

What Happens Next – Sunday November 21, 2021
Populism and the Decline of the Mainstream Center-Right in European Politics

My name is Larry Bernstein.

What Happens Next is a podcast where an expert is given just SIX minutes to present his argument. This is followed by a Q&A period for deeper engagement.

This week's topic is European Politics.

Today's speaker is Tim Bale. Tim is a Professor of Politics and International Relations at Queen Mary at the University of London, where his research focuses on European and British politics. Tim just published a new book entitled *Riding the Populist Wave: Europe's Mainstream Right in Crisis*.

In this call I am interested in learning about the populist trends in European politics in the UK, France and Germany.

In the UK, I want to find out about Post-Brexit relations with the EU, what direction Boris Johnson will take the Tories, the implications of the Scottish desire for independence, and is there a future for the Labor Party?

In France, I want to understand how it was possible that a new upstart political party run by Macron won the presidential election and took a majority of the legislature in the last election. And what are the ongoing implications of Macron's victory for the old political establishment and their political parties. I want learn what the likelihood that Macron will win reelection and who will likely represent the political right in a future presidential runoff.

And in Germany, will center political parties maintain governing control after Angela Merkel retires from the political stage? And what direction will German politics go with a multiparty coalition?

So much to discuss, so with that I turn to Tim Bale, please begin your Six Minute Presentation.

Tim Bale:

What are the big political issues facing Western Europe right now? Well, there are the perennials, increasing economic growth to help pay for the welfare state, which is coming under massive strain as European societies are aging and the demands for health and social care are increasing year on year. We also have to worry about regional disparities. Italy and the UK has its north and south divide. Germany has its east and west divide.

And then of course, there's immigration, mostly from the Middle East driven by poverty and by civil wars in places like Iraq, Syria, and Somalia. Immigration can help out our aging societies,

but it also has triggered a huge backlash, particularly among the less educated. And that has presented mainstream right parties in Europe with an opportunity to frame their liberal left opponents as soft on immigration and suggest that they are somehow out of touch with ordinary people.

Center-right parties are finding that many of their relatively affluent younger college educated voters are turned off by nationalism and by social conservatism, particularly if it has a religious tinge. And it's the Christian Democratic parties that are doing worst of all. Which brings us to Germany. The CDU/CSU, which has dominated German politics for 60 to 70 years, is in trouble. It managed for a long time to buck the trend of Christian Democratic decline in part because Germany's left fragmented much earlier than the left in other countries because of the rise of the Greens early on there, and because the CDU/CSU was extraordinarily good at finding excellent leaders, Konrad Adenauer after the Second World War, and then much later on Helmut Kohl and Angela Merkel, and because of the history of Germany, in some senses inoculated German voters against very radical alternatives on the right.

But at the last election, the CDU/CSU, which got 41% of the vote in 2013, dropped from 33% in 2017 to just 24% in 2021, and looks likely to lose power as a result. Interestingly however, the CDU/CSU lost most of its votes not to the populous radical right, Alternative fur Deutschland, the AfD. But rather it lost votes to the mainstream center-left Social Democrats, which is in some ways a solitary reminder for those of us writing about these very polarized times that competence, that the economy, stupid, that convincing leadership and time for a change are still quite powerful forces in electoral politics.

But it's also worth remembering that the CDU/CSU lost votes to the Greens and to the liberal FDP, which is a reminder of the fact that what the late Ronald Inglehart, the US political scientist, called the Silent Revolution, the spread of liberal, progressive, and post-material values, composed just as much of a problem for center-right parties as the backlash we were talking about earlier.

The next case and test in some senses for all this will be France where an already fragmented mainstream right is facing a threat from the far right in Eric Zemmour, a xenophobic anti-immigrant politician who has broken through, and trying to unseat the current president, Emmanuel Macron, who above and beyond any other politician in Europe has been able to fashion a kind of centrist populism. Meanwhile, across the channel in the UK, we have a fairly traditional Conservative Party under Boris Johnson, which in these post-Brexit times has turned itself into a kind of ersatz populist radical right party which seems to have less in common with the Conservative Party as we once knew it than it does with former President Trump.

At the same time, he's prosecuting what some people like to see as a culture war or a war on woke.

