



Centripetal Forces in Europe: Cartography

Dr Ania Skrzypek

FEPS Senior Research Fellow

“Europe is in crisis”. Indeed, there is hardly any speech delivered today that would not begin or end with that statement.

Nobody remembers anymore a situation when there was no crisis in Europe. It became a pertinent feature of speeches on both EU and national levels, as also certainly a state of mind of the Europeans. Crisis is the explanation and the excuse, crisis is the limit and the incentive for action, finally crisis is the only criteria alongside which European project is being perceived, spoken about and evaluated.

**FEPS
POLICY BRIEF**

NOV 2015

FOUNDATION FOR EUROPEAN
PROGRESSIVE STUDIES
FONDATION EUROPÉENNE
D'ÉTUDES PROGRESSISTES



“Europe is in crisis”. Indeed, there is hardly any speech delivered today that would not begin or end with that statement.

When did it start? Was that in 2008, when global financial crash exposed Europe’s economic vulnerability? Was that in 2005, when the citizens of the two founding Member States rejected the draft of the EU Constitutional Treaty, displaying the depth of the EU’s democratic deficit? Or was it even earlier, when the EU Lisbon Strategy failed to commit all to deliver on the Maastricht’s promise of a Social Union? In fact, nobody remembers anymore a situation when there was no crisis in Europe. It became a pertinent feature of speeches on both EU and national levels, as also certainly a state of mind of the Europeans. Crisis is the *explanation* and the *excuse*, crisis is the *limit* and the *incentive* for action, finally crisis is the only *criteria* alongside which European project is being perceived, spoken about and evaluated.

Consequently, **whenever any new challenge for the Union emerges, many ask the troubling question: is that it, is that the last nail to the proverbial coffin?** And though the end of the EU has been foretold abundant times, somewhat contrarily to the predictions it still, somewhat miraculously, perseveres. Even more, paradoxically it finds the subsequent waves rather motivating in terms of reaching out for the solutions previously classified as unthinkable. Hence the greater the predicament, the stronger it tends to emerge out of it.

Academics describe this feature as the “development based on perpetual leaps”. It is based on an observation that integration process is not a linear one, but always resonates external and internal circumstances. While diverse defies emerge, the EU is bound to either anticipate or to react upon them. That leads to a set of new impulses, which instigate a progress in one, many or all areas. The herewith-triggered transformation is usually equally focused on safeguarding the fundamentals, as it is on reforming them. That is because there could be no hope for any new arrangement without a multi-pier consensus reflecting a reiteration that what binds the Community together is by far stronger than what challenges it.

There are countless examples that can prove the applicability of this theory, but perhaps the best is to use the most recent one to illustrate it here. **When the effects 2008 crash transcended into the European Union, it took measures to both mend the damages and put in place mechanisms to prevent similar blows in the future.** Naturally from the social democratic point of view the measures imposed by the conservative majority were repulsive and disastrous in impact, however objectively speaking the empowerment of the European Council and the application of austerity policies advanced the centre-right project of Europe of Nations with economic backbone organized alongside ordo-liberal logic. They provided the framework for a very peculiar new consensus, which eventually carried also the centre-left. While their programmatic shift prompted an unfortunate label of “light austerity party”, it seem to overshadow that at the same time progressives did add elements of their agenda into a new package as well. Among them was for example the Youth Guarantee, the add-on of social dimension to the European Monetary Union or even recently, the flexibilisation of the rules of Growth and Stability Pact within so called “Juncker Investment Plan”.

Subsequently, rather than contemplating further the nature of the crisis, a more constructive approach to the “future of Europe” debate would require a change of focus. Moving on should equal turning towards a following query: **what at the current stage remains out of the traditional binder that has used to hold the Union together?** And secondarily to that, **is there enough remaining, so that the progressives in Europe could use it as an anchoring point for their eventually profoundly alternative, modern agenda and ensure a new breakthrough for their movement?**

The task begins naturally with an evaluation. As it would be impossible to analyze in details all the different dimensions of the EU’s functioning in the scope of this text, a selection is essential even if it runs a risk of being idiosyncratic. To relate with the second of the earlier formulated questions, the elements picked need to offer an answer to how much of a Social Europe there still is and consequently in how there would be a possibility to reintroduce it as a project for the future. This requires looking at the issues that can be classified in fact into four groups: values and their contemporary interpretation; engine of progress and its future prospects; institutional and intra-state relations; societal and citizens’ individual commitments.

In order to make the argument clearer, each of the dimensions will be exemplified here with one issue that seems particularly relevant at the given stage. To facilitate further conversation upon them, the selected aspects have been included in a reusable diagram (please see below). It constitutes certain cartography. Its vertical line stretches between “what drives us apart” (minus) and “what keeps us together” (plus). Its horizontal line is devoted to matters connected with activating, impulses-providing aspects (plus) versus passively acknowledged pertinent features (minus).

