

**Managing the Forces of European Populism:
The next election to the European Parliament in May 2019 may become
the first pan-European referendum.**

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A specter is haunting Europe, the specter of referenda. In 1972, the first-ever referendum was held on a topic related to European integration: 68.3% of French voters agreed on membership of the United Kingdom in the then-European Economic Community. In 2016, not returning the earlier favor of the French, a narrow majority of British voters opted for leaving the European Union. The #BrexitVote was the 50th referendum held on an issue related to European integration.

There is just one problem with this exercise in democracy: With increasing levels of European integration, more and more people outside the country holding a referendum are affected by its result. The failed European Constitution was the most powerful example to this day. While a majority of EU citizens in a majority of EU member states had voted “yes” in 2003, relative majorities of those going to the polls in just two countries — France and the Netherlands — killed the constitution by saying “no.” Little thought has been given to accommodate that misconception. But addressing this question is all the more important as a veritable wave of new referenda is waiting in the wings. In Italy, the focus may be on banking union, in Hungary on refugee settlement, in the Belgian province of Wallonia

one on TTIP (should it materialize). More will follow.

As long as no pan-European referendum exists, these national votes end up distorting the picture of what European citizens want rather exponentially. That leaves in the hands of one country what affects all. The recent British referendum is the best example for this. Think of all the follow-on effects, whether on the Gibraltar-Spain issue, the impact on Ireland north and South, on global trade relations of the EU or on the prospects for EU defense.

Referenda as anti-democratic exercise:

It is also a profoundly undemocratic exercise: The number of citizens in Europe who are not able to cast their vote, but have to live with the consequences of that vote, is immense. What is seen – by some — as a great leap forward in democratizing politics in fact turns into a substantial problem as it ends delegitimizing politics in Europe.

Referenda have become weapons of populist politics. They are intended to challenge the often boring and daunting processes of democratically elected and legitimized

representative organs. They ultimately lead to the worst outcome, confusing representative democracy (as defined by John Locke) and plebiscitary democracy (as defined by Jean-Jacques Rousseau). This is the inevitable consequence when the two concepts are matched.

Creating deliberate confusion and false promises

This is precisely what the British Tories set out to do when they resolved to use the referendum on EU membership as a tool to tame the forces of populism and cool off public sentiments, including in their own ranks. The result is predictable enough: all-out paralysis. The people on the winning side now expect a result which the politicians will likely not be able to deliver, at least not without inflicting serious domestic pain. The effort to promise a rosy garden, which many of the Leave campaigners resorted to, is bound to become their undoing.

Why 2019 matters so much

One lesson should be learned as soon as possible: Should populist sentiments continue to thrive across the European Union, the next election to the European Parliament in May 2019 will become the first pan-European referendum.

Quite possibly, the outcome may turn into a negative sense, driven as the voting may well be by populist simplifications. It is always alluring to seek to reduce the complexity of

managing modern societies. But that effort is also always bound to fail, as it is based on an illusory promise. In that sense, the vote in 2019 will determine whether or not voters in the various EU countries have reached the level of maturity to understand two facts of life:

- First, not to expect miracles or easy solutions from politicians.

- Second, to comprehend that more or less all countries would be worse off fending for themselves.

National solutions seem the easy path out, but more often than not, they are a dead end. The populists must hope that voters won't find out in time.

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