Larry Bernstein:

Tim, thank you for your six-minute presentation. The reason I asked you to speak on What Happens Next is because I wanted to learn about the European political experience and then apply it to the United States. Now, you just published a new book called *Riding the Populist Wave: European's Mainstream Right in Crisis*. And in that book, you explain which values and issues predict voter preferences. Can you please explain your political science framework that helps define the European right and left?

Tim Bale:

What we first go into is what is right and what is left? We say that the difference between the two is their attitude to inequality. The left is very much opposed to the idea of inequality. The right accepts it as natural and productive for the economy. You have what we call a mainstream right, which we divide into, market liberal parties and Christian Democratic parties. And you have the far right, which can be divided into the extreme right, which sometimes flirts with violence and the populist radical right.

And we frame those in terms of what Ronald Inglehart, an American political scientist, called the Silent Revolution, which began really in the late '60s and 1970s and sees a gradual spread of liberal, progressive values, post-material values throughout the population, and particularly the educated.

And on the other hand, there's been a backlash against that, what the Italian political scientist, Piero Ignazi, calls the Silent Counterrevolution, which is really a kind of rejection of the values of the Silent Revolution. And it's very concerned with the cultural change. And in particular focuses on immigration.

Larry Bernstein:

Let me describe the framework as the Ronald Inglehart Silent Revolution as compared to the Piero Ignazi Silent Counterrevolution. And I'll add my take on it. What Inglehart is saying is that there's this Maslow Hierarchy of Needs. And at the top of the pyramid, after you've gotten fed and you've got shelter and you feel safe, as Maslow said, there's the self-actualization where you can dream about supranational institutions to solve world problems. And Inglehart says it's that group, the self-actualized, you'll trend towards the left. And if you're not in that state, you'll trend towards the right. And he established this concept immediately after the youth revolutions in 1968 both in Europe and the United States. First as a question about his work, which was done now almost 50 years ago, how is it as a predictive technique to establish whether or not you really will belong to the left or the right, whether or not self-actualization is a good predictor of your political leanings?

Tim Bale:

Well, in some ways I think it was very prescient. Inglehart was before his time because the difference between left and right is no longer so exclusively economic, about the distribution of resources within society, but is much more a question of people's cultural values. Values-based politics has become more important than distributional politics in terms of the distinctions between left and right and people's voting choices.

Larry Bernstein:

In the United States, if you were trying to predict a voter, what party they belong to, the first question you might ask is how educated are you. Number two is probably race. And then third might be income. And those aspects have gone under radical change since 1970. And for example, white, some college or high school education would have been a core to the Democratic Party. It's now core to the Republican Party. And I wonder how these political science frameworks survive when there's such a substantial transition?

Tim Bale:

I think that's a really good question. I think if you look at European countries, we can see some similarities there. There's a really excellent book if people want to understand European politics in that sense called *Diploma Democracy* by two Dutch political scientists. And it says the same thing in some ways as you said there, that education has become an increasingly important dividing line and driver of voting. And mixed up with that is now age. Certainly, in the UK for example, at the last election in 2019, the easiest way to tell how someone had voted was to ask their age.

Minority ethnic populations will tend to vote left rather than right. I don't think we need to abandon necessarily all the voting models that we previously operated with, which tended to focus on, as you said, income and, to a lesser extent, wealth and people's occupation. They still to some extent make a difference. But they don't make anywhere near as much difference as they used to as the values.

Competence: How good a job that president or that prime minister is of delivering the public services does still matter to voters.

Larry Bernstein:

One hugely distinguishing feature of European politics is that each country has more than two major political parties. In Germany, you mentioned that on the left that there were the Greens and the Social Democrats, and on the right, there was CSU/CDU as well as the AfD. In the UK, you have Labor, Libor Democrats, the Scottish National Party on the Left and the Tories and UKIP on the right. What are the implications of coalition governance?

And, how does such a large number of political parties' impact personal identity? I suspect that that someone living in London might identify as a Brit, a Fulham football fan and as a conservative. They might also self-identify as a European. So, you have these various identities.

But when there are five political parties and it's very difficult to distinguish between where each individual party stands on various issues, how does that impact partisan identity?

