

BLOG POST

CRISIS NOTEBOOK

WHAT NEW AGENDA FOR EUROPE?

This Note is the fourth in a series of reflections of members of the “Observatoire politique du Parlement européen” of the Jacques Delors Institute. These reflections have been inspired by the current crisis.

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Arising at a time of transition for world history, and of deep crisis for the democratic model, the unprecedented crisis triggered by the pandemic will have some of the effects of a major international conflict: redistribution of economic and geostrategic power, new rules for the international balance of power, the collapse of some countries and some regimes, new and unexpected sources of conflict and regional tensions, the international organisations created for the world of ‘before’ seriously showing their age, promotion of all sorts of ‘values’ of countries, regimes or leaders who want to appear as emerging as the ‘victors’. For all of this, in an exceptional acceleration of history, just a few months will have sufficed to speed up the far-reaching developments that have already been underway since the start of the century.

In such a context, any commentator must remain moderate: a question mark is more appropriate than an exclamation mark. But let us nevertheless try to differentiate the lines of force before the dust settles.

1. LET US START WITH SOME REALLY GOOD NEWS, THAT OF THE AWAKENING OF EUROPE. THE EUROPEAN UNION IS SERIOUSLY RAISING THE QUESTION OF SOLIDARITY AT LAST.

The immutable rules of European integration have been confirmed: “Nothing is possible without men”, Jean Monnet would say. He would also add: “Europe will be forged in crises, and will be the sum of the

solutions adopted for those crises.” He also shared with de Gaulle the belief that everything would depend on the power of the Franco-German engine. Here we are once again.

It will have taken the mega-crisis generated by the pandemic to satisfy the conditions of temperature and pressure that would blow off all the psychological and political locks that were blocking the European budget: a cap on the magic figure of 1% of GDP, a ban on borrowing even to finance investment, financing via national contributions instead of own resources as laid down in the treaties and which still prevailed some 20 years ago. Strongly buoyed by the joint proposal by Emmanuel Macron and Angela Merkel, the Commission, presided by Ursula von der Leyen, proposed to break down all these taboos. The debate is still ongoing between the 27 governments, as we speak. But whatever the outcome, the simple fact that these topics are being broached as a top priority by the European Council who has refused to speak of them at its level for the past 30 years is a silent revolution. The blend of “crisis/personalities/Franco-German tandem” played a role. Let’s not deny ourselves this pleasure.

The debate that is now unfolding is that of true European solidarity. For solidarity is not an abstract concept. It has to prove itself, and above all, it can be measured. Its measurement is that of the common means that we are ready to devote to it, by specifying the source: this is in fact the whole meaning and scope of a budget. The question of European solidarity, which was greatly raised by the successive crises of the past years; financial, migratory, terrorist and now, health, is now being raised where it finds its natural place: the budget. The money on the table represents five times the current annual EU budget—to be spent over several years, granted, but as quickly as possible—which gives a first indication of what is at stake.

2. YET, ALL THE FORMER CHALLENGES STILL REMAIN AND IT WOULD NOT BE EXCESSIVELY PESSIMISTIC TO BELIEVE THAT THESE WILL PROBABLY COME OUT WORSE THAN BEFORE.

The gravest dangers lie within the Member States themselves.

Admittedly, the flood of money poured into the Member States by both the Commission’s programme and by the ECB via the banks will help these States to mitigate the consequences of the post-pandemic crisis. But it will leave the pre-existing national malaise whole, and this can only have been exacerbated in the meantime with the onset of further inequalities.

Because almost all our States are suffering from a political disease that is more mysterious, more lasting and more harmful than any biological virus: a collective nervous depression, stemming from identity anxiety and deep-rooted distrust towards the governance method of modern democracies. The violence of political discourse, which is magnificently amplified by social networks; the media and electoral triumph of the orators self-declared as prodigies of conceited mediocrity; unabashed racism under the pretentious word of xenophobia; parliamentary majorities open to extremist parties or paralysed by them; the depreciation of all the elites and of all the sciences; the loss of legitimacy of the judiciary in favour of universal suffrage among some, and among others, the loss of legitimacy of universal suffrage in favour of protest violence and randomly drawing lots; the exaltation of victimhood nationalism among people who consider their weakness as an injustice of contemporary history, and one-upmanship of arrogant egotism among those who believe they are always strong.

