (Kaczyński is undeniably a genius in that respect), leading to a relatively easy victory. It might be thought that such a boost in popularity would be hard to maintain in the long run, quickly tumbling under the pressure of having to manage the EU's fastest-growing economy (Eurostat 2015b). Instead, nearly a year has passed since the Polish elections, and support for the conservatives and nationalists is stronger than ever. Extreme nationalist (or, more bluntly, neo-Nazi) squadrons march

through cities on the occasion of state funerals (*Sputnik* 2016), with President Duda proudly publishing photos of their flags and flares (Duda 2016). From the perspective of Brussels it must seem to be a paradox—the most Euro-enthusiastic nation supporting the most Eurosceptic political powers and ideals.

On the one hand of course there are extremist groups, such as the National Radical Camp (Obóz Narodowo-Radykalny) or the All-Polish Youth (Młodzież Wszechpolska), which deeply believe the EU to be the worst evil. But they are not mass movements (not yet at least) in the sense of forming the bulk of PiS's electorate. According to recent studies, PiS's support comes from rural areas and cities alike; from people of all ages (still with slightly higher support from the 60+ group); and predominantly with lower levels of education, but with 25% of university graduates supporting them—in other words PiS has voters across the full spectrum of the Polish population (Maliszewski 2015). Evidently voting for a Eurosceptic party does not clash with these voters' positive views of the Union. There can only be one reason for this—a complete lack of understanding of what the EU is about. Not only do people not know what the EU does for them, but they do not care about it, or give it any thought until they are asked about it in a poll. This is a complete failure of the EU's most fundamental principle—creating a sense of community among the European people.

The obsolete machine

A recent *EU Observer* opinion piece—written, interestingly, by a Eurocrat—points to some of the underlying errors in the EU's ways (Civis Europaeus 2016). While it is true that the Union is in theory an agglomeration of member states, and their governments should therefore bear responsibility for conveying the EU's message and values to their citizens, it is irresponsible to shift the blame onto them. One does not need to be a Eurocrat to know that member states, in the best case scenario, put their own interests first, and in the worst case have only the governing party's self-interest at heart. They will never put a set of abstract EU ideals, including European identity, ahead of their immediate interests.

Hence, for the sake of the Union, it is imperative for European institutions to completely reshape their priorities and their entire way of thinking. The model of a management office fit for Schuman, Monnet, Adenauer and comrades, who believed in European unity and only needed a sewing machine to keep everything stitched together, was obsolete the moment the Berlin Wall collapsed. Certainly, as mentioned earlier, every Eastern European wanted to be part of the West, but in this new landscape this was far from enough to keep the European spirit alive. Europeans—new and old alike—do not need a machine working somewhere far away in Brussels. They need people, people who represent the EU, who *are* the EU, walking among them.

The anonymous author of the *EU Observer* piece offers an idea: the Commission should employ highly professional, local spokespeople, to actively campaign in the member states for the EU. Instead of delivering midday press briefings, these people

would jump from one TV studio to another, from talk show to talk show, giving a ‘face to the EU’. This is a clever idea, certainly, but would it be enough? Not even close. Such a person, even if he became a minor celebrity (‘that EU guy from breakfast TV’), would soon end up in the same basket as the other ‘talking heads’ on TV—being just another suit, another guy who has made it and is now stuffing his agenda down our throats (to avoid a more graphic metaphor). No, the EU cannot be just a term heard from our television speakers—we, the people, have to *be* the EU.

Project EU reconnect

The deterioration of EU identity, this detachment from the European brand—to revert to the business metaphor—is eerily similar to the struggles faced by the world’s biggest marketers. Studies presented by the World Federation of Advertisers (WFA), the global association of brand owners, show that most people would not care if 74% of brands disappeared, and that only 20% of brands ‘improve our sense of well-being and quality of life in a meaningful way’ (Karmarama Good Works 2016). Is not improving well-being and quality of life the ultimate objective of the EU? It is, and on the whole it is being achieved too, in the same way that a disposable nappy vastly improves the quality of life for a parent. But what we are missing here is the ‘sense’, that knowledge of what the EU is doing for each and every one of us. Just as young parents nowadays fail to see any added value in a disposable nappy, European citizens take the EU for granted, oblivious of its accomplishments. Ask a 25-year-old parent about a reusable nappy and you will get the same response as if you had asked about national borders—‘a what?’

Similar studies by Meaningful Brands show that 80% of brands believe they deliver great customer experiences, while only 8% of customers agree (World Federation of Advertisers 2016). The EU allegory here does not need explaining. While for the advertising world this overwhelming customer disengagement has resulted in the rise of ad-blocking software, the EU faces a rise in Euroscepticism and nationalism.

The WFA’s answer to the issue was what they called Project Reconnect—an ‘effort to develop a better understanding of what people want and expect from brands’, requiring ‘listening, dialogue and change’ (WFA Project Reconnect 2016). But wait—you say—that’s something the EU has been trying to do all along, isn’t it? After all, whole directorates in the Commission are devoted to these goals. So how should the EU ‘reconnect’ with the people?

As mentioned earlier, the primary requirement is a change in thinking, a different perspective. All the existing ideas revolve around revamping the EU’s communication methods, changing how information is handed down from institutions to citizens. And while that is hugely important, there is a limit to how many celebrity spokespeople the Commission can have in Poland, and the number of chat shows they can attend. The EU’s communication strategy should not be top down, delivering great facts about the EU to citizens who just do not care, but should work from the bottom up. It is the citizens

who should spread the EU's words and democratically topple any nationalist rule. This is the one thing that can save the EU: a true civil society.

