

European election debate: Conservative, social democratic leaders praise austerity, sanctions vs. Russia

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On Thursday evening, the so-called European election TV “duel” took place between the lead candidate of the conservative European People’s Party (EPP), Jean Claude Juncker, and his opponent, Martin Schulz, of the Party of European Socialists (PES). The “duel” is part of desperate attempts by politicians and the media to lend the European Union (EU) a democratic façade, whereas the population increasingly rejects it. Polls predict a low turnout and record wins by parties campaigning against the EU.

For the first time, the various party groupings in the European Parliament are standing a lead candidate for the office of President of the European Commission. The debate was broadcast during prime time on Germany’s ZDF and Austria’s ORF television channels. There was a hand-picked, predominantly young studio audience. Questions from the audience and from viewers had been prepared in advance. The staged programme was meant to give the impression that the EU is “young, dynamic and democratic”.

The broadcast had exactly the opposite effect. No real debate took place. It was a discussion between two veteran EU bureaucrats who have known each other for a long time, who agree on all central political questions, and who both embody the reactionary character of the EU. This was most clearly expressed in their support for an aggressive foreign policy and the imposition of austerity.

In particular, the Social Democrat Schulz vehemently justified the intervention of the West in Ukraine and urged tougher action against Russia. Apparently inspired by the new great power fantasies that are gripping ruling circles in Berlin, he said that the EU could not stand aside in Ukraine.

Schulz and Juncker threatened Russia with economic sanctions—if Russia “breaches international law, then the Russians must be clearly told that there will be sanctions”, Schulz declared, even if this costs jobs and electricity prices shoot up.

With equal determination, Schulz and Juncker defended the austerity policies that have driven millions in the EU into poverty and unemployment. Juncker justified the austerity measures by saying they were “working”, even if this was “painful for some”. Schulz, for his part, bluntly announced that “the end of the crisis will be reached when people have paid the price with their wages and pensions and above all higher unemployment for all the rip-offs that led to this crisis”.

Both politicians and their parties are directly responsible for the social misery in Europe. Juncker was president of the euro group in 2008 and 2009, when billions were paid to rescue the banks. Schulz, a member of Germany’s Social Democratic Party (SPD), belongs to the family of parties that have played the leading role in then extracting this money from the general population.

In Germany, the SPD rules together with the Christian Democrats under Angela Merkel, who more than any other politician stands for austerity. In Greece, it was the social democratic PASOK government under Giorgos Papandreou that initiated the cuts and structural adjustment programmes.

And in France, the Socialist Party government of President Francois Hollande, with the active support of the SPD, is currently working on a Responsibility Pact—a French version of the welfare and labour “reforms” pushed through in Germany under the last SPD-Green Party government.

As a result of these policies, 27 million people are unemployed in the EU. Youth unemployment in countries such as Greece or Spain stands around 60 percent. There is abject poverty in the Eastern European countries, which are mainly used as a source of cheap labor for German corporations. And even in supposedly rich Germany, millions are forced to exist on low-wage jobs or are dependent on welfare.

None of this was seriously discussed during the debate. Instead, Schulz and Juncker tried to keep up the appearances of a debate with wisecracks and artificial controversy. In most instances this was just downright embarrassing, but in some cases it was more revealing than perhaps the candidates had intended.

When Schulz claimed that he stood for more transparency, and accused his colleague of standing “for a Europe that meets behind closed doors”, Juncker countered, “I got to know Martin Schulz behind closed doors”.

From the beginning, the television programme was based on a deception. The moderators claimed that voters had the opportunity to “choose the decisive man in Europe”. In reality, however, it is not the European Parliament that decides on the European Commission president; it can only make a recommendation. The proposal for a candidate is made by the European Council, comprising the 28 EU heads of state and government. The European Parliament merely votes on this proposal.

In an editorial the day after the debate, the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* warned that the apparent election of the Commission President was not worth much more than the paper on which voters placed their cross. “The temptation for the heads of state and government will be great to brush the result of the European elections under the carpet in order to nominate a man or a woman of their choice ...The attempt to democratize the EU and bring it closer to its citizens would be discredited”.

Such a farce is not really necessary to discredit the EU in the eyes of broad layers of the population. More and more people already reject the EU and see it for what it is—a tool of the most powerful banks and corporations that serves the ruling class in Europe to crush all social and democratic rights of working people, and to pursue their geo-strategic interests in the framework of an increasingly militaristic foreign

policy.



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