

## TEN

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## The European Union in the Era of Polarization

One important factor seems to be neglected in our European political, public, and even academic discourse – namely, that the European Union (EU), being a result of much longer process of European integration, was born at the time of the greatest triumph of Western civilization. The Treaty of Maastricht coincided with the collapse of the USSR and the bi-polar Cold War international order, and with the emergence of the Unipolar Moment, as Charles Krauthammer has famously coined it (Krauthammer 1990). That was the era of the absolute domination of the United States of America in the world. Liberal democracy and checks and balances were seen as an almost universal political system, joined by “market fundamentalism” (Joseph Stiglitz, Paul Krugman and more) under the umbrella of the Washington Consensus in economic sphere. These mixture brought about, as is well known, “the end of History” thesis of Francis Fukuyama – that is, it excluded any alternative (TINA) to the new political and economic orthodoxy or ideology. The then new-born EU is the child of this era of great triumph and optimism in the West.

The end of the Cold War order was first of all the US’s unparalleled success, but also that of Western Europe. The former three Communities (Coal and Steel, Euratom, and EEC) were replaced – step by step – by the EU, new enlargements were on the horizon, both to the EFTA countries and those behind the former Iron Curtain. Having a “soft power” status the EU has combined its strength in the financial and economic dominion with a commitment to humanitarian aid, economic assistance programs, international institutions and patient, multilateral diplomacy.

The triumphant spirit of the new-born EU was visible and could be easily detected in the intellectual discourse of the time. It was stressed especially in the beginning of the new century (and Millenium), when – please, recall – Mark Leonard was explaining in the renown “Foreign Affairs” magazine “Why Europe Will Run the 21st Century”, (Leonard 2005) while Jeremy Rifkin announced a new era of “The European Dream”, that, what more, would soon eclipse the former American Dream (Rifkin 2004). And all integration processes then proceeded toward

one crucial end: to construct a Europe (the EU) that is increasingly united, under the famous motto: *Ever closer Union*.

What has happened then that the same Mark Leonard, together with another liberal thinker, Ivan Krastev, has recently published in the same magazine another study, entitled “Europe’s Shattered Dream of Order”? (Leonard and Krastev 2015). Why is the French President Emmanuel Macron in stark warning saying to “The Economist” that Europe is “on the edge of precipice” and could even “disappear geopolitically”? (The Economist 2019). While the departing president of the European Council Donald Tusk is replacing the once famous slogan of Bill Clinton, “It’s the economy, stupid”, with another one: “Unity, stupid”? (Euronews 2019). Even if this is an oversimplification, it sends a strong political message: economics is not everything anymore; we in the EU need to stay politically and socially unified, be more open and polite to each other, have some more solidarity and empathy among us, as the deep divide is at the root of our current predicament.

This short academic intervention is an attempt to explain what is the reason behind these dramatic change of tide, and the replacement of our former optimism by dark visions. Another crucial question is also warranted: what has brought about the completely new parlance of the elite and gloomy, or even blunt description of the EU and its role in current domestic and affairs?

## The reasons of discontent

The EU, seen for a long time as the first truly post-modern entity on the international arena, with its accumulation of economic wealth, unprecedented trade, people-to-people connectivity, and unique status of normative power, was the object of envy and example to follow by many around the globe. Constantly growing, with – at one moment – the largest trade and economic potential and power close to “the only superpower”, the US, the EU in its first decade and a half of existence was the proud object of admiration far and wide.

The other dimension of the European project – namely, a shared commitment to open societies and open markets – was also strongly pressed both inside the EU and widely accepted outside of it. And then, step by step came a series of events, which I intend to label “nationalist impulses” in this study, ones that undermined the previous enthusiasm over the bright future of this unique integration process. Since then fewer and fewer people seem to believe in the justice of “honest” market forces, the domination of the private sector, as well as in the virtues of liberal democracy. In some cases, like Hungary and Poland, even the rule of law has been put under a question mark. What is the reason behind all of this? Why do the former ruled-based institutions and arrangements seem to be under siege now?

