

"Popular or Populist Democracy in Central Europe?"

Thursday, 27th February 2014, from 10:00 till 15:30

Venue: The Great Hall, Czernin Palace,
Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Prague

Cooperation: FES Prague and the Institute of International Relations Prague

Panel II: European integration as a source or a solution of populism?

Chair: **Lucia Najšlová**, Charles University, V4 Revue / EUROPEUM Institute for European Policy, Prague

Vladimír Bilčík, Slovak Foreign Policy Association, Bratislava: *Central Europe in EU governance debate*

Josef Janning, Mercator Fellow, DGAP Berlin: *German hegemony in the Eurozone?*

Vít Beneš, Institute of International Relations, Prague: *European integration as a top-down project of elites and the role of national parliaments*

Agata Gostyńska, Polish Institute of International Affairs, Warsaw: *EP elections and their implications on the interinstitutional relations*

Chair Lucia Najšlová

Lucia Najšlová presented Panel II as attempting to answer a challenging question: whether the European integration is a source of populism or a solution to populism. According to her, in our country the EU was usually framed as the ultimate good or the ultimate evil without enough nuances. That does not mean that we should dismiss the question of whether the current shape of the EU integration is a benefit for the citizens of this partnership between 28 states.

Josef Janning

Josef Janning treated the subject of German hegemony as a complex myth with a significant influence over the way that populists' European rhetoric is founded.

According to Mr. Janning, a lot of populist movements are built on the fact that the mainstream is not listening. This is true but it is a little bit complicated because nowadays, the mainstream has become populist in certain way. An early example of populism can be Tony Blair, as a leader who wanted to lead his people wherever they would be ready to follow. Angela Merkel is also of the

same type. Her signal is “Let’s find out where we should be going together”. On the contrary, though, the cold type of leadership says “This is where we are going; you have to trust me and follow me.”

The argument about German hegemony can be developed with an assumption that there is a will and a capability of German politics to dominate Europe, and to shape it according to Germany's own desire. Josef Janning talked about the theory of imperialism. Germany was the principal imperial agent of the United States within Europe, and it was calling the shots. In the thinking of the colleagues from the German Democratic Republic (*GDR*) there was absolutely no question about the fact that whichever way it would go, the GDR would have a very quick and easy entry into the European community.

Inside Germany and in some of the more populist discourses in the so-called *creditor countries*, this hegemonic argument could be phrased as “Nothing in the EU is possible if it is against our will or our consent.” which he called hegemony by denial. This impression has been very much reinforced by the way that Angela Merkel has dealt with the euro zone crisis - by not taking an open position as the crisis broke out and delaying the decision up to the very last moment. In some of the northern populist movements it has been a very welcome attitude. In recent times we can eye the growth of another term - *sovereignism*, as it refers to one of the stronger shaping factors of today’s EU discourse. This factor somehow pushes people to think that “with our will, almost everything is possible”, but in reality things are possible only if you are able to win a substantial majority. So when you look at real power issues in the EU, Germany is quite a powerful actor but not nearly as powerful as it would need to be to fulfil any requirement other than hegemony by denial.

Secondly German policy would have to seek to build shaping coalitions around a revived context, and a revived common cause around a revived Maastricht spirit. After all, even the UK and Denmark have ratified the Maastricht Treaty, and they are part of the monetary union. They are not implementing the 3rd stage but just the 1st and 2nd stages with the reporting and monitoring requirement. They have everything to do with the euro and the whole fiscal coordination. There is a need for a sufficiently sizable coalition for us to say what we do in order to strengthen governance in the euro zone. Then Germany would have to reduce the asymmetry in European integration. Some member states need the support from the others and have to undergo additional commitments. This is a great problem for communication and also a great resource for populist rhetoric.

Finally, we need to define and codify commitment that is equally applicable to all member states, such as the European veto over national budgets. Then we will also need to launch something which would not be following the lines and transferring powers from the national to the European level - that would be a common program on governance reform.

The chair Lucia Najšlová then highlighted one element of the speech - the general crisis of politicians resigning their leadership role when the leaders are just following the public opinion, and perhaps, with or without the EU integration, the situation will be the same in the future.

Secondly she noticed that the question of the intentional or non-intentional hegemony of Germany would have to be discussed. She also said that another question which should be discussed is whether this position of Germany is just a consequence of its economic strength or a result of its will.

