The European Union as Empire: Democratic Political Representation in Empire Europe

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Abstract. To conceptualise the European Union ('EU') as an empire is controversial. Yet, closer examination of the complex phenomenon of empire actually provides a constructive and a valuable understanding of the EU. This article aims to do away with state-centric approaches and examines the democratic political representation of the EU as an empire. Eric Voegelin's theory of political representation is chosen to create an understanding of political representation in the EU. Voegelin's focus goes beyond legal and 'elemental' approaches to representation and, therefore, allows for an interesting comparison with early empires, providing valuable angles to examine the political reality and symbols of the EU. This study concludes with a realistic perspective on a known problem, on which, by the use of the empire-analogy and a Voegelinian approach, it sheds a new light: democracy, functioning as the basis for unity in the EU, is fragile, and the distrust of Europeans to their representatives results in complications with unifying Europeans. It is an empire, historically seen, that might allow for a configuration for the EU that provides a good way to mitigate and balance differences since empires have an intrinsic relational and structural plurality that delivers, more than a state, unity in diversity.

Keywords: European Union, empire, political representation, European identity, Eric Voegelin

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1. INTRODUCTION

The crisis of representative democracy, characterised by a decline in voting turnout, party membership and trust in politicians, has been well-documented (e.g., Van Biezen, Mair, & Poguntke, 2011; Tormey, 2014; Schmitter, 2015).[2]

The crisis of political representation is not unknown to the European Union ('EU'). Indeed, article 10 of the Treaty on European Union lays down the ambitions of the EU to be a representative democracy, but the problems remain vast. For instance, after the Maastricht Treaty in 1992, an end to the permissive consensus came about (Hooghe & Marks, 2009). Also, the EU lacks a certain legitimacy as a result of, for instance, non-transparent policy-making (Kröger & Friedrich, 2012), instrumentalism and idealising economic growth (Dewandre, 2018). And overall, the EU is accused of a democratic deficit, a phenomenon that populist actors are quick to point at when it comes to the EU (Ruzza & Pejovic, 2019). Also, the EU's many institutions beg the question who represents whom: although the heads of state or government in the European Council are democratically accountable through their national parliaments, this accountability is absent within the European Council as an institution (Mair & Thomassen, 2010).

Still, this crisis of representative democracy might evoke new approaches to political representation. Indeed, the existential crisis of the EU ('what is the EU?') centres mostly around *sui generis* or state-centric approaches (e.g., a federation) (Beck & Grande, 2010). However, there is a decrease in conceptualisations of the (nation-)state, which might come about as a result of the pressure of globalisation on the nation-state and increasing transnationalism, pushing theorists outside the state-centric approach (Parker, 2010). On top of that, with, among other things, a lack on the monopoly of violence and no fixed territory, the EU is clearly not a state (Zielonka, 2006).

Therefore, this article focuses on the political representation in the EU while conceptualising the latter as an empire. Of course, an empire – neglected in contemporary political science – continues to be seen as a controversial political structure (Gravier, 2011). Empires, and especially empires in relation to European nation-states, evoke memories of 19th-

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[2] This paper is a shortened version of the author's previous and more extensive work presented as a master's thesis (see Dijker, 2021).

century colonial empires (Zielonka, 2012). On top of that, academic scrutinization of the empire-analogy to the contemporary EU would echo Eurosceptic voices (Behr & Stivachtis, 2006).

Nevertheless, as will be examined in this article, historically and etymologically the meaning of the term empire – though not value-neutral – refers to much more than merely colonial and imperial policies (Foster, 2013). More important for the present study is that applying the analogy of empire to the EU might be useful for new understandings of the EU. It is argued here that the conceptualisation of the European Union as an empire can reveal aspects of the EU that previous analogies (e.g., the EU as a federal state) have underestimated or have not taken into account, such as political representation, forms of governance, and ideological factors.

To continue this endeavour, an understanding of political representation will be created. By using the empire-analogy, however, examining the political representation of the EU through conventional measures (such as legitimacy of decision-making and institutional formation) will not be adequate (Lietzmann, 2018). The reason for this is that empires and states differ in their means of representation and in how they unify their citizens, as will be examined later (Wimmer & Min, 2006). Therefore, Eric Voegelin's (1901-1985) theory of political representation, mostly taken from his *The New Science of Politics* (2000a), will provide a suitable approach for empires. This is because of his elaborate approach beyond 'ordinary' and legal understandings of political representation, which allows to make comparisons with (ancient) empires.