The first anomaly or fault-line (and “nationalist impulse”) came in the spring of 2005, just a year after the largest enlargement of the EU took place – only a year after the enlargement to the former Eastern Bloc countries, from behind the former Iron Curtain. The EU, its institutions, and leaders were seriously shaken for

the first time when in national referenda both the French and Dutch public opinion rejected the whole idea of a supra-national entity and undermined the previous neo-functional logic of integration. These votes simply proved the “cardinal sin” of the integration project, that it was a creation of the elites, by the elites, and – in the wider public opinion eyes – only for the elites. To quote Manuel Castells: “In the case of the European Union, there is consensus on the fact that there was originally a defensive project, intended to prevent another war breaking up in Europe, that was later used by a few visionary leaders to put forward a utopian project. This was a project of political and economic elites without the real participation, commitment and full understanding of most citizens” (Castells 2018: 3).

As a result of constantly growing pressure, the European leaders and institutions in Brussels lost their strategic and political azimuth and blueprint. Since that moment there have been more and more problems with a further strategy and agenda of integration. The EU institutions and leaders lost their previous ambitious plans. Together with, unfortunately, a lack of strong leadership and vision, a huge question mark has appeared on the agenda: what to do next? Followed by many other important questions, as for example: if not a supra-national kind of federation, then what – an intergovernmental confederation or the leadership of strong European capitals again? If not open societies and open markets, then what? So we were just simplifying reality, and now a time has come to pay the price?

This strategic disarray has been deepened by the global financial and economic crisis of 2008 when one of the pillars of the system – that is, the neoliberal economic Washington Consensus – was undermined. Lost was the public faith in the promise of the elites that neoliberal policies would lead to faster economic growth and in effect everyone would be better-off. Thus came a second “nationalist impulse”, followed by another phenomenon: distrust of the elites appeared, and has grown worse ever since then. The “democracy deficit” appeared on the agenda, slowly growing as an important issue in public sphere.

Instead of the former integration efforts and the mantra of “ever closer Union”, a new spectre has appeared on the European continent with the name of Grexit, meaning the danger that some of the partners of the process of integration can leave it. The integration that in some cases took a form of currency or monetary (euro) union in the new circumstances has delivered a painful message: the unity of the continent is broken, we have some countries, like Greece, or the PIIGS (Portugal, Ireland, Italy, Greece and Spain), that have some serious problems with Maastricht economic criteria (public debt, budget deficit, inflation), not fixing them quickly and properly. Instead of unity, tolerance, solidarity, and mutual benefits as promised in original documents of the integration process, some countries on the continent, mainly in the Mediterranean region, had some serious economic or financial problems. Thus, another disease has emerged on the horizon: inequality. Unfortunately, Joseph Stiglitz seems to be right when claiming that “the 2008 financial crisis failed to make us realize that unfettered markets don’t work” (Stiglitz 2019). Many decision-makers and ruling elites still do believe in their magic – and, as in the case of Greece – were and still are ready to impose them as drastic austerity

packages, simply adding in this way new fuel to the ever-louder “populist” opposition denouncing these policies as unfeasible and unrealistic and promising the poorest that they will be better-off soon.

The next “nationalist impulse”, or two followed one by one, came in 2014 and 2015, when the European public opinion detected first an external and then an internal security crisis. The first one was and still is strictly linked to the problems in Ukraine, which started in autumn 2013 when pro-European youngsters in the Ukrainian capital city Kiev went to the streets and inaugurated the Euromaidan demonstrations. As we know, they brought about not only internal upheaval, but also the forced annexation of Crimea by Russia (March 2014) and later led to occupation and open conflict in the region of Donbas. As is well known, both of those painful and meaningful issues are still on the agenda until today, with Donbas still bleeding and the territorial (but not only) problem unresolved.

