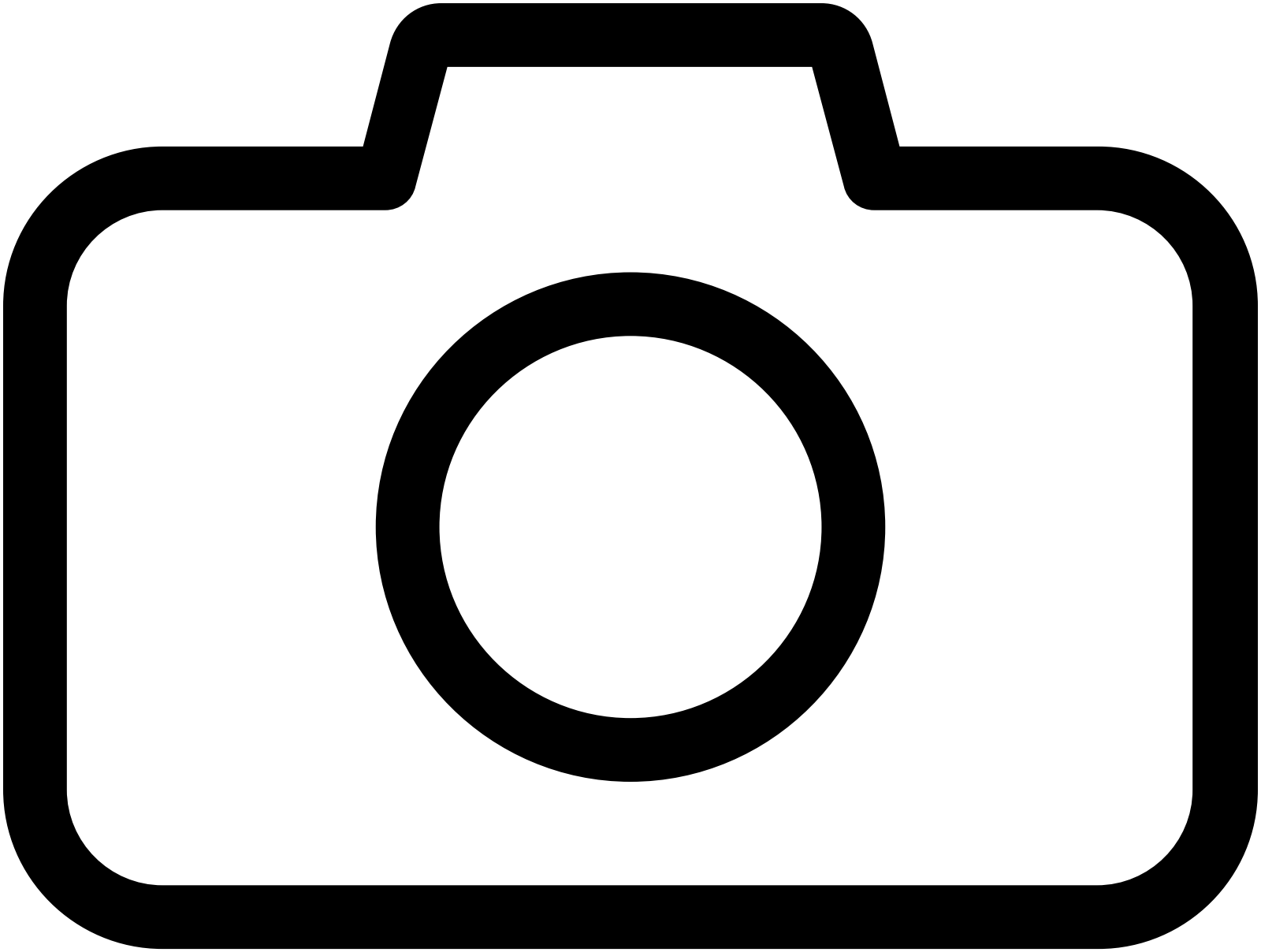

Arne Weychardt

06.11.2014, European elections: The extremists‘ hour. Europe has voted

„Spitzenkandidaten“ for the position of Commission President, Euroskeptics and Anti-Europeans. These European elections were different than all the others held since 1979, when representatives to the European Parliament were chosen directly by Europe's citizens for the first time. A commentary by Joachim Fritz-Vannahme on the outcome.