In order to review the political representation in the EU while conceptualising it as an empire and using Eric Voegelin's theory of political representation, a brief literature review is introduced to familiarise the reader with the 'Europe as empire' literature. Second, the Voegelinian understanding of political representation will be introduced. A reader familiar with Voegelin's work will notice that the explanations are performed – though aspired to be presented with veracity – rather succinctly, due to the limited space. Third, the political representation of the EU will be reviewed in more detail, taking into account the Voegelinian theory of political representation. Then, it will be examined what form of governance could work in the EU as an empire. Here, a focus on membership of the EU as an empire will reveal, following Jan Zielonka (2006), the role of democracy in unifying Europeans. Following

Voegelin, it will also show that the EU has an immanent order and that democracy as unificatory factor makes the EU fragile. Central in this paper will be the following question: how does a Voegelinian approach contribute to the understanding of democratic political representation in the EU as an empire? To be sure, this paper aims to establish a constructive critique to the EU and to create empathy with its attempt to unify the European continent.

2. THE EUROPEAN UNION AS EMPIRE: A LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature in which the EU is conceptualised as an empire (mostly descriptively rather than normatively) was especially fruitful during the eastward expansion of the EU. It started around the late 1990s, and the first contributors (among whom Jan Zielonka) came from Eastern- and Central-Europe (Pänke, 2019). Authors contributing to this literature focus on a variety of aspects: e.g., the EU's external role in the world (such as Chandler, 2007 and Sepos, 2013), the internal structure of the EU (e.g., Zielonka, 2006 and Gravier, 2009), and comparative approaches with 19th century nation-states (e.g., Behr, 2007 and Nicolaïdis & Onar, 2013) and with medieval empires (e.g., Zielonka, 2006). On the whole, this literature establishes a link between «ideas of imperial governance as geopolitical modelling» and empire-like structures and the European Union (Pänke, 2019).

A moral justification for the empire-analogy can be derived from the etymology of the word 'empire'. The term 'empire' comes from the Latin *imperium*. Russel Foster (2013) shows the importance of Cicero's distinction between *imperium* and *patrocinium*. He explains that Cicero distinguished these two terms, both a form of political control, by the use of soft- and hard-power. Indeed, *imperium* refers to «a polity which pursues aggressive and expansionist 'imperialism', while [*patrocinium*] is an empire more concerned with maintaining internal cohesion through a paternalistic hierarchy of member-states» (Foster, 2013, p. 380).

An empire, according to Michael Doyle's (1986) definition, refers to «a relationship, formal or informal, in which one state controls the effective political sovereignty of another political society» (p.45). From this approach to the term empire, we already start to see a difference between imperialism and empire. On the whole, we can say that imperialism has negative connotations: territorial conquest, colonisation, and repression (Vollaard, 2014). However, important to note is that one does not necessarily entail the other. Indeed, an empire does not necessarily have to pursue imperial policies; and a non-empire, for instance a state,

could engage in policies one would deem imperialistic (Foster, 2013). This paper will follow Doyle's distinction between empire and imperialism: the latter, for Doyle, relates to the *policy* of the polity: «[i]mperialism is simply the process or policy of establishing or maintaining an empire» (Doyle, 1986, p. 45).

Besides this, the empire-analogy might actually also contribute to the understanding of the EU. Using the analogy of a state, namely, is misleading since it is well accepted that the EU is not a state: there is no monopoly over the legitimate means of coercion, no «clearly defined centre of authority», and it has no fixed territory (Zielonka, 2006, p. 2). Admittedly, the prevailing Westphalian paradigm provides a more contemporary and empirically verifiable ground for students, and the vagueness associated with the concept empire shows that it is difficult to use the empire-analogy as well (Zielonka, 2006).