Even the 'good pupils' of northern Europe (Netherlands, Scandinavia) have not escaped this. Considered everywhere as the models of democratic, budgetary, economic, social, educational and environmental success, they nevertheless feature among the most affected by the most intolerant forms of extremism. This should lead us to disregard the scant explanations of both the right wing ("It's the economy, stupid!"), and the left wing (inequality is the mother of all vices). A good fifteen years later and there is still no diagnosis, the remedy is still far away, and recovery seems to be beyond the political horizon in the wake of the health crisis.

For this reason, the initial emergency in Europe is that each State knows how to do its 'homework', in this case, learning to live in peace with oneself. Our Republic is proud to proclaim itself one and indivisible, but some of its most recent members (latest generation of Muslims), just like some of its oldest members ('yellow vests' of the small town roundabouts) feel badly considered, misunderstood and badly integrated. The pandemic and the economic hibernation have only resulted in rubbing salt into these wounds. Nobody other than us will solve this Franco-French issue. Now, whatever the resolve motivating its leaders, a France that is crippled by this existential malaise, added to its chronic inability to finance its public services and its social model, will have no ability for momentum in Europe. When the turnout in our large towns for the municipal elections falls below that of the European elections¹, it is our own national democratic model that first of all needs to be looked after.

Concerning the Union itself, the legitimate enthusiasm aroused by the removal of financial taboos should not obscure the fact that the proposals on the table, despite their ambition, in no way answer the existential questions being asked in the wake of Brexit. Because the massive assistance proposed complements the national policies to facilitate recovery. These proposals only marginally concern Community policies. While showing solidarity in dressing the wounds, how far are we ready to take this by acting together? Given the new challenges of the century, who is ready to do what and with what means within the European framework? While we can consider that the Green Deal is an objective shared among the 27, what about a digital policy, real European R&D, internal and external security, migration policy, foreign policy, and the solidarity that is vital for the euro area? The time has come to put all the cards on the table, and to propose enhanced cooperation or even new sectoral treaties to the most vigorous countries.

This was the role envisaged for the "Conference on the Future of Europe", which is now more necessary than ever. Given the new context, this should open with an assessment of the lessons to be learned by the crisis.

3. THE NEW CHALLENGES REQUIRE A NEW APPROACH:

An ocean of uncertainty regarding the health, finance, economic and political spheres. A landscape of very unequal devastation. Global ground rules put on hold by everyone for months on end. It is not only at European level that a conference on the future is necessary, it is also needed at global level.

The G20, the UN and its satellites and the OECD should be its main organisers. The European Union should launch the political initiative, possibly in partnership with the African Union, before this is done by China, eager to restore its international respectability, or by the potential successor of Donald Trump. In

¹. In Paris for the 2019 European elections: 42% abstention. 2nd round of the municipal elections: 58%. In Strasbourg, one voter in two voted for the European elections, only one in three for the municipal elections.

fact, what needs to be launched is a veritable overhaul of the architecture of international governance. On reflection, it is quite comparable to what happened after 1945, in San Francisco and Bretton Woods. Here are a few examples of chapters to be launched.