Tim Bale:

Well, for one thing, it's actually declined over time. In most European countries now, the number of people who identify strongly with a particular party is really relatively low. And if you look at surveys done in the 1960s, it used to be a lot higher, and that makes a difference at elections. Most European countries, unlike the UK and unlike the US, have proportional representation, which in some ways gives people more choice. The trade-off is it makes for a much more complex governing situation.

When it comes to coalition politics, in many countries it works perfectly well. There doesn't actually seem to be that much of a link between countries' electoral systems, which sometimes produce actually very fragmented governments and good government in that country. And Germany is a very good example at the moment. They had an election a few weeks ago. It will probably take another month or so for them to get a government together.

But the advantages in some ways of that process is that you get far more buy-in when that government finally takes shape and you get a rather less polarized politics than you get under first past the post plurality systems as you have in the United Kingdom and the United States.

Larry Bernstein:

One example of the problems with a multi-party system is in Italy since the Second World War. So many parties, no party ever wins an election, governments coming and going. Moving away from Europe, the Israelis have a multi-party system. Over the past two years, it took multiple elections to form a government. Why do you believe that a coalition government is more stable and better at governing? From the US perspective once a president wins an election, he has four years to achieve his objectives and then go back to the people to seek reelection. Why do you think that the chaos that goes on regularly in Europe and with strange results in Italy and Israel is superior?

Tim Bale:

Italy had its problems, but if you looked at Italy after the Second World War through to the 21st century, you actually see quite a lot of stability underneath the chaos because the Christian Democratic Party in Italy actually was always in government, albeit with different parties each time. Israel, I guess is a particularly special case. They have got ethnic divides there and a very difficult external situation. And I think that is a special case. But if you look around the rest of Europe, I don't think you see anywhere near that chaos. Governments perhaps don't last quite as long as they do under the system in the United States, but they remain relatively stable.

And as I say, the advantage is governments, believe it or not, are able to pass legislation without very much trouble. In some ways is a contrast with the United States, where the

president is sometimes dependent on a legislature where he has no majority, and therefore is actually unable to get some of the things he wants to get done through Congress.

Larry Bernstein:

In the recent past, the Scots predominantly voted for the Labor Party but when the issue of Scottish independence came to the forefront, the Scottish National Party or SNP did extremely well in previous Labor enclaves. And my question is, when you get these single-issue parties, like the SNP, how does that impact Labor's success in MP elections? If Labor loses Scotland permanently, does Labor have any chance of achieving a majority in the UK Parliament? And when you look at those specific MP races in Scotland, Labor sometimes finishes in third place, I mean it is incredible.

Tim Bale:

Well the UK isn't completely unusual in having, a regionalist, or a secessionist party within it. There are many countries in Europe that have these parties. So Scottish nationalism really first began to grow in the 1970s. And it really took off at the end of the 1990s and early 2000's when the Labor government in the UK opened a parliament in Scotland. It still sends lawmakers to the Parliament in London, but it also has its own parliament. And this is where the SNP once it won power in the Scottish Parliament, it was able to persuade people that they should vote for the SNP in the elections to the London Westminster Parliament as well. With the result that, as you quite rightly said, from being a kind of Labor fiefdom, Scotland is now very much a Scottish Nationalist fiefdom.

The Scottish Nationalist Party managed to extract a referendum on Scottish independence from the conservative government in 2014. It lost that independence referendum, but actually it helped the party in its support. And it's won more seats at Westminster since then. So we are in a quite unstable situation in the UK. It could well be the case that we have a second Scottish referendum, in part because Scotland didn't vote to leave the European Union in the same way that other parts of the UK did, and the SNP have used that to their advantage. So, we are really waiting to see what happens next.

Larry Bernstein:

Nationalism is our next topic. The nation state hasn't gone away. If anything, national pride, the use of language, culture, et cetera is still essential. How should we think about nationalism, why does its importance fluctuate over time?

The concept of the European is new and not rooted in the citizens personal identity. I mean there is no European football team or Olympic team. And most importantly, why does the issue of nationalism separate those on the left from those on the right?

