

Europe: Which Way After the Pandemic?

By

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If someone had told us a few years ago that at the end of 2020, Europeans would dream of a normal life - in which they could go shopping to the local foodstore, farmers' market or the big mall; drop in to a fitness or gym studio; travel wherever and whenever they wanted; go for a walk or to a restaurant with family or friends; visit their parents, or grandparents; send their children to school everyday; go to the movies, to a concert or a game, - we would probably think that in the meantime a war has broken out or that the European Union has fallen apart.

Well, the coronavirus pandemic swooped down upon us almost suddenly, and we had to be reminded what quarantine means (even though we now chose the more modern English word lockdown), and that borders can very easily be put in place again, and that we can just overnight be deprived of a number of basic human rights and freedoms in the name of survival. But is the only reason for this apocalyptic change in the insidious virus that came from China (or may be not from China)?

We can recall that Europe's borders began to close five years earlier - during the migration crisis, which also erupted almost suddenly in 2015 and is still smoldering, becoming a painful and unresolved problem for the EU and for Europe in general. Negotiations to repeal the Dublin Agreement, which is clearly not working, and to devise a new common migration policy have been stalled for years, and there is a lack of solidarity between member states on the distribution of refugee flows. There are disputes as to why some countries have more vaccines and others do not have enough. In the meantime the pharmaceutical companies fiercely compete in the name of profit, even obliging the European commission to hide the terms of the contracts for the supply of vaccines. Everyone pulls the rug towards themselves.

Such problems are piling up more and more, turning into chronic crises and plunging the union, and with it the dream of a common European future, into ever deeper doubts and anguish.

No Ambiguities Anymore

We have been living with the ambiguity around Brexit for almost 5 years now. The problem is not just for the British, because the future architecture of the union and the path it will take will largely depend on how relations between Brussels and London are settled. The British were reluctant to part with some of their sovereignty and, failing to impose their principle of a Europe of nations and to accept federalization as

a way to develop the continent's integration, were ready to leave the union even without a trade agreement, breaking with the single market and the customs union. They even threatened their former allies with force if they continue to fish in their maritime economic zone.

If, in the end, the benefits of Britain's exit from the EU outweigh the negatives in the long run, or even in the medium term, its example could be contagious.

The EU suffered another recent setback as a result of the crisis over the adoption of its common financial framework for the next 7 years, as well as the economic recovery fund after the huge pandemic damage. Poland and Hungary threatened with a paralyzing veto all the union's activities. The dispute, notably, was not about the money itself, but about the fundamental values proclaimed by the union – democracy, the rule of law, the right to a choice - and the way they are interpreted by different countries. This was a very symbolic split: should the majority of countries, especially the big old members, impose their views on smaller ones and use financial sanctions for this purpose? We have even heard hints from Warsaw and Budapest that leaving such a union, which they even compared to the Soviet Union, is also an option.

Is this the European union that its founding fathers dreamt of?

Of course, the threats from Poland and Hungary, at least at this stage, are a bluff. But the fact that such anti-European sentiments are gaining solid ground in some member states does not escape the attention of sociologists. And they argue that if referendums are held now, then in at least a few countries the result could be on the balance or negative, and not just in Eastern Europe. The hasty rush to federalism as a common future seems acceptable mostly to the Brussels bureaucracy, and this is at the root of the rise of populist forces in a number of European countries. Whether most European voters will support this idea is far from certain. This contradiction is causing serious tensions throughout the EU and puts under strain its whole structure.

Eastern Europeans, for example, feel unjustly neglected after all major posts in the main European institutions last year were re-occupied by representatives of Western Europe. And this happened in breach of the previously approved democratic principles for their election, through behind-the-scenes maneuvering by the major European players.

This inevitably stimulates dangerous centrifugal forces within the EU, especially if it does not seriously reform itself to overcome its alienation from its own citizens.