Nevertheless, consensus on definitions on terms such as 'state', 'democracy', 'power', and 'nation' does not exist either. Hence, «a certain degree of conceptual ambiguity seems unavoidable» (Zielonka, 2012, p. 507). In general, within political science, especially when it comes to understanding the EU, the use of paradigms and different models is common to create a form of understanding of Europe's complexity (Zielonka, 2006). Of course, these models simplify the working of the EU, but at least they allow one to understand trends and to make comparisons (Gravier, 2011). In short: we need theory to make sense.

Below are some of the key concepts that exemplify the EU as an empire according to the literature. They will be briefly explained to gain a better understanding of why the EU can be conceptualised as an empire.

2.1. Civilising power, civilising mission and centre-peripheries

The use of the analogy of empire reveals the normative powers of Europe. This relates to the understanding of the core-periphery relations in the EU as empire, often done through Ian Manners' term 'Normative Power Europe' (Manners, 2002). The foreign policy of the EU, then, is transferred to the peripheries through soft power (Bachmann & Sidaway, 2009). Furthermore, the civilising mission «[justifies] the creation and extension of the empire over the dominated territories» (Gravier, 2009, p. 642).

The relationship, thus, between the centre and the peripheries ('the dominated territories') is asymmetric. Of what comprises the centre within the EU is hard to say. In some publications (e.g., Beck and Grande, 2010 and Gravier, 2009) it is argued that several centres exist, some point at Brussels (e.g., Gravier, 2011), others at Germany (e.g., Fouskas, 2018), and also Western-Europe is deemed as the centre of the empire (e.g., Zielonka, 2006 and Foster, 2013).

In general, we can speak of a certain exclusion (e.g., Foster, 2013) when it comes to the centre-periphery *and* periphery-periphery relations. With the latter there are obvious differences between Member States that are not identified as a centre of the EU and, for instance, MENA-countries – which are peripheries of the EU but are «deemed unworthy of accession into the Union» (Foster, 2013, p. 387).

2.2. Territory and borders

The borders of the EU are identified as being 'fuzzy' and constantly moving (e.g., Zielonka, 2006). The borders are not set, rather they are «geographical zones» (Zielonka, 2017, p. 642). In terms of the use for understanding the EU, the concept of 'fuzzy borders' clearly allows to capture the EU in the framework of an empire better than the state-centric approaches since the territory of federations is fixed (Gravier, 2011).

2.3. Diversity

Besides structural elements, some scholars highlight relational elements such as diversity – in terms of cultural heterogeneity – as an important concept identifying the EU as an empire. It will also be pivotal for this paper. Diversity, namely, seems certainly a defining aspect for empires and sets it apart from federations, as the degree of heterogeneity is much higher within empires than it is within federations. In the latter, we can speak of a «bounded national community» in the form of an imagined, unitary idea of 'the nation' (Wimmer & Min, 2006, p. 870). For empires, there is much more cultural diversity (Beaud, 2018). The unification of 'the peoples' in an empire is not on the basis of an imagined nation or constitution, but rather on the basis of a universal principle (Wimmer & Min, 2006).

2.4. Colonialism

The colonial heritage of empire Europe is identified in several publications (e.g., Hansen & Jonsson, 2012; Nicolaidis & Onar, 2013; Böröcz, 2006; Mtshiselwa, 2015). Some contributions that highlight this aspect want to bring the focus on the influence of the colonial history of European countries on the civilising mission of the EU (Del Sarto, 2016).

2.5. Multilevel governance

Empires have a 'hub-structure', which means that the relations between central political powers and the peripheries are much more interwoven and, as established above, a high level of asymmetry exists among them (Gravier, 2011). Intervention of the centre in the peripheries is then also seen as legitimate within empires, whereas this is less the case for federations (Zielonka, 2006). The multilevel governance system, with its 'concentric circles', is an element Jan Zielonka has brought up in his understanding of the EU as an empire (e.g., Zielonka, 2006, 2001). Others (such as Marks, 2012) have alluded to it through referring to a 'composite structure'.