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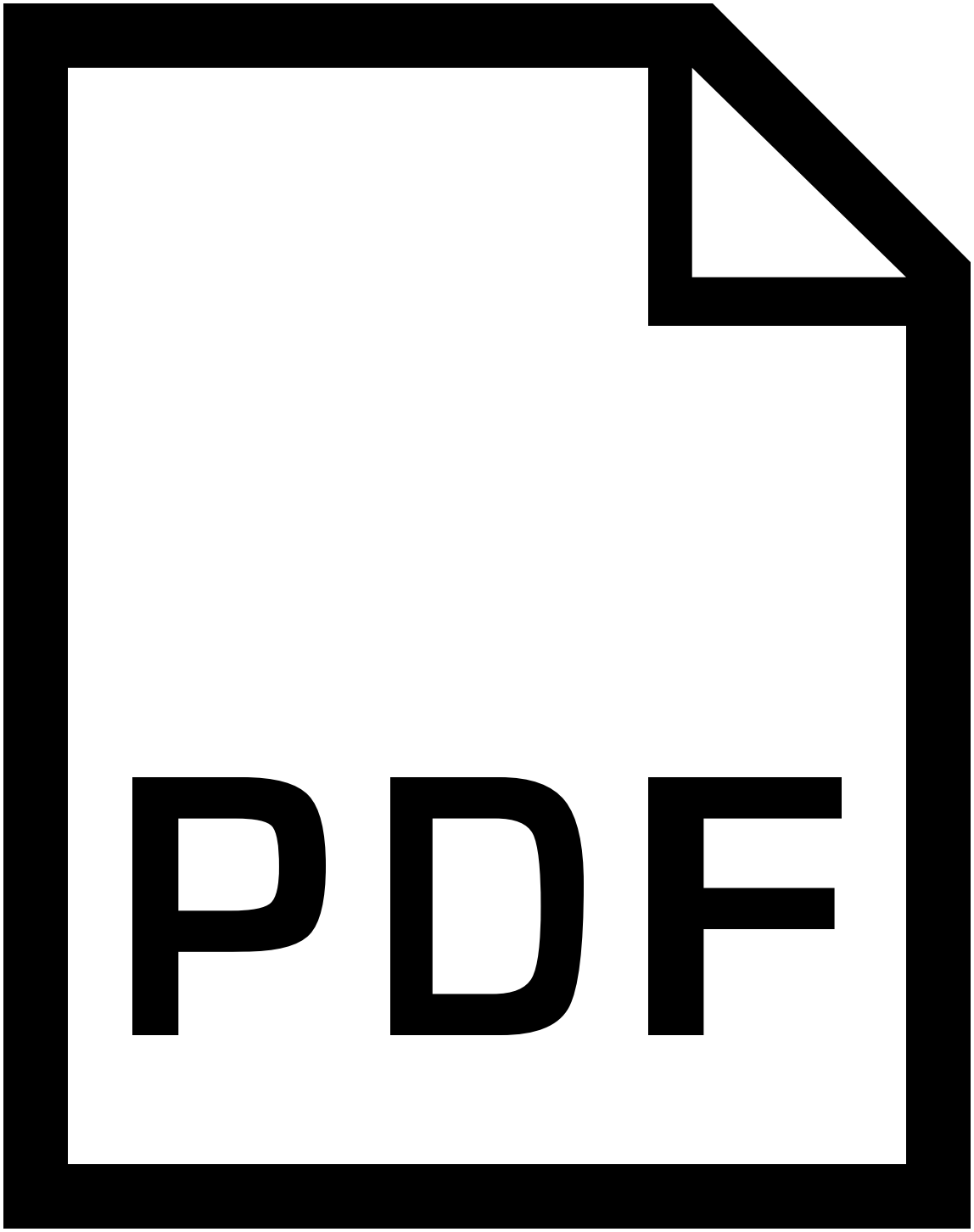

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These European elections were different than all the others held since 1979, when representatives to the European Parliament were chosen directly by Europe's citizens for the first time. This year's elections were different because, for the first time, the major parties ran high-profile candidates who were hoping to become president of the European Commission.