Vít Beneš

Vít Beneš started his presentation with the classical definition of *democracy* - “a government of the people, by the people, and for the people” - and then continued with a discussion of the definition of *autocracy*. In an autocracy, as opposed to a democracy, the law is produced by the autocrats, not by

the people. According to him the EU is not a democracy because the three requirements of democracy are not fulfilled in its case. But the EU is not an autocracy either because there is no single autocrat in it. He explained that the EU can be seen as an international organization (IO), which means that it is a government of the states by the states.

The theory defended by some authors is that the EU is a government of the people by the states. The EU law is not an international law; it is directly applicable to individuals.

The first assumption of the EU is that Europeans are identical and homogenous. That is the reason why the EU provides equal rights and obligations to them. Who governs the European Council and the Council of the EU? These two institutions still remain the principal decision makers, and they tell the Commission which laws have to be drafted. The position of Beneš on the EU's legitimacy is that the EU government is not legitimate because there is a discrepancy between those who are governed and those who govern. The intergovernmental EU system produces laws that are directly applicable to individuals but without legitimacy; directives from the EU are dictates from a foreign government that lead to nationalist populism and systems dominated by great powers.

If the EU citizens are homogenous and identical under the EU law, they should be sufficiently identical and homogenous to create this law. The thesis that there is no demos is a cheap excuse for not allowing the Europeans to make their own law. The second option is that if we are not homogenous and identical enough to create the EU law, then there is no justification for the EU law.

The chair Lucia Najšlová underlined the idea of the European demos. We can link the debate on it with the new European Parliament election if we look at the discourse of the candidates in the different countries. Their main agendas are based on the concept of "I am going to get something out of the EU for my country" and not on the concept of "I am going to do something for the EU because we have some common interests".

Agata Gostyńska

Agata Gostyńska highlighted that the rise of populism is an important issue for the coming European Parliament elections. Since the Lisbon Treaty has been written, the member states have had to take into account the result of the coming European Parliament (EP) elections and the nomination of a president of the Commission. This is the legal foundation of personalization. According to the EP and the Commission, this innovation is more about the nomination of a candidate in every political family before the election than an institutional issue. Member states are not at ease with this process of personalization. They are afraid of the centralization of power in a supranational institution.

Ms. Gostyńska showed the arguments of the supporters of personalization and also those of the opponents. The supporters think that it will lead to greater competition and a boosting of the European public sphere. To back up their arguments, they use a Eurobarometer report which stated that people will be more inclined to vote for one top candidate. Other polls proved that 39% of people are happy that the EP would choose the next president of the Commission. This will make the next president more legitimate. In comparison, 27% of people disagree with the idea, and 34% have no opinion on it.

The opponents focus on the unintended implication of this election and the polarization of the Commission. They think that the Commission will not be a neutral institution in charge of the agenda anymore.

In the speaker's opinion, the personalization of the elections is unlikely to favour a boost of the competition. It would, however, mean a big change for the relation between the EP and the Commission. The following election will take place against a background of populism rising and a weakening of the European consensus on EU affairs. The mainstream political parties will have to speak up and compete somehow with the pro- and anti-European cleavages and pick up some of the subjects of the eurosceptics. The election will take place in the context of a continuous policy with the aim to complete the economic and monetary union. With this fact, the election could be an instrument for a more democratic EU. The result could be a closer relation between the Commission and the Parliament, but this trend will or will not be confirmed only after the election... Ms. Gostyńska proposed some recommendations in regard to the problem of reinforcement of the eurosceptics due to personalization. She suggested that it will be better to have this wide campaign with the top ten candidates reinforcing the EP, which could reinvent the Commission at some point. The nomination of a candidate could at least encourage a better coordination with the EU. Most of the big European families already published a common manifesto for this election. That could be the solution to the democratic deficit.

Vladimír Bilčík

Firstly Mr. Bilčík touched on the topic of populism and the EU integration. The speaker considered populism as the idea of disturbing the peace of the status quo of the political institutional policy. He explained the difference between two kinds of populists. On one side there are those who bring social schemes into the political discourses, asking for more participation in an enlightening populism. On the other side, we have the dissatisfied masses, which see a black and white picture of the world. They ask for more leadership and the answer to the problematic situation. In regard to Central Europe and these two populisms, the speaker talked about the importance of not just focusing on the last 5 years but on the last 20 years. The European integration project has been a popular project of this period, but the populist ideologies came into play much more later. The integration is both the solution and the source of the problem. The popularity of European integration, for instance in Slovakia, was an answer to the creation of Slovakia as an independent state. The building of the modern state of Slovakia was tied to the European integration project. More generally, the Central European countries attempt to provide an answer to the crisis by answering the following question: "What kind of EU do we want today as a part of the governance debate?" In Central Europe pro- and anti-EU respondents give very different answers to that question. The solutions to the governance crisis and the individual EU projects are different, so we cannot talk about homogeneity in Central Europe. For instance, despite the place of Slovakia in the heart of the EU and integration into the euro zone, the political participation in the European governance is not so strong, and also on the level of citizens we can see very high abstention rates in European elections.