3. VOEGELIN: GNOSTICISM AND POLITICAL REPRESENTATION

Voegelin's *The New Science of Politics* provides a valuable approach for potential comparisons and insights into the EU as an empire. First, as noted in the literature review above, the method of unification in empires is often a universal principle rather than a constitution (Wimmer and Min, 2006). In general, the literature on political representation focuses on the nature of representation through empirical evidence which «is rather limited in regard to [the] policy-making process beyond the nation-state» (Kröger and Friedrich, 2012). Furthermore, research focused on political representation is mostly occupied with the institutional formation and the legitimacy of decision-making. Voegelin, on the other hand, highlights the aspect of the imaginative ('symbolic representation') of politics and institutions and how this constructive imaginative is received by the public, by which Voegelin's focus lies mostly on transcendental representation (Lietzmann, 2018).

Voegelin's diagnosis of ideologies as disordering the soul by attempting to 'immanentize the eschaton' – i.e., creating a 'heaven on earth' and to conceptualise earth as the end of history – shows how an instrumentalist attitude towards the world is employed: the political order is

perceived only in an immanent form (Voegelin, 2000a).[3] Voegelin, however, wants our attention on the situation after an imperial order would have conquered the whole earth: what happens then? There will be no end to history; in fact, the imperial order could be conquered itself: «the end of all human action does not lie within this world but beyond it» (Voegelin, 1962, p. 184). Without transcendence ('an end to the chain'), an infinite means-end conquest of 'the world' comes about (Voegelin, 1962). For Voegelin, thus, an order is created by taking into account an «unseen measure» (Voegelin, 1962, p. 179).

3.1. Political Representation

Political representation for Voegelin is central in political science. There are three forms of representation that Voegelin investigates in his work (Vatter, 2020).

First, the problem Voegelin identifies with researching political representation lies in the 'elemental' type of representation. This refers to the representative institutions, that what is visible in the external world. A political scientist would focus, for instance, on voting turnout, geographical and demographic factors and formal legislation. Looking at these factors, Voegelin argues, is key to understand a society, but insufficient. Different societies, namely, have a different understanding of representation: a Western liberal conception of representation would show that in a Communist regime there is no 'true' representation. A Communist, on the other hand, would argue that other parties ought to be excluded and only the one Communist party gains the «monopoly of representation» to represent the genuine voice of the people (Voegelin, 2000a, p. 115).

Therefore, secondly, Voegelin continues with examining political representation in the existential sense. Here, Voegelin (2000a) defines more clearly what he means with representation:

> [T]he rulers, who can act for the society, men whose acts are not imputed to their own persons but to the society as a whole – with the consequence, that, for instance, the pronunciation of a general rule regulating an area of human life will not be understood as an exercise in moral philosophy but will be experienced by the members of the society as the declaration of a rule

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[3] This paper will not go into further detail on Voegelin's (later reconsidered) understanding of Gnosticism in *The New Science of Politics*. See Voegelin (2000a), especially lecture 4 on Gnosticism, for a detailed explanation on how modernity is perceived by him as a process of immanentized Gnosticism.

with obligatory force for themselves. When his acts are effectively imputed in this manner, a person is the representative of a society. (Voegelin, 2000a, p. 117).

Thus, the focus lies on the relational and, above all, on action (Pitkin, 1967). When humans form «themselves into a society for action» – which Voegelin terms 'articulation' – then representation occurs, by means of symbols, and a society comes into existence (Voegelin, 2000a, p. 117). Articulation, thus, refers to the process of institutions *expressing* «the reality of a political society through the conceptual form of representation and decision» (Lietzmann, 2018, p. 60).

Existential representation refers to the 'guiding idea' or spirit of a society. It is here that we arrive at Voegelin's focus on action, as the representatives of a society unify the people and let the people act upon that what its representatives demand. Meanwhile, the representatives are subject to the larger idea on which the institutions are built. Hence, the elemental and existential forms are in close-knit with each other, for the institutions (elemental representation) must conform to the spirit of the society (existential) (Voegelin, 2000a). What this 'authoritative' idea of representation implies is that the representatives stand above constitutional law since law is created by the representative power (Pitkin, 1967). As mentioned in the introduction, it is here, among other aspects, that we can see where Voegelin goes beyond 'ordinary' inquiries of representation: the law, namely, «is supposed to be widely based on established customs and shared values», and thus has to sustain a certain representation beyond its mere legality (Pardo & Prato, 2019, p. 54).