The winner was Jean-Claude Juncker, the polyglot, longtime Christian Democratic prime minister of Luxembourg. It is hard to imagine that the EU's heads of state and government will ignore the results and Juncker's victory and choose someone else. During the intensive campaign, Juncker traveled throughout the Union to face the public and debate Martin Schulz, the Socialist candidate, at numerous events, and they will meet up again as proponents of a compromise-seeking grand coalition.

This first attempt at running leading candidates was worth it. Even if most of their positions did not differ greatly from each other's, it gave their viewpoints a clear profile, a human face. And anyone who wanted to use the ballot box to send a warning to their national government, or even to the entire political establishment, could not also complain about an anonymous, "faceless" EU.

This year was also much different than past elections in that the media were dominated by the euroskeptics and opponents of today's crisis-ridden EU. If you listened closely during the current campaign, you therefore might have been surprised: The only ones who remained true to the party line were UKIP adherents in the UK, who continue to demand that their country leave the EU. Marine Le Pen in France, Bernd Lucke in Germany, the bizarre Beppo Grillo in Italy and the unyielding leftist Alexis Tsipras in Greece are all calling for one thing first and foremost: a different EU. Some want it to be more socialist and more anticapitalist, some want it less regulated and more competitive, and one of the above wants it decked out in France's national colors and home to as few immigrants as possible.

The mirage of the populists' united front

Did populists on both the left and right sense that, while many voters have a lot they are not happy about when it comes to today's EU, they are not willing to imagine a Europe without the civilizing ties the Union indeed offers?

Moreover, in the last few weeks it became clear that the populist parties' "united front" was nothing more than a mirage as demonstrated by a recent Bertelsmann Stiftung study. The Alternative for Germany party wants nothing to do with its Dutch "counterpart," Geert Wilder's Party for Freedom. Nigel Farage's UKIP refuses to join forces with Le Pen and her National Front, and Tsipras's radical-left Syriza in Greece and the rightwing radical Jobbik in Hungary are worlds apart.

In contrast, the pro-Europeans of the center-right and center-left are much more united in their declared belief that the only proper answer to a Europe in crisis is a better, stronger Europe. But how is such a Europe to be achieved? That will become apparent in the next few months through a number of events: how the European Commission is staffed and structured and who gets chosen as the EU's foreign minister (sorry, its "high representative for foreign affairs and security policy"), not to mention the issues that the new European Parliament focuses on. Not only are the voters who just cast their ballots responsible for what happens next, so are the governments of the EU member states and their national parliaments, who have a say in who will be given positions in the EU's most important institutions. The question is: Does everyone making decisions in the various national capitals understand the responsibility they bear?

Voter turnout stable on a low level

Something that was not new this time was voter turnout, which averaged 43 percent across Europe, barely above the rate five years ago. Yet here, too, it's worth taking a second look. Many people like to complain that Europe today is so out of touch with the public, so complicated and incomprehensible. Then how do you explain the low turnout in those countries that held both European and local elections?

Others justify not going to the polls by saying the European elections are not as important as national elections, which determine how the government is formed and who serves as the opposition. While that may not be totally incorrect, that certainly doesn't mean it's true, since it is now generally the case in almost all policy fields within the EU that the European Parliament makes decisions together with the European Council, made up of the heads of state and government of the EU member states. To look at it in reverse: national governments are more powerful than ever before.

And what if the low turnout, now a constant in European politics, were to be considered neither reprehensible nor a cause for alarm? Today's EU is, from a democratic point of view, clearly legitimized by national parliaments and governments, who are responsible for increasing integration among member states, and also by the European Parliament which, from now on, will have a say in choosing the European Commission president as well as the individual commissioners. After all, this autumn the designated commissioners will be subject to an exacting, lengthy hearing in front of the European Parliament. There have indeed been cases where candidates were forced to throw in the towel following their hearing. And that can hardly be called "undemocratic."

Everything great in Europe?

So is everything great these days in Europe? No, that would be going too far. Denmark's People's Party, Britain's UKIP and France's National Front are the winners in their national contests and have thus dramatically changed the political landscapes there. Elsewhere, too, the rallying cry about closing borders and sending immigrants home was disturbingly popular. Fear and anger thus played a role in what voters had to say: fear of foreigners and of losing one's job, and anger towards "the powers that be," who have ostensibly exposed so many vulnerable people in Europe to greater competition. That, in any case, is the feeling in crisis-ridden EU member states, a feeling that can now be documented statistically. It is the core message of these European elections, imparted in this hour of extremism. That, too, is why these elections were different.