In effect of the series of those events, the effort of the European great powers (Germany and France) and the Minsk II Accords from February 2015 (Grover 2017) notwithstanding, the Eastern border of the EU (and NATO) was set on fire. What more, in the same year (2014) another issue emerged that was just as dangerous for Europe (and the world) – namely, the so-called Islamic State in Iraq and Levant – ISIL, also known as ISIS and its Arabic form as Daesh, with its brutal impact and behaviour. The constant conflict and unbelievable cruelty and brutality linked to ISIS’s appearance and behaviour, shook world opinion. Exploiting the mostly domestic war in Syria and using for its purposes the destabilization of Iraq, ISIS emerged as another important source of threat in the eyes of the European public and the elites.

What was worse, the destabilization of the Middle East and the dubious performance of the Turkish authorities, in allowing the refugees from Syria and Iraq to travel further, has produced another challenge for the EU and its member states – namely, the unprecedented wave of migrants who in 2015 came to Europe, mainly from the Middle East, but also from Africa and partially Asia. According to a credible report of the UNHCR, hundreds of thousands of people fled across the Mediterranean Sea from war, conflict, and persecutions in their own domains. Already by December 7 that year more than 911,000 refugees and migrants had arrived on European shores since the year began and some 3,550 lives had been lost during the journey (Spindler 2015).

This unprecedented influx of refugees and migrants to Europe almost immediately produced not only an external, but also an internal security crisis, as well as produced further controversies among the ruling European elites. As we all recall, Chancellor Angela Merkel came out with her *Willkommen Politik*, which clashed with the approach promoted by the charismatic (in his country) Hungarian Prime Minister, Viktor Orbán, enjoying unrivalled supreme power since spring 2010. Not having a credible and strong opposition at home, it was he who decided to bring back to Europe the walls and barbed wires. While later, when the European Commission came out with the idea of quotas for the member states to absorb the refugees and migrants coming to the continent, not only Budapest, but also the Visegrad Group (V-4) countries (the Czech Republic or Czechia, Hungary, Poland, and

Slovakia) openly refused to accommodate this decision, becoming – in the eyes of the Western European elites – a “club of dissent” or even more: “a group of renegades” (Eisenchteter 2019).

The series of those events, mixed with some terrorist attacks in Europe (including France, Belgium, and Germany), most frequently linked to Muslim extremists, once again plummeted trust in the ruling elites and confidence in democracy in the EU, which was exploited by the forces already self-defined, personally by Mr. Orbán himself, as “illiberal democracy” (Tóth 2014). Unfortunately, the terrorist attacks are still a threat to this day. The issue is still valid, as was strongly confirmed by a special report of the Analytical and Sanctions Monitoring Team for the Security Council of the UN published on 15 July, 2019 (UNSC 2019). No surprise then, that the political forces negating the current liberal democratic mainstream in Brussels and major capital cities of the member states are using this opportunity to enlarge their potential and impact. Political demagoguery full of ant-Muslim prejudice is growing also due to another factor, that is, the danger of a new wave of migrants, which constantly presses the external (mainly the Mediterranean) borders of the EU. Within the countries of the Visegrad Group (V4) a new unified factor has emerged that can be labelled as “revisionist” and is based – especially in “non-liberal” Budapest, followed by Warsaw – on the defence of Europe’s Christian roots. This offers a cultural-and-religious-based axiological rejection of non-European immigration.

Then came “nationalist impulse” of another kind – the British referendum on Brexit in June 2016, which surprised almost everyone and definitely stunned the elites in Brussels. Instead of further enlargement under the “ever closer Union” agenda, a new scenario has appeared on the horizon, that of disintegration. Since then, there is a growing worry that the number of the states or subjects integrating themselves could diminish. Simultaneously, new phenomena appeared during the Brexit voting. Thus, in its aftermath we have, among others things: the new anti-establishment charismatic leaders (as in the case of Nigel Farage and his United Kingdom Independent Party – UKIP); political forces ready to exploit public frustration and low self-esteem combined with mixed feelings mixed with sometimes strong distrust towards the migrants (not only Muslims, but also those from Central and Eastern Europe, mainly Poland, who arrived on the island after the 2004 enlargement of the EU); and uncertainty of the future. Since that vote, a series of new, deep domestic dividing lines among the highly polarized electorate has emerged. And thus, the previous slogan of “ever closer Union” has to be replaced by another: “ever looser Union”. What is worse, an uninterrupted, it seemed, integration process for the first time ever was replaced by another option: the spectre of disintegration. This was the fifth “nationalist impulse”, with a clear-cut message: national interests are more important than regional or continental.

