

Reflex-Based Politics is Bad Politics

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Do you know who Prime Minister of Saxony is? Probably not. Stanislaw Tillich was fairly unknown outside Germany until recently, and even within Germany very few people had ever heard of him. Saxony has recently hit the headlines as being a hotspot for German xenophobia with the highest number of xenophobic attacks on refugees being recorded there, in towns such as Heidenau and Clausnitz. Tillich (Christian Democratic Party, CDU) has come in for severe criticism because of his reluctant response to these attacks. Although he has disassociated himself from right-wing populism and the *Alternative für Deutschland* (Alternative for Germany, AfD) he has failed for years to enforce concrete measures against the enduring problem of xenophobia in Saxony. The politics and policies of his local party are what I would describe (at least partially) as *reflex-based*. And this will be the subject of my following blog entries: how does the concept of reflex-based politics and policies relate to an increase in right-wing populism and extremism?

What is it exactly I mean by the term *reflex-based*? Reflexes such as swallowing or breathing are natural and indispensable, without them we cannot survive. A reflex is a series of tiny programmes, which occur in our nervous system, without any complex conscious evaluation (dear physicians, please excuse this simplified description). For example, these reflexes save our fingers from getting burnt or make us blink when a mosquito approaches our eye.

If we apply the logic of the individual to the realm of politics it is indispensable to say that what works at the level of the individual is not necessarily applicable to the political sphere. Let us take, for example, the German stereotype of the thrifty Swabian housewife who carefully avoids debts. This praiseworthy attitude is unsuitable for a national economy which, in order to prosper, needs to borrow money to invest in long term projects. In short, the state-generated tax income is not sufficient to cover the expenses for long term projects such as building roads and bridges. The same logic applies to reflexes which are crucial at the level of the individual, but are counterproductive for policies, quite simply because they are not based on reason. Moreover, reflex-based politics is solely reactive and not proactive. This implies the danger that circumstances or other people set the agenda and not elected politicians. Please excuse the worn out metaphor, but if you are not in the driving seat, you do not determine the destination of the journey or time of arrival.

To make it clear, politics and policies are in some way mostly reactive; a press release for an anniversary, a speech or draft laws mostly respond to problems or incidents which occurred in society. But they contain an element of reason and reflection how to react, while reflexive politics lacks this fundamental aspect. To give you an example, from my point of view Francois Hollande's immediate reaction to the horrible Paris attacks were reflex-based and not **reasoned**. To order airstrikes against Daesh was a reflex rather than an appropriate reaction to the causes of the attacks. It was evident at that time and is still true that the airstrikes would not change anything in Syria, except producing more victims and hatred. Solely domestic motives and fear drove that decision, which is not rare; reflex-based politics and policies dominate these days, which has at least two reasons.

First of all, political discourse in Europe has been in 'crisis mode' for many years now. Crisis discourse, economic decline and austerity politics dominate all other topics. The Ukrainian and Syrian crises along with the advance of Daesh and terrorist attacks also shape our individual perceptions of life nowadays. There is greater insecurity because politics seems not to be delivering its original promise: to solve the people's problems and to secure their livelihood. This 'crisis mode' causes that political decisions are based more likely on fear

rather than on confidence and reason. In other words politics and policies are dominated by reflexive behaviour.

A second reason, which causes politics and policies to be reflex-based is the sheer pace of our time where broadcast media try to deliver the news in real time and a speedy and catchy response via Facebook or Twitter often wins out over a carefully thought through but slower response. The same holds true for politics nowadays. The pressure to produce rapid answers often leads to a simplistic response driven by fear, especially the fear of doing something wrong. These developments together create a situation in which politics and policies are failing to offer optimal solutions for citizens, as they focus on quick fixes rather than on long-lasting solutions.

As I have already begun to outline, when politicians fail to deliver on their promised solutions voters will turn to others who claim to have answers, namely those on the outer edges of the political spectrum. From my point of view, the success of right-wing populism and extremism today has — to a great degree — its roots in mistakes made by mainstream parties that are driven by strongly reflex-based politics. This is blatantly obvious in Saxony, where the state's long-standing reluctance to prosecute right-wing crime has opened up a space for xenophobes to establish a network of right-wing structures. Even Saxony's Deputy Prime Minister Dulig has recently pointed out that the police are partially incompetent. According to him state security authorities lack quality in general, especially 'intercultural competence and leadership'. ([Spiegel Online](#), 3 March 2016)

In my next blog posts I will go more into details by focusing on concrete examples and I will discuss the possibilities for 'decelerated' and more reasoned politics.