Outside the EU, Britain is already emerging as a new contender for a global role, for which it has deep historical traditions, economic and military potential. As an independent country with a centuries-old geopolitical doctrine of its role in the world (in which, by the way, English is increasingly establishing itself as the main language for international communication), it acts much more synchronously and in a coordinated way than the clumsy EU machine which squeaks at every attempt to reconcile the efforts of its constituent member states with their divergent interests. The British-French and British-German controversies will come to the fore again, further weakening the European Union, which will already have a serious domestic

rival with a growing gravity on the continent. London is making serious efforts to build its own axes of influence, establishing, for example, special relations with other regional powers, such as Turkey and Ukraine.

European Axes, US New Era and NATO

The Berlin-Paris axis, hitherto considered the engine of European integration, is also creaking more and more often.

Thus, there are several contenders for influence in Europe - the EU itself, Britain, the United States, Russia, China, and even Turkey. In this complex configuration, Brussels can count on asserting its own role in the world, playing on the contradictions between them, and only if it manages to deal with its internal problems.

A new element in the global equation is the new US administration after the painful experience that not only Europe but also the world had with President Donald Trump, who set out to isolate the United States through his vision of populist nationalism and by giving up America's role of a global policeman. Trump's emergence on the transatlantic arena made Europe realize how good it felt so far under the military protection of its big overseas brother. He told Europeans that in order to continue to rely on US support, they must make a much greater financial contribution to their common defense alliance - NATO.

The EU's military-strategic helplessness became apparent as the conflict between Azerbaijan and Armenia flared up again. Europe has become a powerless observer of the massacre in an area on its periphery and of great geopolitical and economic interest to our continent. Russia and Turkey had to intervene to put out the fire, of course, according to their own visions and interests.

The EU is now looking with great hope to the new President Joe Biden, who has promised a change of Trump's anti-European course and more attention to transatlantic allied relations. To what extent this will happen however is too early to say. The Biden administration is yet to reconsider Trump's policies, and it will not be surprising if it decides to retain, to one degree or another, those aspects that suit the interests of America. Moreover, it is not yet clear which forces of the American political, economic and military elite will prevail in the team of the elderly Biden and will act on his behalf.

One of the most important factors that will determine the future not only of Europe but of the whole world, of course, are the consequences of the coronavirus pandemic. The reaction of the EU mechanisms was not at the adequate level here either, especially at the first stage of the pandemic, when there were only a few particularly affected countries - Italy, Spain, France. Brussels has again failed to impose a common approach to measures against the spread of the virus. In the end, the principle was: every country saves itself as best it could. This chaotic approach has led to the closure of borders, to the disruption of travel and transport communications, of trade ties, and hence to deficits in the production and delivery of a number of vital goods and medical supplies.

The truth shone in full force that the health systems of the individual member states were generally unprepared for cataclysms of this kind, and in a number of countries they were completely neglected and suffered from ingrained flaws, ignored for many years. This situation is incompatible with the EU's claim to be a global example of social policy and welfare in the interests of its people.

EU Recovery Plan Test Case and Regaining Citizens' Confidence

However, the EU has managed to harness its powerful scientific and technological potential and create several promising vaccines that gave rise to the world's hopes of overcoming the pandemic nightmare. The launching of a program for free and voluntary vaccination of the population in all member states with a fair distribution of available resources was a notable achievement, but its implementation has encountered serious problems due to the greed and irresponsibility of the pharmaceutical giants trying to avoid their obligations in the pursuit of profit. And the EU seems unable to reign in their impudent behaviour.

Whether the EU succeeds in maintaining the confidence of its citizens will largely depend on the implementation of this program.

The crisis in which the EU found itself because of the pandemic is existential. No doubt that profound conclusions remain to be drawn not only about the functioning of healthcare systems, but also about avoiding similar crises in the future, about rebuilding the European economy on a new basis, with a new international division of labour. This will not abolish globalization, but it will significantly change its nature.

The new situation also poses serious political dangers. Measures against the spread of the virus have in practice limited a number of basic freedoms of European citizens, which they are already accustomed to and take for granted. There is a serious risk that the ruling elites in the individual EU countries may preserve these measures in their arsenal and may be tempted to resort to them in other emerging crises of various types - for example, terrorist threats.

It is also crucial whether the post-crisis recovery program, which provides huge financial resources with a promise for a fair distribution between countries, will be successfully implemented.

If the European Union does not find the right answers to all these problems, its future will be bleak.