Finally, in January 2017 came the “Trump factor”, which was another fault-line for the liberal democratic and value-based order. Donald Trump as the new US president proved almost immediately that instead of values he cherished naked interests. Thus, he brought power politics to the fore, simultaneously undermin-

ing multilateral agencies and solutions in favour of bilateral deals. The EU, being by definition a multilateral subject and voluntary association of equal states, has found itself in a completely new situation, and under enormous pressure. It has a new dilemma: how not to be crippled, like many multilateral solutions openly rejected by the Trump administration (including big trade proposals like Trans-Pacific Partnership – TPP, or Trans-Atlantic Trade and Investment Partnership – TTIP). Probably the most important message to all nationalistic forces everywhere, including those already very visible and active on the European continent, coming from “the Trump factor”, was very encouraging to all of them: they started to be convinced that even the United States of America, the cradle of liberal democracy and the neoliberal course in economics, has undermined if not openly rejected them.

### The new division lines<sup>13</sup>

After so many crucial events, Europe is in undoubted crisis. One of the American authors, William Drozdiak, is right giving the meaningful title of his study: we do indeed have a “Fractured Continent”. He is writing about “deep fissures across the continent” and maintains that: “Today the dream of European unity has begun to wither away and the future stability of the continent is clouded with uncertainty” (Drozdiak 2017: XV). The former definition of the EU, frequently used in the literature and discussions, “from crisis to crisis”, cannot be used anymore, as we have too many crises on the scene at the same time. We have here in the EU a real need for urgent solutions and a new blueprints which are missing. The continent is suffering from political and economic stresses, and probably the best definition of the current situation is that we are dealing with a new era of polarization.

From the current perspective one can detect several new division lines on the continent, and – what is even more important, but also dangerous – within the framework of each member state of the EU (its intensity is varied among them). First and foremost, since the economic and financial crisis of 2008, which came to the EU a little bit later, a deep and growing division line between rich and poor has emerged, both on the level of member states and among them, on the continental scale. Probably the best description of its nature was given by an astute observer of Europe from a distance, the Hungarian-born George Soros, who not only blamed the austerity policy towards Greece promoted by the Troika (European Commission, European Central Bank and the IMF) and thus confirmed the creation of the North-South axis (rich North versus poor South) in Europe. First of all he described that the EU has “converted into a relationship between creditors and debtors,” (Soros and Schimitz, 2014: 19, 48) which is obviously a division

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<sup>13</sup> The author of this study was dealing with this issue already in an article: B. Góralczyk, “New Division Lines in the European Union. How to Cope with Them?”, *Studia Europejskie – Studies in European Affairs* No. 4/2018, pp. 9–21.

line much bigger and more dangerous than only an economic or strictly financial fault-line. The message from Soros is clear-cut: we need more cooperation, solidarity, and understanding rather than coercion, domination, and austerity imposed from above.

Grexit and its aftermath has brought about a series of new division lines and heterogeneity of perceptions, ideas, and projects on domestic scenes, later supported strongly by a turbulence which followed the Brexit voting in the UK. We can easily enumerate a few of them:

- Elitist – populist
- Liberal – non-liberal
- Federal – intergovernmental
- Open – closed societies
- Globalist (accepting open markets) – non-globalist (unilateralists, voting for closed markets and prevalence of national interests)
- Finally: Eurosceptic – Euroenthusiastic forces, with a strong sentiment of disapproval towards European integration.