Thirdly, Voegelin shows that societies also represent something that transcends their *cosmion*, namely a truth from outside the society (Voegelin, 2000a). This is also why Voegelin takes an extensive historical approach; he examines the symbols articulated by historical civilisations (McMahon, 1999). For instance, Voegelin shows empirically how historical civilisations have experienced their existence coming from somewhere transcendent. An example of a symbol externalised by a society that explains for a society where it comes from are the myths of the Romans on their polytheistic belief (Webb, 2014). Voegelin provides many examples of historical civilisations to have shown to externalise, by means of symbols, their experience of participation in life towards transcendence. Such symbols explain the 'Truth' of the *condicio humana*; that is, human life is limited and part of a much larger whole, namely the cosmos (Voegelin, 1962).

Voegelin returns to the «imperial representation of cosmic truth» (Vatter, 2020, p. 70). «One uniformly finds the order of the empire interpreted as a representation of cosmic order in the medium of human society», where the «empire is a cosmic analogue, a little world reflecting the order of the great, comprehensive world» (Voegelin, 2000a, p. 131). The existential representatives, then, are endowed with the «task of securing the order of society in harmony with cosmic order» (Voegelin, 2000a, p. 131). By having such a transcendental representation, a specific purpose is attached to the society's order, which allows to unify the people.

Early empires, for instance, dating roughly from the 6th century BCE until the 15th century CE, saw their society as a representation of the cosmos, and thus produced symbols that reflected this understanding (Voegelin, 2000a,). The Roman Empire experimented at one point in time with Christianity, which became its 'spiritual movement' for its «imperial order» (Voegelin, 1962, p. 172). Indeed, empires around the 6th century BCE, Voegelin explains, experienced a 'spiritual outbreak', whereby a meaning was attached to the existence of these empires. More specifically, it was a meaning of being representative to the whole of humanity. These empires are defined as 'world-empires',[4] as they perceived themselves to rule all territory on earth and to represent the whole of humankind but believing in some sort of 'world' (or cosmos) that transcended its *cosmion*. Although no causal connection exists between the 'spiritual outbreak' and the rise of the empire, the connection is of an ontological kind: the attribution of meaning to the order (Voegelin, 1962).

4. POLITICAL REPRESENTATION IN THE EU

The current political representation in the EU seems, in the elemental sense, problematic. Indeed, with data from a 2020 Eurobarometer report we can see that 43% of European citizens say to trust the European Union, and 48% tend not to trust it (and 9% does not know) (European Commission, 2020).

When looking at the voting turnout of the European Parliament elections, it does not look good either for the representation within the EU: since 2004, turnout has not been above 50%,

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[4] For historic examples of such 'world-empires', see Voegelin (1962, p. 170-171).

with only the latest election in 2019 showing slightly more than 50% turnout (50.66%) (European Parliament, 2019).

The attempt of the EU at a constitution in 2005 hoped to encourage 'more Europe' and to simplify the working of the EU. The aim, thus, was to allow for more power for the central European institutions, and to continue European integration. This implied a more Westphalian transformation of the EU's structure. Yet, it failed to put through these reforms in the final draft because the design of the constitution «was in the hands of the heads of the member states», who were hesitant to confer more power to the European level (Zielonka, 2006, p. 123). Nevertheless, as unanimity was required and French and Dutch voters turned down the constitution – only for it to be later transformed «in a more modest Lisbon Treaty» – the constitution did not come to fruition as such (Hobolt & Brouard, 2011, p. 309).

Despite no constitution as unificatory symbol, but with constantly changing and fuzzy borders with high degrees of diversity, it can be said about the EU that its «progressive integration has certainly enhanced a sense of European identity, but it has not produced the European people for and by which EU decisions are being made» (Zielonka, 2006, p. 138). In other words, the constitutional and existential representation seems to be left out as representatives at the EU level struggle for their legitimacy.

Still, EU authorities have tried to enhance the feeling of unity. Recently, thus, the EU tried with the aforementioned constitution to add a symbol of an imaginative of 'Europe' in a constitutional sense. Other examples of political symbols are the flag of the EU, the euro currency, and the European anthem (Foster, 2013). Russell Foster (2013), moreover, identifies one more important imaginary: maps (p. 373). Maps create a sense of identity, which allow for useful tools for empire-making as these political entities lack the sense of a common identity. And hence, the empire defines who is included and, especially, who is excluded through maps. With that, maps mark a certain dichotomy of civilised and uncivilised (or 'to-be-civilised') (Foster, 2013).