Of course, civil society is not something that can be artificially created by an institution. A true grass-roots movement has to rise spontaneously, be born in peoples' hearts and not be founded by a government or institution. But that does not mean that institutions cannot support such organisations. Luckily for the EU, the groundwork has already been laid.

KOD – the Solidarity of the twenty-first century

Following the 2015 presidential and parliamentary elections, all of Poland's power was seized by one party, PiS, and in practice by one man, Jarosław Kaczyński. He took control of the media and the judiciary, already holding the legislature and the executive. The separation of powers as such ceased to exist. With the paralysis of the Constitutional Court and a refusal to publish its verdicts, the constitution became nothing more than a page in the history books. This was more than enough to cause the people to rise up. Just as they did in the 1970s and 1980s, when they formed the Workers' Defence Committee (Komitet Obrony Robotników, KOR) and then Solidarity (Solidarność), the people created the Committee for the Defence of Democracy (Komitet Obrony Demokracji, KOD).

KOD is a textbook example of a twenty-first-century grass-roots movement. Barely weeks after the October elections, a handful of middle-class working people created a Facebook group, inspired by an article by a former anti-Communist oppositionist that warned of the impending 'deconstruction of democracy at the hands of PiS' (Łoziński 2015). They called it 'Komitet Obrony Demokracji' (Committee for the Defence of Democracy). Within just three days the group had gained 30,000 members and was the talk of Poland. And thus Polish civil society, largely dormant since Lech Wałęsa's Solidarity, was reborn.

The movement drew people of every background and every age, not only liberals but also right-wing conservatives—everyone who cared for democracy, which was being threatened for the first time since the fall of Communism. The movement quickly took to the streets, acting spontaneously and reactively: at every government attempt to dismantle the foundations of Polish democracy, KOD supporters immediately flooded the streets. Demonstrations ranged in size from 30,000 people in Warsaw, to hundreds of thousands throughout 40 Polish cities and numerous capitals worldwide, with the biggest demonstration to date, entitled 'We are and will remain in Europe', gathering up to 240,000 people on the streets of Warsaw (*PressTV* 2016). A nationwide poll in April 2016 revealed that 5% of the population, an astonishing 1.5 million people, had already attended at least one KOD event, with another 23% planning on or considering doing so in the future (*ONET Wiadomości* 2016).

A protest movement was just the beginning. As the Committee grew, it quickly developed robust structures, with regional and local branches in practically every municipality in the country. Being a KOD supporter became ‘the in thing’, a must for every Pole who cared about democracy, the rule of law, fundamental rights and, most of all, his or her European identity. At the same time KOD cells started sprouting up all over the world, with the first KOD demonstration abroad organised in Brussels itself. KOD became a registered association in Poland, as well as in the UK and, more globally, in the US; the Brussels-based KOD International was also established, which aims to bring the KOD spirit to the entire EU and beyond.

KOD has become a household name. Polls conducted after four rounds of protests showed that 46% of the population supported KOD, compared to 42% for the PiS regime (TVN 24 2016). This momentum could not be allowed to go to waste. Street protests, while attractive to the media, were not a feasible long-term solution. Having structures and manpower, the Committee established working groups tasked with a simple set of goals: to find ways for civil society to thrive, to halt Kaczyński’s dash to a dictatorship and to safeguard democracy forever. These teams of experts gave life to initiatives such as KOD Media—an online news platform, *Koduj24.pl*, and a future radio station—which hired all the public media journalists deemed ‘undesirable’ by the new government. A KOD think tank was formed to provide specialist knowledge and expertise in the fields of economics, political science and the social sciences. A project called ‘Space of Freedom: What Poland Do We Want?’ has gathered over 100 experts, and aims to ‘provide everyone with the solid foundation necessary to become a conscious, involved citizen of the democratic state’ (KOD International 2016) by organising a series of meetings and debates in every major Polish city. These debates include the topic of Poland’s position within the EU.

Finally, one of KOD’s most daunting undertakings was to gather over a hundred thousand signatures in favour of the Citizen’s Bill on the Constitutional Tribunal—a draft law prepared by the country’s top legal minds, which would solve the crisis and safeguard the constitution for future generations. As it turned out, the bill fulfilled all of the recommendations that would be issued by the Venice Commission some three months later. Unfortunately, with PiS having a majority in parliament, this people’s initiative was doomed from the start. But the message got through—the people have risen, and they have a voice.

Conclusion

Now a fully grown non-governmental organisation in its own right, KOD is still just one tree, with a forest needed to cover Europe in order to produce enough oxygen to clear the air of undemocratic pollutants. This is where the EU needs to come in, redrafting its budget and refocusing its enormous machine to support movements such as KOD, wherever they may sprout. In Poland alone there are dozens of movements and initiatives, some of them very young, combating hate speech, intolerance, racism and

other close-minded ideologies. Across Europe as a whole, there are hundreds of similar groups.

The awarding of the European Citizens' Prize to KOD by the European Parliament was a welcome gesture, but it gave the people of Poland a pat on the back and not much more. Europe requires action on a scale never seen before. People do not need the Commission to issue press releases; they need to see it working with them, hand in hand, whenever they rise up to say 'no' to illiberal rule—be it in their city, in their country or on their continent. The EU must become actively involved in any initiatives that provide a positive message and are fighting to reclaim people's minds for European ideals. These organisations are the agents of change, not the institutions' spokespeople.

As Gene Roddenberry would put it, the Commission needs to boldly go where no institution has gone before.

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Martin Mycielski is the plenipotentiary of the board for international affairs at the Committee for the Defence of Democracy (KOD) and founder of KOD International. With a background in EU institutions, the Polish Ministry of Foreign Affairs and marketing, he writes for EU publications, represents civil society at EU-bubble events and lobbies for Poland in EU institutions.