In the wake of the great migrant wave of 2015 we can observe another major European divide – on the East-West axis again, as it was for decades. It is visible on the continent as well as on many domestic scenes of particular member states of the EU (and not only in Eastern and Central European region). In some individual cases the clash is taking a sharp form of us versus them, of tribal wars between religious people fighting with atheists or Christians with Muslim in the cultural or civilization sphere (the old formula of *ante murale Christianitatis*, which could be detected in internal discourse in Hungary during a strong, government sponsored anti-Muslim campaign). In the meantime, hard Eurosceptic parties and political forces (Dennison and Zerka 2019) have started consciously to exploit politically some further division lines detected in the societies, like educated versus uneducated, wealthy – unhealthy in wages and economic sense, or urban versus provincial, eventually central versus local. What is more, frequently democratic forces are fighting with some undemocratic notions and trends, sometimes already expressed in political parties and movements.

It seems that we have in the EU now two major division lines at the top of the agenda. One concerns the lack of our common European identity, which unfortunately was not created during the process of integration, and thus we have its visible weakness. The other one is focused on economic inequality. The former is leading us directly toward an axiological crisis, a new kind of sectarianism, when the battle of ideas is taking the shape of a constant tug-of-war between pro-European political parties and social movements versus mainly right or centre-right political forces ready to use nationalism and populism as their useful tools. The latter is exploiting the deep frustration and social discontent of the *demos*.

From the Central and Eastern European perspective, one has a feeling that once, in the previous political system of “real socialism”, we had economy of shortage, as Hungarian economist János Kornai has famously coined it, while now, three decades later, we seem to be in the era of shortage of proper values or we can observe a mixture of values of different kind, under constant pressure and

fighting among each other. Not the economy, trade, or personal wealth, as it was immediately after the collapse of the Soviet Bloc, but axiology and the rule of law are coming to the fore of the public and political discourse.

To sum-up: responsibility clashes with un-responsibility in the EU now and predictability is of the great value in front of a great wave of irresponsibility visible everywhere, on both shores of the Atlantic Ocean.

## What to do next?

How to navigate through the darkness? Where to search for a powerful flashlight in dark European rooms now? One thing is more than obvious: it is still much easier to find a descriptive theory of the process on the continent than to find a solution or a common blueprint for the future unknown. Due to our main European disease now, that is internal polarization, any consensus seems impossible to achieve soon. Liberals have a different opinions than Social Democrats, not to mention the Greens, while simultaneously the ever more conservative Christian Democrats cannot find a common ground with ever stronger national and extreme right forces. Formally, we are trapped in one cage named the EU, in fact our diversification is strong – and growing, not diminishing. Unfortunately.

Due to the fact that, together with “the Trump factor”, power politics came to the fore, some more realism is necessary to judge the current events and to predict the future. Not necessarily all liberalism should be criticized as utopian, as its opponents often claim. However, it is visible that the former “idealist” approach must be replaced by more rational down-to-the-Earth arguments, as power in all its dimension now counts again, much more than ever before during the European integration process, it seems.

This will be a difficult struggle for the EU, a very unique entity, multipolar by definition and based on the common ground and values (known as the Copenhagen criteria). For these reasons some internal arrangements, starting from the “democratic deficit” issue, should be placed on the front, while on the international scene one notion is of strategic meaning: either the EU will prevail as united, or will become irrelevant (Góralczyk 2015) in the era of new balance of power among the big powers, including the US, China, Russia, and maybe some others like India, Turkey, Brazil or Indonesia. Not an easy task when both the nation states (or Great Powers) and their interest seem again to prevail on the international and global scene, and not the values so inherently preferable by the “normative power” like the EU.

All kinds of more cooperative policies are in great demand, while the economic calculations cannot be made at the expense of other states or minor players. The initial values of cooperation and the European integration process, like solidarity, consensus, mutual assistance, better understanding, and even a common European identity should be adopted and stressed again, together with the adaptation by the ruling elites of demand made by *demos*, that is to include a popular votes into the future scenarios, if the institutions in Brussels do not want to retreat and lose in



favour of – so many and so visible – “populist” forces on display on the continent and in practically every member state of the EU.