Joachim Fritz-Vannahme is director of the Europe's Future program at the Bertelsmann Stiftung

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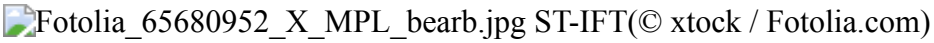
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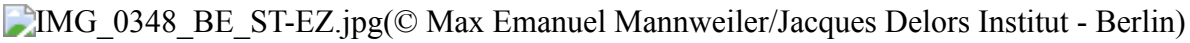
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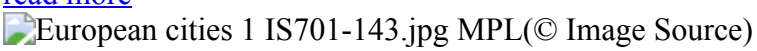
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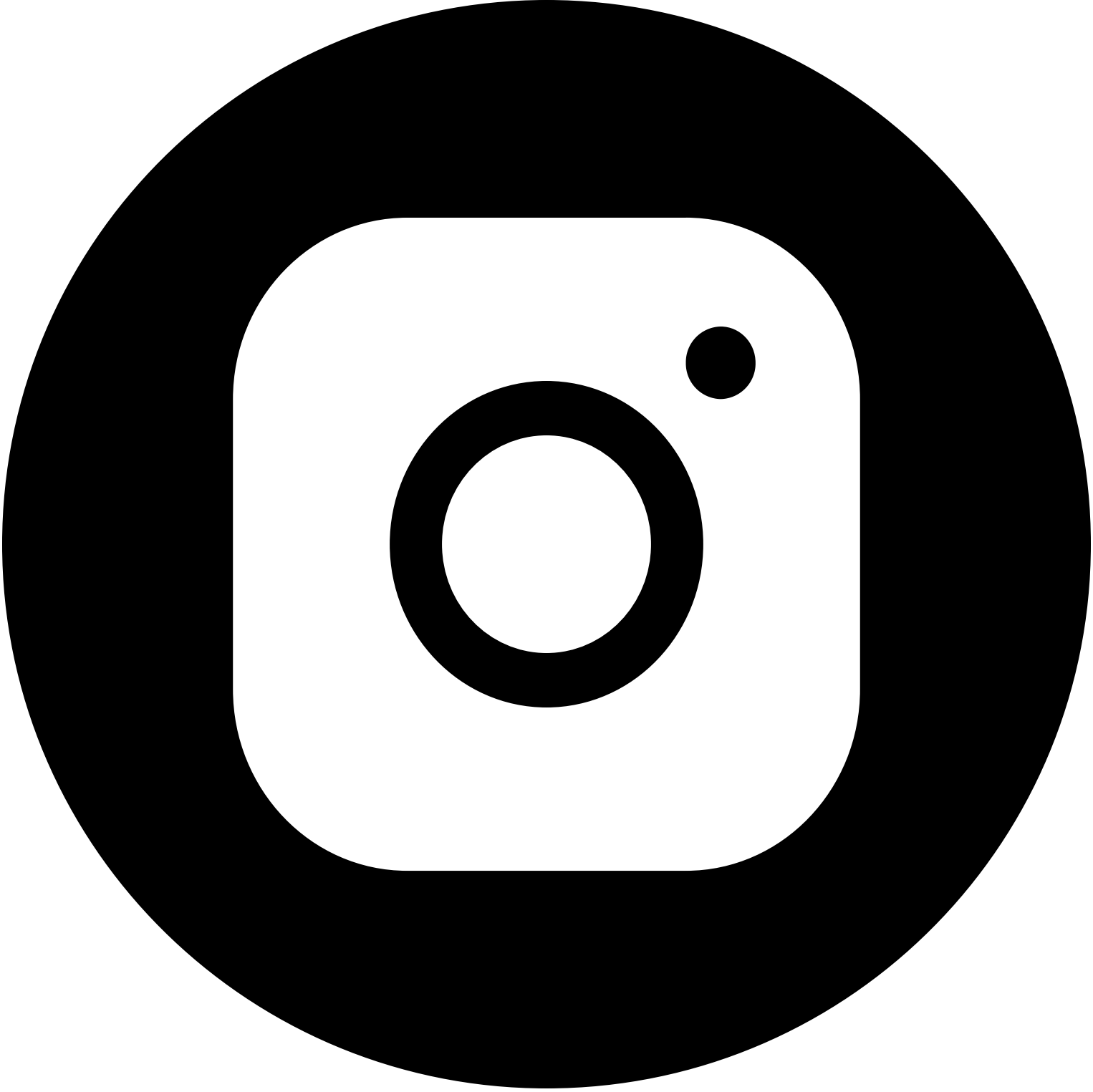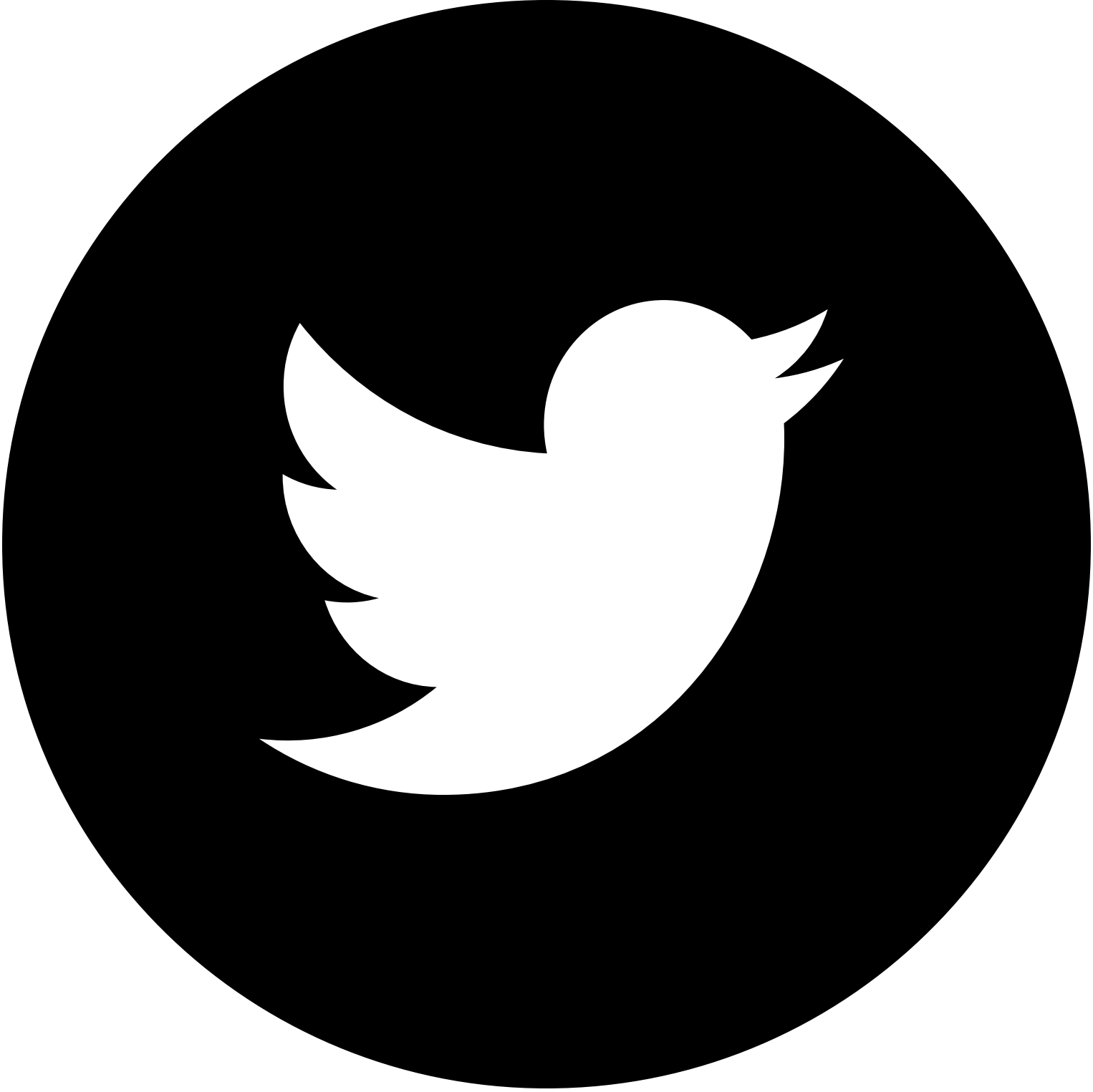
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