Overall, the political symbols provide an insight into the European society (Lietzmann, 2018). The maps that make sense of the EU correspond with a certain reality that Europe as an empire has of the world; this 'world experience' is an imaginary that allows for a community (Foster, 2013). «The mental image of political representation is not solely a reflection but an

action itself: it is involved in the social construction of political representation. It appears as an 'image'» (Lietzmann, 2018, p. 57).

The current understanding of political representation through state-centric approaches, together with the accusation of the 'democratic deficit', show that nationalistic sentiments still play a significant role in the EU (Ruzza & Pejovic, 2019, p. 439). Furthermore, one might have to approach the aim of creating a European people with some caution. Indeed, nationalism, and exclusion accompanied with it, have shown its devastating effects in the imperial policies of the colonial and the totalitarian empires of the 19th and 20th century (Rensmann, 2019). In addition, historic examples of empires that existed out of great heterogeneity, such as the Roman and Austro-Hungarian empires, show that a pluralistic society can in fact articulate and act for itself (O'Sullivan, 2000).

5. LIBERAL DEMOCRACY: FRAGILE UNIFICATION AND PLURALISM

The imaginary of Europe as empire also says something about its membership: who is part of the empire and who is not (Lietzmann, 2018). The ancient 'world-empires' saw themselves as a «cosmic analogue», as they were part of a larger cosmos, represented humanity within the cosmic order *and* believed in a transcendental reality, which constituted the true end of history for them (Voegelin, 1962, p. 179).

Today, globalisation, as a feature of Western civilisation, shows the representation of universal humanity (Rossbach, 2007). The myth of the national 'imagined community' disappears and «is replaced by the myth of an all-inclusive humanity» (Ossewaarde, 2008, p. 211). Still, 'the Other' might be *de facto* part of humanity but might not be so *de jure*. Indeed, Europe as empire, with its civilising mission, has a kind of imperialism that aims to include the 'chaotic Other' into the *cosmion* (Waever, 1997). «For, in post-Westphalia, humanity is '*European* humanity'; human rights are European rights» (Ossewaarde, 2008, p. 211).

The values to which every potential Member State ought to adhere can be found in Article 2 of the Treaty on European Union and the 'Copenhagen criteria' (Pänke, 2019). These liberal values could enable Australia or Japan to become a member of the EU, as critics have often remarked (Gebhardt, 2013). Here we touch upon the territorial 'centre-periphery' aspect, as the centre(s) of the EU imposes the liberal values on the many 'internal' and 'external' peripheries

(Foster, 2013). The internal peripheries are regions and Member States within the EU, and external peripheries are seen, for instance, within the European Neighbourhood Policy (Behr & Stivachtis, 2006). This duality in peripheries is common to empires: for example, Russians were subordinates of the tsar and the regions outside Russia's direct territory were subordinate to «Mother Russia» (Beller, 2017).

With a universal representation, the EU would in this way fall almost into a Kantian conception of a voluntary federal league of states (Kleingeld, 2011). Yet, Kant's cosmopolitan idea was focused on modern liberal democracy, with a representative government of the republic (Pagden, 2002). Current understandings of liberal democratic representation, however, will prove more difficult for the conception of the EU as an empire, as examined next. The European Union is a modern empire, which means that its parts are states – just as the Habsburg empire (Beck & Grande, 2006). Focussing on the level of political entities (i.e., nation-states), forming together the larger EU, what mode of governance could work in the EU as an empire? To answer this, Jan Zielonka's (2006) understanding of the EU's political democratic representation will be followed.

5.1. Democracy in Empire Europe

An empire would find much difficulty with having legitimacy in today's world where sovereignty and democracy are pivotal. Sovereignty, for instance, is not something identified with empires, and «standard accounts of democratic representation» focus mostly «on territorially based electoral representation» (Urbinati & Warren, 2008, p. 388). The «electoral representation identifies a space within which the sovereignty of the people is identified with state power» (Urbinati & Warren, 2008, p. 389).

