

OPINION • 2024 EUROPEAN ELECTIONS

Sociologist Dominique Méda: 'We need more European Union'

COLUMN

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In a column, Méda argues that, beyond the criticisms leveled at Brussels, member states need a transnational space to debate and overcome their differences.

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"Euroscepticism can appeal to the realistic perception that the currency union no longer represents a 'win-win' for all members," wrote Jürgen Habermas in 2018 [in a powerful article](#), which drew an unflattering assessment of the European Union's actions and highlighted its democratic failings.

The latest research confirms and clarifies the philosopher's concerns. Political scientist Roland Erne and his colleagues highlight several key features of the policies pursued by the EU between 2010 and 2020 (*Politicising Commodification: European Governance and Labor Politics from the Financial Crisis to the Covid Emergency*, Cambridge University Press). The new economic governance put in place by the European Commission in November 2011, described at the time as a "silent revolution" by its president, Manuel Barroso, has made it possible not only to exercise close surveillance over member states' public accounts but also to prescribe policy changes in areas that had hitherto remained excluded from EU intervention.

The authors show that wages, theoretically outside the EU's remit, have been the subject of direct recommendations aimed at curbing their increase – except in Germany – and have suffered as a result. In the transport, water and health sectors studied in particular, the prescriptions of European

authorities have systematically followed the same path of marketization, the promotion of public-private partnerships, privatization and the downsizing of public services.

Unraveling achievements

When the financial sanctions of the Stability and Growth Pact were suspended in 2020, the Commission used access to funding from the Recovery and Resilience Facility as a means of coercion to impose its views on countries. The authors highlight that, far from establishing a clearly transnational policy that could be fought by an alliance of European trade unions, the new economic governance has led to a renationalization of issues and competition between member states, preventing the constitution of a convincing opposition force.

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Despite these unfortunate consequences, a reform of the budgetary rules that changes the general framework of economic governance very little was recently approved by the European Parliament. The legislation continues to give extensive powers to the European Commission, and risks accelerating the trend toward cuts in public services and social rights. This is illustrated by French Economy Minister Bruno Le Maire's recently expressed desire to do away with an over-costly welfare state and Prime Minister Gabriel Attal's announcements of new measures to reduce unemployment benefits. Such a strategy can only fuel public despair and the vote for far-right parties who, if there were more of them in the European Parliament, could block the functioning of the EU and unravel its achievements.

The ideal of a political community

And yet, there are many achievements. Several important social reforms were undertaken at the end of this legislature, thanks in particular to the hard work of some of the Parliament and Commissioner for Jobs and Social Rights Nicolas Schmidt.

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We need more EU. We need, as Habermas suggested in the above-mentioned text, a more democratic EU, with a more powerful Parliament that stops deferring to the Commission and rejects the backroom deals between states that encroach on its legitimacy and renationalize debates at a time when it is important to assert a European-wide interest. We have nothing to gain from a return to horse-trading between nation-states, or from such deals being made in secret, outside the European public arena, as was the case with the latest social directives.

More broadly, we need a genuine transnational space for knowledge-sharing and debate, allowing us to better understand (and overcome?) our different approaches. In his lecture, Habermas questioned, as many in France do, Germany's unconditional support for monetary stability. If we want to live together, don't we have to be able, at some point, to put each other's beliefs on the table, publicly, to understand each other better?

In the lecture "Naissance de la bio-politique" ("The Birth of Biopolitics," January 31, 1979), Michel Foucault beautifully explained why, in 1948, Ludwig Erhard's demand for economic freedom enabled a traumatized, divided and occupied Germany to rebuild the legitimacy of the German state. Isn't it time for Germany to open a new chapter in its history? Yes, our countries would benefit from increasing the spaces for free and open exchange on their totems, rather than letting Europe's opponents blow on the embers of a nationalism that is always quick to flare up.

Read more [Dominique Méda: 'Fear is back in Europe'](#)

Because that's where we are. At a time when we have succeeded in organizing a space that recognizes democracy, equality, freedom, the rule of law, dignity and peace as fundamental, shared values, the next elections could deal a fatal blow to the ideal of a political community capable of resisting the ambitions of the empires that surround it. Nationalism is back, with all the hatred and risk of war it entails. We have the chance to vote freely, on June 9, for parties committed to making the European Union a democratic community, with the means to promote an ambitious environmental and social policy.

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