Tim Bale:

Well, you're quite right to say that nationalism hasn't gone away. And I think one of the problems for the European Union has always been that it's really been unable to create a European demos, or a European identity that trumps people's national identity. Having said that, if you look at surveys, a lot of people have these nested identities. They feel slightly more French than they do European. There isn't necessarily a zero-sum game.

Poland is a very interesting case and point, because the Poles are a very nationalistic society, and the presence of Putin's Russia exacerbates these kind of nationalist feelings. And yet, if you do surveys of the Polish population, they are extremely positive about the European Union. Now, their government is not. Their government tries very hard to kind of whip up nationalist feeling against the European Union, but it hasn't been particularly successful in doing that.

But that then I think raises the question you're raising really, which is where does nationalism come from? It isn't a kind of bottoms up phenomenon. It can be whipped up by entrepreneurial politicians for good or ill. And this is happening all the way across Europe. And it is something that right wing politicians tend to do, because those who vote for the right tend to have rather more nationalistic feelings than those who vote for the left.

Larry Bernstein:

From the American perspective, Brexit seemed to be an incredibly important issue. And we've wondered, after its passage and its implementation, how does Brexit affect the relationship between the United Kingdom and the European Union. There was so much gnashing of teeth with regard to trade and foreign policy. What's happened so far, and what do you think will happen next?

Tim Bale:

Well, Brexit clearly is an incredibly important dividing line in the United Kingdom, and remains so. We've had what political scientists refer to as this sort of effective polarization since 2016. People have very strong leave identities and remain identities. And those leave and remain identities are actually stronger than identification with particular political parties. Although increasingly, you've found that those who voted leave, and who see themselves as leavers tend to now vote conservative, which has been to Boris Johnson's advantage.

I think it's important to stress that Brexit was always going to be a process rather than an event. That actually this is an ongoing negotiation. And unfortunately, relations between the European Union and the UK are still very difficult, in part because it suits the UK government under Boris Johnson to maintain friction with the EU is quite a useful thing.

Larry Bernstein:

I want to turn to French politics. I think what was absolutely shocking to me in the last French presidential election was that fact that Macron won despite not being a member of a major

political party. That Macron's new political party En Marche, in its first attempt successfully won a presidential election.

Another incredible event was that the major political parties in France did not even make it to the presidential runoff. This would be like in the United States a situation where the Republicans and Democrats were unsuccessful in getting a candidate in the final round runoff. It is mind boggling.

Why in the last French presidential election did Marine Le Pen and Macron make it to the runoffs. And then you touched on this in your opening remarks that a radio and TV host Zemmour is now one of the leading candidates in the next upcoming French presidential election. Now, recent polling has shown him winning 15 to 20% of the votes in the first round, which is slightly more than hypothetical candidates from France's major parties.

Tim Bale:

Well, I think the framework of the silent counterrevolution is extremely important when you're looking at France and indeed other European countries. Because you saw the rise of the far, right, the Front National under first Jean-Marie Le Pen, and then his daughter, Marine Le Pen, really as a result of this backlash against immigration and against problems that France has with the integration of its ethnic minorities. And those were things that the center right party simply couldn't seem to cope with.

And that meant that the Front National, in some ways, displaced the center-right. But on the other hand, you had a very weak center left. And so there was a vacuum there, which Emmanuel Macron, came into fill. And really, as you say, was a phenomenon. Someone who most French people hadn't really heard of, but just had a natural flare for politics, and was able really to convince people that the old parties had failed, and that unless they voted for him, then the alternative was an extreme that most French people really reject.

Macron created his own party, En Marche, a few months just before the election. And not only won the presidential election, but then won the legislative elections, which gave himself a big majority in parliament.

Larry Bernstein:

Isn't that even more incredible than his own presidential race? In the United States, the concept that ... Ross Perot, for example, as an independent, could win the presidency, but then that the Perot party could win a majority of the House is inconceivable. How is it possible that an institution with no on the ground apparatus could win a majority of the House? How is that possible?

Tim Bale:

Well, it is a phenomenon. Even in Europe this is very, very unusual. I know we are in the age of the startup, but it is very, very unusual for a politician to be able to create a party from scratch and do so well.