The task will thus be to transform the concepts of sovereignty and democracy to allow the political representation of the EU to be legitimate. Ulrich Beck and Edgar Grande (2006) have done exactly that: «[i]n the European Empire the concept of sovereignty is itself being transformed; i.e., […] sovereignty is developing in *complex, cosmopolitan sovereignty*» (p. 70).

Concerning democracy, empires were «pre-democratic», at least in the modern sense of the word, but modern nation-states have also been undemocratic at times (Gravier, 2011, p.

417). Still, it is argued that democracy can «only work in a typical Westphalian state» (Zielonka, 2006, p. 119). Indeed, representative democracy came about within the nation-state, where a «distinct community» holds similar beliefs, values and one 'people' exists in the minds of that community (Zielonka, 2006, p. 134).

It seems then rather too optimistic to think that the European Parliament ('EP') could play a larger role in the European empire. Enhancing the power of this institution would also mean to resort to a more state-like democratic political representation. Furthermore, the EP seems still much more divided on the basis of nationality rather than of ideology. Still, power at the EU level is mostly in the hands of non-majoritarian institutions (e.g., European Council, Commission, and the ECB) (Zielonka, 2006). As the parliamentary system would be even «ill-adapted to the needs of a hybrid creature like the [EU]», it seems then too optimistic to confer more power to the EP (Dehousse, 1995, p. 134).

Also, with the scale of the EU, as Zielonka (2006) pointed out, «the larger the unit the more difficult it is to offer citizens valuable forms of participation» (p. 187). And, ironically, as Kröger and Friedrich have shown (2012), organisations that aim to be present at the European level to represent their constituencies actually weaken their representation once present at the supranational level (p. 267). It follows that it is too difficult to have the same standards of direct participatory representation of the national and local level as it is for the European level. Hence, expecting the same form of democracy and sovereignty for the EU as an empire as for nation-states, with a significant role for the parliament, is unlikely. To be exactly true to a government *with* and *by* the people seems thus unrealistic.

The EU is an empire with a high sense of plurality, in the form of cultural diversity, multilevel governance, fuzzy borders, and «competing truths» (Pardo & Prato, 2019, p. 54). As a result of the many channels of distributed power, a representation of organisation rather than of citizens comes about (Lord & Pollak, 2010). Still, if it tries to institutionalise civil governance, the EU has to work on making «public life as something that concerns [the citizen] personally» (Voegelin, 2000c, p. 67). And in Zielonka's (2006) conception of the EU as an empire, there is reason to be optimistic about that since «the European public space» is typified by, although distinct national communities, a similar value believe system revolving around democracy (p. 135). «[D]emocracy [then] becomes the Union's basic 'legitimation principle'» (Zielonka, 2006, p. 183).

5.2. An Immanentized Empire Europe

What seems obvious but has to be pointed out, is that the EU is not a 'world-empire', in the Voegelinian sense. For Voegelin, the political order of a society «can have only a transcendental origin» (Rometsch & Wessels, 1996, p. 8). Indeed, Voegelin argues that even for secularised societies, established by gnostic movements that deny their participation towards transcendence, have a truth that comes from a transcendental origin. With Marxism, for instance, the truth of «the self-understanding of a society as the representative of cosmic order» – that we saw among the early empires – has been replaced with a historical truth in the immanent sense (Voegelin, 2000a, p. 134). The symbolisation may differ, but the self-understanding remains the same: for Marxism, humans are capable of creating a classless unified and secularised paradise. Those who disagree with this «run counter to the truth of history […]; nobody can be at war with the Soviet Union legitimately but must be a representative of untruth» (Voegelin, 2000a, p. 134).

The EU, then, takes itself as representative of mankind and takes a cosmic analogue. Yet, it is closed off to transcendental reality; that is, the immanent realm is not in relation to an unseen and unattainable measure. Rather, the immanent realm, the European political order, *is* the final measure (Voegelin, Algozin, & Algozin, 1974). Indeed, the EU is the political embodiment of an empire with liberal democratic values (Risse, 2015). Liberalism installs a 'permanent revolution' in the immanent realm, as it «discover[s] constantly new obstacles to freedom that must be overcome» (Corey D., 2019, p. 19). Liberalism, wanting to establish freedom and peace *on earth*, becomes an ideology (Corey D., 2019).

