

CITAS-Dialog 2019

Europa, quo vadis?! Wie geht es weiter nach der Europawahl und dem Brexit?

13. Juni, 19-21 Uhr, EBW, Regensburg.

This discussion was planned in late 2018, when the results of the EU elections were unknown. We assumed that the United Kingdom would be out of the EU by then. While the title might thus have proven to be a misnomer, the key questions of where Europe – both as an ideal and as a set of political and economic institutions – is heading, remained relevant.

The event was organized in cooperation with the Evangelisches Bildungswerk Regensburg, with its coordinator Carsten Lenk moderating the discussion. Thank you to all the speakers – Rainer Liedtke, Ulf Brunnbauer and Jochen Mecke, and especially Joanna Rostek, who travelled from Giessen. We are also grateful to the audience for attending in large numbers (around 45 people) on a delightful summer evening.

The discussion began with statements by the speakers, focusing on the regions and countries they specialize in, before the speakers and audience engaged in broader dialogue. Joanna ROSTEK argued that the Brexit vote and its aftermath has laid bare divisions in the United Kingdom that go beyond pro-European and Eurosceptic positions. Divisions between rural and urban areas, young and old, and the countries forming the UK, have become more salient. Ironically, as she notes, the UK followed European trends in the election, with traditional mass parties such as the Conservatives and Labour, losing votes to rivals with clearer positions on the key issues.

Jochen MECKE questioned whether ‘division’ (Spaltung) was the right term, arguing that the term’s prevalence in public discourse could function performatively, to create divisions where perhaps debate and tensions were more reflective of realities. He examined the situation in Italy, France and Spain, finding a diverse set of results, with Spain standing out with the leftist socialists winning most votes, while Italy and France had produced successes for Eurosceptic populists. Having gained power in their own countries on the back of an anti-elite campaign, they tended to present “Europe” and “Brussels” as an imagined elite to be challenged. A sense of self-victimization prevails in such discourses, he argues, where home-made financial crises and inequalities are blamed on Europe.

Ulf BRUNNBAUER drew on this evidence to argue that there is a significant misperception about Eastern Europe as the cradle of anti-European politics, since it is primarily Western European countries that have enabled populists to gain prominence, Austria’s FPÖ, who prove immune to corruption scandals for a hardcore of votes. Parties such as PiS in Poland and Fidesz in Hungary are, he argued, not far removed from late-twentieth century conservative Christian Democrat parties, he argued. Where a clear East-West division is evident, is in the fact that not even ten percent of Green MEPs come from the east of the continent, which indicates the salience of certain ideological and economic divides that could affect the European future. Of particular concern, he argued, is the division between metropolitan and peripheral areas that EU membership has exacerbated in new member states. Ultimately, though, the EU has a positive effect, meaning that he argued passionately for countries such as Albania and North Macedonia to be admitted, even if further expansion might prove unpopular among Western European countries while corrupt practices in such countries might go unpunished. Ultimately, he stated, it is a case of ensuring Europe avoids being overcome by Russian or Chinese influence on its own doorstep.

Rainer LIEDTKE focused on Greece as a case study of how generally pro-European parties were most successful in the elections, despite conditions offering apparently fertile ground for Euroscepticism

and far-right parties. Ultimately, traditional voting patterns more reflective of local, often clientelistic practices, prevailed. He was thus keen to stress, as a historian, the significance of the *longue-durée* in voting practices and political attitudes. This meant he also questioned whether terms such as crisis and upheaval (*Umbruch*) are the best to describe the current situation, since Europe had experienced much worse in the twentieth-century. Commenting on Brexit, he suggested that some anti-EU sentiment is understandable when considering that the UK had signed up to what it hoped would be a largely economic project. The more it has shifted towards a political project, evident in the phases of expansion that embraced first post-dictatorial southern and then Eastern Europe, the more British scepticism has grown, despite the clear economic benefits of EU membership for the UK.

Joanna Rostek agreed, arguing that that the British experience had served other countries as a warning against leaving the EU. Still, as her powerful closing remarks suggested, to ensure a viable future for Europe as an ideal and political structure, it is necessary to engage with critical and sceptical views, since European and national elections, as well as public discourse, shows that they cannot be dismissed or ignored.

While the audience was by and large pro-European, the event nevertheless laid foundations for understanding the specificities of the countries and regions that form Europe.