I think it is the case that that lack of loyalty helped create a vacuum where talented entrepreneurial politicians can come in and surprise us all. But Macron is a phenomenon. It's important to say that the shine to some extent has gone off him.

If you govern for a few years, eventually, you don't look quite as shiny and new as you once did. But he still stands a very good chance of reelection next time around, particularly because he may be facing an extreme candidate, that the majority of French people, whatever they're feeling is on immigration, will feel is just a little bit too extreme for them.

Larry Bernstein:

So do you think that the final round will be Macron and someone on the right or is it possible it could be someone on the left?

Tim Bale:

I think it's very unlikely it'll be someone on the left. Very many left-wing voters in France, will probably jump for Macron because they believe that he is the best of a bad bunch. And although he's a little bit neoliberal on the economy, they still see him as a liberal with a small L, and social values.

It looks to me, once again, as if the center right, is actually quite fragmented, which will mean that the candidate that comes through will be from the far right.

And at the moment, it looks as if it won't be the more traditional far right party, headed by Marine Le Pen, but it will be Eric Zemmour, who in some ways is a more frightening candidate than Marine Le Pen. If you care about progressive values, if you care about liberal democracy and you are worried by xenophobia, you're worried by anti-immigration rhetoric, Zemmour is quite a frightening guy. But as a result of that, it will probably mean that if he does get into the second round and faces off against Macron, Macron would probably win fairly easily.

Larry Bernstein:

Our American audience doesn't know Zemmour. So maybe you could explain to us, who he is, what he stands for, why he's popular. He's not a politician and what anger and frustration has he tapped into that has allowed him to become a leading candidate for the President of France. Where are the other career politicians from France's major political parties?

How can it be that these life long career politicians have little chance against a radio and TV personality who doesn't belong to a political party and has never run for political office?

Tim Bale:

He has the very strong opinion that France's ethnic minorities don't do enough to integrate into French culture. He believes there is such a thing as French culture. And if they want to stay in France, then they ought to get with the program. And if they don't want to, then they should leave. Now many French people do respond to that kind of rhetoric and those kinds of policies, because the cultural change that they've seen over the last few decades is quite scary.

Larry Bernstein:

The working-class communities in Northern England had been a core part of the Labor Party.

The Tories won what had been a labor fiefdom for generations. And it reminds me of what happened in West Virginia. West Virginia had been predominantly Democratic since 1934. And in 2000, the state went for the Republicans and it really hasn't looked back. Trump won the state by 40 points. And it reflects the White working-class, not college educated, religious people have become core voters in the Republican party.

And I seem to think that this is a very similar story, what you're seeing in the north of England. Those voters, who had been loyal to the Labor Party, to paraphrase Ronald Reagan, I didn't change my view, the Democratic Party left me. And Labor, they would argue, had left them. How do you think about the North of England and the fall of that election wall?

Tim Bale:

I think there are very strong parallels actually, between what happened in the United States and what happened at the general election in the UK in 2019. You're absolutely right to say that in some ways, these people in the Midlands and in the north of England, in formerly Labor constituencies, had been voting Labor, despite the fact that their values were actually quite different from the values espoused by the Labor Party.

They were far more nationalistic. They would say patriotic, far more worried about immigration, far less comfortable with some of the social changes that the Labor government, under Tony Blair, had made than those Labor party lawmakers representing them. Brexit broke the relationship between those voters and the Labor party.

I think the question is, and it's interesting that you talk about how West Virginia has gradually become more Republican over time, is whether that will actually happen in those seats, in the so-called red wall.

It may well be, that their relationship with the Conservative Party is rather more transactional than that. And it may well be, that the Labor Party is able to moderate its social liberalism, in order to appeal to them on economic grounds and not put them off, if you like voting Labor on values questions. So it also-

Larry Bernstein:

I'm actually surprised, Tim. I think there's a bet in the offing. I would think that the Midlands and the North of England is more like West Virginia, I think. If I interview you a generation from now, my expectation is that it will be Conservative by 40.

Tim Bale:

Well, right. And let's go back to the conversation we had about Scotland there, because of course, that's what happened in Scotland. Once the dam broke, there was no way back for Labor. And it could be that, that is exactly what happens in the Midlands and the North.