Discussion

The first questioner - from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs - asked Vladimír Bilčík the following question: "Who are the pro-integration populists today in Central Europe?"

Vladimír Bilčík said that the pro-integration populist is the one who wants more leadership or EU answers to complex issues which the member states cannot deal with by themselves. He gave three names as examples of pro-integration populists: *Petr Drulák* is a pro-integration populist; *Radek Sikorski* and *Maroš Šefčovič* – who are current members of the European Commission – are two other examples.

The second question - about the lack of democracy and legitimacy in the EU - was addressed to Vít Beneš. The questioner remarked that the members of the EP and the representatives of the governments are elected, so there is no lack of legitimacy. He compared the European Council to the Czech Senate and asked about the differences between them.

According to **Vít Beneš**, the reason why we have eurosceptics in the EU is that they are right. There is a democratic deficit because of the eurosceptics, but we should try to promote the intergovernmental model without thinking that it is the source of the democratic deficit.

Some populists want more power for the parliament with less power for the EU. As for the comparison between the Czech Senate and the EU Council, the Czech Senate is elected in Czech Republic-wide elections. Each of the senators swears that he or she will represent the whole of the Czech nation. But they also represent the interests of their respective districts. Another thing is the difference that exists because of political parties. We vote for one individual and also for his or her party, so de facto each senator is not accountable to us, but to his or her party.

In regard to the idea of the top candidate, Vít Beneš asked a rhetorical question: “How can we speak about competition when European political parties are not allowed to compete in the elections?” There is a competition here, but only between their national proxies.

Vladimir Handl from the Institute of International Relations in Prague asked about the expectation of Josef Janning that Germany is a very incomplete hegemony, especially in foreign defense policy.

Firstly, **Mr. Janning** brought forth the idea that the more globalization progresses, the more people develop their sense for an identity that they are seeking - national or regional. This is a concept that was not created by the populists, but they live from it.

Josef Janning then expressed his opinion that Germany is a non-hegemonic state, but it is also a state with very strong leadership position. He said that he believes that we will see German initiatives on foreign and security policy, including defense. There is a willingness on the part of German ministers to drive this attitude forward.

A second question was about the supposed effect of the decision of the German Constitutional Court to dismiss the threshold of 3% at the European elections.

Josef Janning answered that the consequence will be that 10 or possibly 12 of the 96 seats for Germany at the EP will go to parties that were previously not represented because the voters vote strategically.

The Constitutional Court said that there must be a good reason to not give top priority to the constitutional guarantee that all votes will be equal. They would accept it if the parliament had a very important function in stabilizing the political process. In the view of the German Constitutional Court, obviously and regrettably, the EP does not have an important role and thus the threshold is not needed. Mr. Janning also mentioned that the mainstream parties are overly tempted to push populists out instead of taking them on.

Mr. Handl then turned also to the other speakers. He asked about the question of the Visegrad platform's role.

Vladimír Bilčík answered that the European integration, as a popular issue in the Visegrad context, still has an inspirational effect in Central Europe, and it also has such an effect for the new Central Europe – for instance, Ukraine. If we can agree about several internal issues, we will be able to have a single voice in opposition to our biggest common neighbours and also in our common political efforts.

Agata Gostyńska answered that the Visegrad Group has been successful on lots of points – it was successful in traditional fields of policies, enlargement, the Eastern Partnership, energy, and so on. But as for the political vision of the economic and monetary union, there is no consensus in the Visegrad Group. There are, anyway, some common denominators that could enable the V4 to boost

the cooperation and achieve some promising results, such as the pre-meetings before the institutional council meetings in which the countries try to coordinate their stands.

The last questioner - from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs - asked a question about the concept of the “Spitzenkandidat” and how this concept is going to work.

Agata Gostyńska answered that in her understanding the idea of one top candidate is just a starting point before the greater cooperation. For the first time, the parliamentarians are faced with the necessity to choose the top candidate who will represent the joint manifesto of the political family.