

# EU: new leadership, old problems

## On the state of the EU as the new EU Commission takes office

1. In the election campaign for the European Parliament last May the established parties and the mainstream media succeeded in creating the impression that after a decade of multiple crises a trend reversal was imminent. Voter turnout rose and the leading daily Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung was pleased to note: "*The rousing escalation and historical dramatization during the election campaign with the catch-phrase "fateful elections" - may have been regarded as exaggerated for some, but nevertheless, it did have the intended effect.*"<sup>1</sup>

2. However the disenchantment came swiftly. The Spitzenkandidatenmodell, previously vaunted as ensuring that the EU could be democratised, was rescinded with one stroke of the pen and the Commission presidency was decided on by Macron and Merkel in the same old fashioned way. This confirmed what Macron himself had stated in 2017: "*Those who were at the top in Europe ... applied the methods that had worked well for decades, namely to decide on Europe among themselves*"<sup>2</sup>.

3. Since conservatives and social democrats no longer have a parliamentary majority decision-making processes are becoming both more protracted and difficult. Thereby the Parliament - already at the bottom in the EU power architecture - will lose political weight as the decision on the Commission presidency clearly illustrates.

4. More and more people now understand that EU elections do not even meet minimum democratic standards:

- they were free and secret, but not equal. Those, e.g. in Germany who wanted to vote for the platform of the left, EU critics of *La France Insoumise*, *PODEMOS* or the Nordic Left Parties, could not do so because the elections were conducted in accordance with the respective national rules;
- the same applies with regard to barring clauses. Whereas in Germany half a per cent was already sufficient to win a seat, the five per cent hurdle applied elsewhere;
- the principle of "*one person, one vote*" does not apply. In countries with a large population 10 times more votes are required for one seat in the EP than in Malta.

5. These democratic shortcomings come in addition to the structural problems of democracy, viz:

- the central functions of a parliament are non-existing, i.e. legislative initiative and budgetary sovereignty,
- there is no separation of powers in the EU,
- the important decisions follow the "hidden mechanisms of power" (Bourdieu), i.e. an informal hierarchy with France and Germany at the top.

But even if these problems were to be solved, neoliberal constitutionalism would still remain, i.e. the quasi-constitutional order of neoliberalism in the Treaties and its implementation in the internal market with its privileging of the interests of capital. The structural and legal privileging of the interest of capital is exemplified in the free trade treaties. The democratic scope for decision making of states and municipalities are systematically restricted in favour of the profit interests of investors. A fundamental alternative to the economic and social policy practiced by the states could only be achieved by unanimous amendment of the treaties. An illusion - at least as long as respect for the treaties is maintained.

6. With Ursula von der Leyen, a politician has been chosen as head of the Commission whose foremost priority is to promote militarisation and to establish the EU as a major power in the emerging multipolar world order but also in face of the conflicts with the USA. She therefore calls her new Commission a "*geopolitical commission*". In order to nurture the longing for greatness and power a new department has been created. However, the attempts to achieve "*strategic sovereignty*" (Macron) meet with massive

<sup>1</sup> 27.5.2019, p. 1

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.elysee.fr/declarations/article/discours-du-president-de-la-republique-emmanuel-macron-a-la-pnyx-athenes-le-jeudi-7-septembre-201/>

resistance. Not only the USA, but also Poland and the Baltic countries prefer to rely on the "*brain-dead*" NATO (Macron) rather than on the EU's own military capabilities.

7. Should the forecasts for the outcome of the elections in Great Britain be correct, the country will leave the EU on 31 January 2020. Brexit does not simply mean that one member country out of 28 will leave. The British economy is the second largest in the EU and the fifth largest in the world. In economic terms, this means as much as if the 18 other economies behind in the GDP ranking would be exiting. The UK is also a nuclear power which unfortunately means a special status in the international system and London is also a permanent member of the UN Security Council. However, the toughest challenge for Brussels could quite well be coming. In particular then, should the United Kingdom not undergo the much heralded decline after Brexit. This would indicate to potential imitators that one can live well also without the EU.

8. One more priority of the new Commission is the consolidation of the 'Fortress Europe'. Since there is no consensus with regard to a humane migration policy, the only issue that can still be agreed upon is the reinforcement of the external borders. The Department of Migration is now called "*Promoting our European way of life*" - a formulation that signals a clear shift to the right in dealing with refugees and migration. The attempt to promote the term "*European way of life*" is intended to create a Euro-nationalistic identity from above.

9. Von der Leyen wants a Green Deal as a further priority. That sounds good. In view of the heterogeneous interests between Poland with its coal, France's dependence on nuclear power plants, the "*energy transition*" in Germany which has largely been left to the anarchy of the markets, and the dispute over Russian gas, will produce even fewer results than the latest German climate package.

10. The debate over the 2021-2027 budget framework also demonstrates that EU climate policy doesn't have any realistic prospects when measured against the actual challenges. Hitherto, each country has contributed 1% of its GDP to EU financing (NB: NATO target for the military is 2%!). If the loss of the British contribution is to be compensated, it will definitely be more expensive for all others members. In addition, there are now the additional funds for further militarisation (PESCO), at about 13 billion euros for the so-called "*defence fund*". No surprise therefore that the 2020 budget remains below the target of spending 20% on climate policy, as recommended by the EU Parliament. There is more populism in this green deal than climate policy.

11) The new Commission has been silent about the centrifugal effects of the Euro which is one of the EU's most important structural problems: Macron's attempt to stabilise the euro zone has been watered down beyond recognition. He wanted "*several percent of GDP*" – i.e. at least 2 percent. That would be 231 billion a year. The now adopted "*Budgetary Instrument for Convergence and Competitiveness*" provides for 17 billion - over 7 years, i.e. 2.4 billion annually, or 0.002% of GDP.

12. It is evident, that the EU remains a precarious construction that does not possess the political, economic, financial and legal instruments to solve the exceptional crises of our time. The permanent state of crisis, the muddling through approach, and the continuing erosion will therefore not abate under the stewardship of von der Leyen.

13 A central challenge for emancipatory politics is opposition to militarisation and great power politics. In particular, from the viewpoint of the Global South, militarisation and great power politics represent the furtherance of 500 years of colonialism and imperialism. At the same time, they absorb the political, financial and intellectual resources necessary for solving environmental problems and eradicating poverty. Under no circumstances, must emancipatory politics come out on one side in the controversy between NATO/USA and the independent military power EU. It is more than ever essential to fight beyond the choice between pest and cholera, for a democratic world order, for cooperation, détente, political conflict resolution, for peace and disarmament, encompassing a pan-European peace order stretching from Lisbon to Vladivostok.

Moreover, there is a need for campaigns against neoliberalism in economic, trade, financial and social policy and against the dismantling of democracy.

It is vital that the debate on fundamental issues such as the future of the EU and emancipatory alternatives continue.