The Conservatives are vulnerable in other places. As the Conservatives become more like a populous radical right party then some of their voters in the leafy suburbs of larger cities.

Larry Bernstein:

Self-actualized.

Tim Bale:

Yeah, absolutely. Self-actualized voters begin to think, well, we may as well give Labor a go. The problem for the Labor Party, however, is that those voters tend to be concentrated in urban areas. And the way that the electorates, the districts are carved up in the UK, means that the Conservatives vote among these socially conservative people, among Brexit Leave voting people, is much more efficiently spread.

So that Labor will pile up lots of liberal self-actualized voters in cities and just outside cities. But it won't do them very much good because in the end, the leave vote, the socially conservative vote is rather more spread across the country and delivers more MPs for the Conservative party in Parliament.

Larry Bernstein:

Let me go back to France. We've talked about the West Virginia voter as compared to those in North of England, but what about comparing the West Virginia voter to similar ones in France?

I'm thinking about those protestors who live outside of Paris and are referred to as the yellow jackets. This group appears not to be politically represented by anybody. These yellow jackets are angry because they think that the Macron government and the Parisian elites doesn't understand them, don't care about them, and actually may wish them harm. These yellow jackets hit the streets and rioted during the first year of Macron's government, but they haven't disappeared.

Tim Bale:

Well, you are right. The Yellow jacket guys. They're clearly still around. They haven't caused as many problems as they did in the early years of the Macron presidency, partly because he's

actually adjusted policy in order to make things a little bit easier for them, in terms of their daily lives. They began by protesting about fuel prices in less urban areas. And he's been, rather more careful on those grounds.

I mean, if they do come out to vote, I don't see them as a voting block necessarily, but in as much as they will vote, they might well vote for the far right, whether it be for Zemmour. Because these politicians, both Marine Le Pen and Zemmour, they don't just get votes on immigration, they do get votes on this very populist idea that they represent the people in deepest France, against the Parisian establishment that Macron does represent.

I don't see that that most French people will go for that extreme an alternative. I think faced with the choice between a centralist politician, like Macron and a more extreme politician in the end, in the runoff, they'll go for Macron.

Larry Bernstein:

In your book, *Riding the Populist Wave*, one of the subjects is the role of the Christian Right. And the importance of religion in European politics has declined over time, I suspect because of a decline in religiosity in Europe. And maybe that we're combining a couple of different ideas, when we talk about nationalism and values. Religiosity is a component of that, just as is in the United States. I think if we go back to West Virginia, I think there is a substantial religious component to those values. How should we think about the role of religion in the choice of partisanship, in terms of values and how that fits in with center right parties?

Tim Bale:

The biggest difference, I would say, between US politics and European politics is the question of religion. It does still play some residual part in European politics and in particular, identification with that branch of the center right, that calls itself Christian Democratic. It's still the case that people who go to church are rather more likely, if there's a Christian Democratic alternative on offer to vote for, Christian Democratic parties than they are for parties on the center left, or indeed, other conservative parties.

The levels of religious observance in Europe, right across the continent are far, far lower than they are in the United States. It really is a minority sport, church going. There's still quite a lot of believing, there's just not very much belonging in Europe.

And even when you look at religiously motivated voters, they tend to vote, for Christian Democratic parties, rather than radical right. Religious voters in Europe tend to be rather more sympathetic to immigration than our nonreligious voters. Partly because they have this tradition of charity of welcoming strangers as friends.

Larry Bernstein:

Why are there no European parties?

Tim Bale:

Well, quite frankly, the European Parliament just is not that important, either in terms of policy making and individual countries, or in terms of how people think about politics on the ground. Voters obviously do vote for the European Parliament every five years, but turnout is incredibly low, and most people see it as very much a second order affair. They don't really have any very strong links with their representatives in the European Parliament. They really don't think about them and probably can't even name most of them, to be honest.

Larry Bernstein:

Do you think this is the function of the design of the European Constitution? One is that legislation itself is derived and created by the bureaucracy. It is a bit shocking as an American that legislation is written by an unelected body of bureaucrats. And then the second aspect is that there's this requirement of unanimity among the European nations for major decision making, which limits their ability to get things done without negotiations between the nation states, bringing them back into the power dynamic. And then on the foreign policy side, the inability to use any military force without the permission of leaders of the respective nation states. Do you think that the European Union is this like the Articles of Confederation back in the 18th century US that was a limited supranational institution that lacked power to do anything material?