This permanent revolution can be seen, first, in the project of the EU. The project to unify the European continent had as its aim to overcome ideologies but has now been accused of having an ideology itself (White, 2020). Indeed, the 'peace project' of the EU «has been driven by its underlying purpose – not by a conception of the final outcome» (Marks, 2012, p. 17). Secondly, the EU's civilizing mission allows the EU to perceive itself as the «civilised zone», with the goal to civilise the peripheries (Foster, 2013, p. 375). These peripheries, however, could also be *within* the borders of the EU. Indeed, the recent law passed in Hungary that bans homosexuality to be part of the curricula and kids' TV (Rankin, 2021) and the 'veto' during the initial debate on the EU's budget, specifically for the Multiannual Financial Framework and the 'Next Generation EU', by Poland and Hungary – who disagreed with associating the

budget with rule of law proceedings – show concrete cases of internal Member States who take liberal values lightly.

Yet, these dissenters to liberal democracy are actually a blessing in disguise for the EU's legitimacy (Žižek & Srécko, 2015). They allow the EU to point out that there are still obstacles to be overcome in its mission to civilise. Moreover, this, together with the EU's territorial expansion, also counts for the rest of the external world: there are still plenty of dissenters to liberal values out there as *potential* members. Genghis Khan, the ruler of the Mongolian Empire, saw himself chosen by God to rule his empire, which constituted – according to the Mongols – all territory on earth. Some territory might be beyond the *de facto* influence of the empire, but through expansion it could potentially be transformed into *de jure* membership. This empire was an «Empire in the Making» which existed «only potentially [and was] actualised into a historic empire» (Voegelin, 2000b, p. 114). The EU, on the other hand, moves on the geopolitical theatre similarly but with an immanentized permanent revolution as the bringer of liberal democratic values.

On the whole, Zielonka's European empire as discussed above, with democracy as the unifying basis for the empire, shows how fragile the EU really is. With the rise of anti-liberalism and populism, competing truths make the current legitimate manner in which the EU is united (i.e., through universal liberal democratic values) extremely trembly. Indeed, neither a constitution nor, as it seems, liberal-democratic values can create a unity in Europe. There are many competing truths in Europe, and we have to find a healthy way to mitigate and balance our differences. We cannot create a cosmopolitan empire *ad infinitum* where everyone lives happily on the basis of common values, doing away with the national imaginaries and traditions; the (historic) differences among Europeans have shown to be too great for that, and thus to think that this is what the EU is heading towards is utopian. This, then, begs a question on the future and sustainability of the European project: is the EU actually just an economic cooperation? And if a constitution does not work for the EU, what form of metaphysical or universal representation is necessary to unify the EU?

7. CONCLUSION

This paper has conceptualised the EU as an empire. More precisely, with the empire-analogy, this paper reconceptualised the political representation of the EU beyond state-centric understandings. It was seen that the EU has undeniably characteristics of an empire.

Moreover, as the means of unification for an empire are universal principles, Voegelin's approach of political representation – with the focus on transcendental representation – allowed to look into the attempts of unification and representation of the EU. It was found that the EU has an immanent order of representing universal humanity with liberal democratic values, while the legitimacy and (elemental) representation in the EU are problematic for the purpose of creating a unity. In general, the EU seems to have difficulty with finding one political symbol to unify the continent. However, historic empires have shown that a unification through a state-like identity is not necessary for an empire to act and that national imaginaries can be preserved.

Moreover, following Jan Zielonka's conception of democratic political representation in his European empire, it was seen that a form of representation similar to a nation-state seems unlikely for the EU. Also, it was seen that democracy as the unifying political symbol lays bare the EU's fragility because of increased attempts at hampering democracy.

Finally, the EU does not have that unifying spiritual movement which (ancient) empires did have that allows to give meaning to the EU's imperial order. This conclusion, derived from the Voegelinian insights, evokes challenging but necessary questions on how we see the future of Europe, which values have to play a role in it and how we mitigate our differences. And it is an empire, with its intrinsic plurality on all levels, that delivers, more than a state, structural and relational configurations to provide a unity in diversity. Lastly, the Voegelinian approach also reminds us of the effort we have to continue to put in the European project, as a democratic Europe might be lost since history does not end in the immanent realm.

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