1. Health, of course, prevention and the fight against infectious or parasitic diseases, starting with those garnering the least amount of attention as they have spared the developed countries: malaria, cholera and schistosomiasis. Also the huge threat posed by the growing resistance of microorganisms to antibiotics, a subject that is forgotten as much as it is broached. The four European agencies that are competent on all aspects of the issue (early warning and response network, research, safety and health at work, food safety) and which have been under-used during the current pandemic, could be at the heart of a real global network steered by a refurbished WHO.
2. Beyond the sole problem of health, mankind—in the sense of human being. All high school essays recall that the only wealth is mankind and demography is one of the rare human and social sciences that is close to being an exact science, but the only wealth that is assessed and is subject to global policies is monetary or monetisable (products, services, investment). Despite two world wars, in just one century the number of humans has increased fivefold, whereas it had taken a thousand years to reach the same fivefold increase. The primary need of a henceforth 'globalised' planet is the implementation of a world population organisation. The perception of development, management of water and rare resources, cultural diversity, climate vagaries and migratory phenomena would be radically changed. Without waiting for its work to begin, it is a matter of urgency for the European Union to follow through with the modest upgrade of rules on asylum and migration policy. The Geneva Conventions were designed to meet the needs of the 1930s. The recent displacements of Syrians and Eritreans did not fit into any known political and legal boxes, likewise for the 55 million displaced persons existing throughout the world today. The shameful situation of the camps in the Greek islands, 'jungles' as in Calais or neo-shantytowns in Argenteuil are not longer acceptable. Putting an end to this means overcoming the legal muddle that is crippling even those with the best will in the world.
3. Adaptation of international organisations and regulations that will be heavily relied on to accompany global recovery: IMF, World Bank, WTO, ILO. It should also be noted that Africa will be concerned particularly with the implementation of the new currency of the Economic Community of West African States, the Eco, and the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA), led by South Africa.
4. The price of energy and carbon. We have been beating around the bush on this topic for decades without tackling it head on. Even if it is corrected by the effects of the recovery, the recent drop in the price of carbon recalls two highly underestimated fundamental truths: the stability of most oil-producing countries depends drastically on the price of oil, and as long as the dimension of energy prices is not dealt with, even the most ambitious environmental policies are doomed to fail. Would the extension of OPEC to all oil-producing countries (including Russia and the United States) and the search for an agreement between producers and consumers be possible approaches? In drawing lessons from the unsuccessful but interesting attempts of the 1970s.
5. Governance of the Internet and the regulations applicable both to material and services on the Web cannot be left to the discretion of the American and Chinese States and that of their multinationals. The EU was the first to adopt credible rules, and its new digital Commissioner is refreshingly proactive.
6. Management of scarce resources. An inventory of lands, ores and other scarce products (such as the active ingredients of drugs) at global level must be undertaken, and a mechanism implemented so

that countries rich in these resources do not abuse their position of dominance. For example, in what domains, at what level, with which partners (States, companies) can the creation of strategic stocks be envisaged?

7. Control of weapons of mass destruction or disruption (ABC [atomic, biological, chemical], cyber attacks, fake-news). In the 21st century, the cold war wears a mask, and this war is led by authoritarian regimes against democracies with impunity. The experience of the previous Cold War shows that despite considerable mutual defiance, international agreements can be key drivers of progress: among the signatories of the Helsinki Final Act, the naive were not on the side of the democracies.

8. A very fine rallying issue for both researchers and world opinion: the clean-up of satellite debris that pollutes the Earth orbit, and the prevention of falling NEOs (near-Earth objects). The technical solutions are known, but the European Space Agency and NASA are working on this in a piecemeal manner. If all spacefaring nations, whose numbers are continually increasing, were invited to pool their efforts on such themes, who would be able to refuse? Likewise for monitoring of solar coronal mass ejections, with a centennial frequency that could have a devastating impact on a world totally dependent on radio-electrical emissions.

On each of these subjects, if a global agreement was not (yet) possible, the EU could take the initiative of regional agreements with the organisations or countries ready to sign. It already does this with regard to trade. It would be an opportunity to enhance regional organisations that are slowly taking shape, such as ECOWAS or ASEAN, and/or the Trans-Pacific Partnership countries, this partnership finally entering into force without the United States of Donald Trump.

In an uncertain world, those who know where they are going take advantage of the situation. Even if they cannot reach their goal, the partners around them and even some events will be drawn by their action: they will be the point of reference, capable of rallying their close ones, interesting their potential friends, and disconcerting possible competitors or adversaries.

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