Tim Bale:

Yeah. There's no doubt that if ever there is a conflict between those two, then it's intergovernmentalism, it's the nation states that win out. It's never going to be that powerful because member states don't want it to be that powerful.

Larry Bernstein:

In the American newspapers last weekend showed some photographs of immigrants from Belarus trying to get into Poland. And the headline is something like, "Belarus weaponizes migrants." Immigration has been a critical issue. How did it effect European elections because these migrants caused law-and-order issues? It influenced Brexit. The French are very concerned about it. It's not going away. Fears of immigration will remain at a simmer and it's the top story in Europe right now. Tell me about how immigration impacts European politics.

Tim Bale:

If you look at European politic over the last 20 years, you'd have to say that if there's one phenomenon that has made the biggest difference, it is migration. It clearly is a concern to a very large section of European electorates. There are lots of politicians who are very keen on exploiting their fears, and indeed, of course, responding to their fears. I don't want to say that those fears are necessarily somehow illegitimate. It's been, I think, even more pronounced since 2015, when we had this European migrant crisis where we had large numbers of people

fleeing Syria. And we had a situation in which Angela Merkel, very, very bravely in some ways, and some people obviously disagreed with what she did, eventually allowed very, very large numbers of people to come into Germany.

On the question of Belarus and Poland, it's a fascinating one. Because in some ways, it's a win-win, although it doesn't sound like it. Poland, which is essentially a populous radical right government, has been scaring the population of Poland with stories about immigration for years. And in some ways, what's happening on their border, although they profess not to like it and it is a problem for them, in some ways plays into that narrative paradoxically.

On the other side of the border, we have Alexander Lukashenko from Belarus, who is clearly using these people to try and get Europe to negotiate away the sanctions that they have imposed on him as a result of him, once again, stealing an election. I think most Europeans are rather more worried about the immigration coming from Sub-Saharan Africa, as well as the Middle East, and coming into Europe via Africa, sometimes in small boats into Greece, into Italy, and into, to some extent, Spain. And every country in Europe is worried about it.

Larry Bernstein:

Some believe that the survival of the European Union depends on the willingness of the North to make substantial transfer payments to the South. During COVID, redistribution issues subsided likely because of the general lack of concern about spending during a crisis. But I suspect it's just a matter of time before redistribution once again takes center stage, especially if there is some sort of financial crisis and the Germans will again question how much money it gives to the Italians, the Spanish and the Portuguese. Do you think that this issue is like a time bomb waiting to explode?

Tim Bale:

One of the difficulties of the European Union has been creating a public that feels totally European. And that, I think, does present an obstacle to anyone who wants to undertake a serious redistribution of resources from the wealthier North to the poorer South and the wealthier West to the poorer East.

I think those big, fiscal transfers are always going to be a problem. And in some ways, that is one of the limitations, I think, on the European Union becoming a full federation. I just don't think that can happen while we don't have the levels of European identity and solidarity among ordinary people that would be required.

Larry Bernstein:

I end each episode on a note of optimism, Tim. What are optimistic about?

Tim Bale:

Well, I actually think that given some of the problems that COVID has caused, that European economies do seem to be bouncing back. They don't seem to be suffering from the unemployment that many people suspected might be the case. The fiscal pump priming that governments undertook during the extremes of the pandemic do seem to have paid off. I think although we worry and we fret particularly about immigration in many countries in Europe, actually, we are pretty good at integrating ethnic minorities without too many strains and too many problems.

Larry Bernstein

Tim, thank you so much for your presentation. That ends today's session.

I am taking next week off to celebrate the Thanksgiving holiday, but I promise that I will be back soon.

If you are interested in listening to a replay of today's What Happens Next program or any of our previous episodes or if you wish to read a transcript, you can find them on our website Whathappensnextin6minutes.com. Replays are also available on Apple Podcasts, Podbean and Spotify.

Tim Bale thanks again for your insights. I would also like to thank our listeners for their time and for engaging with these complex issues. Good bye.