Not only the accumulation of wealth or greater trade volume and GDP growth should be stressed as the main values, but social and wage equality, quality of life, combined with the common approach and answers towards the new challenges, starting from the migrants waves, climate change, and ecological pressure. Time to change the agenda. Yes, continuously we want to be prosperous and economically satisfied, bolstering peace and interdependent economic life, as we cannot stop the objective global trends. But our responsibility is growing, as the world is containing not only democratic states and the EU is not an exemplary case anymore like it was a decade or two decades ago.

Not democratic peace theories, so favourite in liberal mind-set, but interests, effective institutions, hard decision-making processes are of the great value again in the era when state power and the Great Power game is on the rise – both on the globe, as well as within the EU itself. Fighting with the irresistible strength of the existing forces one needs to be a realist. This is the only way to adapt oneself to these forces and these tendencies, as Edward H. Carr once observed (Carr 1962). Because, as another important realist school thinker, John J. Mearsheimer reminds us: “all great powers act according to the same logic regardless of their culture, political system, or who runs the government.. great powers are like billiard balls that vary only in size” (2014: 21). Better to recall all of this, even if the EU is not a classical great power by any means. Maybe the EU and its institutions are not characterized by the limitless lust for power, as are states, but we would like to survive as a specific, important and independent global player. How? Let’s quote Donald Tusk once more: “Unity, stupid!” In other words, only a farewell to current multifarious and wide polarization is the EU *ultima ratio* and the only chance to survive as an independent global player.

Of course, it would be a futile exercise to change the nature of the EU as a normative power into a typical realist power with a naked power as its *animus dominandi*. However, a proper response to bridge the gap between existing rhetoric and reality is absolutely necessary. Not words but deeds are in a great demand in the EU and its institutions at the end of the second decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Time to wake-up from former ultra-liberal illusions and false “European dreams”. The whole continent is clouded with uncertainty, its cohesion and common purpose so visible after the disintegration of the Eastern Bloc and Soviet empire is disappearing again, while the Western liberal democracy is clearly passing through perilous times.

Looking for the future of the continent and European integration project, the hegemonic role of Germany is crucial in all aspects. This country being the greatest beneficiary of the eurozone, and the most powerful economic power of the EU will have a decisive voice on the issue, what next? To quote George Soros again: “I see two alternatives.. One is that Germany would accept its dominant position and the responsibilities and liabilities that go with it, in which case Germany would become a benevolent imperial power in Europe, similar to the United States after World War II. The other narrative is for Germany to leave the euro and thereby

allow the rest of Europe, the debtor countries, to take possession of the euro” (Soros and Schmitz 2014: 21).

Nor did William Drozdiak hesitate to write: “For the foreseeable future, the fate of Europe will be decided largely in Berlin” (2017: 26). However, no one knows for how long Germany will remain a reluctant hegemon? Is the axis Paris-Berlin coming back to the fore, especially after eventual and still possible Brexit? Is so divided Europe headed to further enjoy a remarkable political stability as it enjoyed (with some exceptions, like in the Balkans in 1990’s) after the World War II? Will the EU re-emerge as united entity or become an irrelevant actor on the global scene (Góralczyk 2015) in the era of power politics again?

Many questions, not too many answers, or – to put it another way – we have different answers on the same problems and issues, suggested by such a diversified political scene. Fragmentation is a fact. Even an existential crisis of the EU is looming. Is this the time to inaugurate a big debate on the European future. Who will initiate it? And who will prevail during it? Are Berlin, Paris, and Brussels to decide over our future? Or maybe not only them but also Washington, Beijing, Moscow, and maybe Ankara? As for now we really do not know who will have a final say on the future of Europe and the EU.

One thing seems to be obvious, however: either the members states of the EU make an urgent leap forward toward a greater and deeper unification, or we will witness an inevitable disintegration into small insignificant entities on the global map. The European integration process is still an unfinished business. It will be decided soon, it seems. It depends on us, Europeans, if we will be regarded as those who missed a huge opportunity, or perhaps those with a pioneering vision for the creation of another great and important subject on international arena. The momentum for decision-makers has just arrived. Immediately after the Treaty of Maastricht, when the EU was just created, we thought of ourselves as masters of history, virtual demigods with potential and power. Where to find this power again?

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