	APART		TOGETHER	
ACTIVE	Engine of progress	<i>No common story for the future</i>	<i>Citizens ‘living’ Europe everyday</i>	Societies and citizens
	Institutional relations	<i>Lack of solidarity among Member States</i>	<i>Principles of the EU politics and pax politica</i>	Values and their interpretation
PASSIVE	Values and their interpretation	<i>Inability to deal with new challenges</i>	<i>Tradition and habits</i>	Institutional relations
	Societies and citizens	<i>Unattended dreams of younger generations</i>	<i>Capital’s Vested interests</i>	Engine of progress

The graph allows identifying interesting tendencies within the 4 chosen fields.

First of all, **it would seem that momentarily to everything that is bringing Europe together and activating new impulses there is a respective counterbalance in what makes it drift apart.** To offer a concrete example, one can look at the category of progress. When the European Economic Community was established, it applied to rebuilding from the destruction of war and ensuring new sources of prosperity by connecting agriculturally driven France and industrial (West) Germany together with BeNeLux countries into one market. Lifting the trade barriers then allowed also more effective use of the resources originating from Marshall Plan. While the economic integration was the primary binder, many social democrats remained arguing that this was a “capital driven” integration. The turn of tides happened in 1980s and 1990s, when a social dimension was added. It

did however remain in the scope of “soft” rather than “hard” EU policies. To that end, even nowadays when the infamous Grexit or Brexit are being debated the first concern seems to be about how capital would behave (should they be effectuated) and not foremost what that would mean to living and working conditions of so many. It is the “capital” in its modern sense of international enterprises, which in some way “passively” holds Europe together still.

Within the same category, there is a counterbalance echoed in the speeches of euroskeptics and anti-Europeans, who claim that the EU as a project is seeing its dome. They claim that the way the socio-economic model is organized is no longer adequate and to that end no longer able to gear the prosperity it has been supposed to bring. The slow recovery, the weak (if any) growth and the lack of idea where to find new resources underpins the argument that there is momentarily no comprehensive story that would stipulate the mission of the Union and would make people of Europe feel that they are part of something greater. **It is the countries that battle recession and bankruptcy, it is the citizens who feel abandoned while suffering deterioration of living and working conditions.** The unemployment grows and the poverty, especially among children, alongside of that. All the new strategies – among them famous 5 Presidents Report and the recent European Parliament’s resolution on Preparation for Commission’s Work Programme 2016 – are in that sense seen rather as wish lists and set of fixes, and not as an outline of a new mission altogether.

This relates to the second observation. It seems that while references to the alleged common values are frequent, it is rather the established memory of them that remains in the binder. Indeed, for the post-war generations, **the European integration was the process of uniting into a democratic, peacekeeping and peace building organization.** It was to safeguard all Members interest and not only prevent the conflicts among them, but also would make them jointly responsible for sharing their prosperity with the neighborhood and the rest of the globe. This was the way the founding States initially interpreted the value of solidarity, applying is very concretely both in internal mechanisms of their mutual cooperation, as also while debating the new deal for the multilateral, post-colonial world. They echo remains what keeps Europe together and what is a trigger for EU to try not to give up on their commitments.

But the problem here is that these grand, once upon a time tangible concepts seem to be lacking translation into contemporary policies. That is as far as the institutional level is concerned, of which examples are numerous. The most striking one is perhaps the recent inability of the European Union to respond to the refugee crisis. Though the situation was urgent, the negotiations have taken already weeks, the Member States and the EU bodies entangles themselves into a conflict around quotas and numbers. While finally the European Parliament prompted a set of minimums to be agreed upon, on the background of it the xenophobic and nationalistic voices have picked into force. This all was taking place in parallel with the second, untold part of the story – which saw inhabitants of Budapest, of Vienna and of Munich (among others) queuing to offer help and support to refugees and migrants reaching their cities. And here is the key point – it is not the societies that are oblivious vis-à-vis core principles. That is the EU and the political forces within it that obviously lag behind in making the connection.

Thirdly, following the question of the connection - there are over 500 million citizens, who live Europe daily. Some of them do it unknowingly – not thinking about the relation between i.e. healthy food standards and consumers protection with the quotidian legacy of the European integration. But



some acknowledge directly the benefits. These are the ones profiting from the schemes allowing comparison of qualifications and students' exchanges programs, as also the very sole of the common market and freedom of movement, seeking better opportunities in other countries. Though they may not verbalize it or express via vote – these are in fact the most convinced among the Euroenthusiasts, who entrust the Union quite literally with futures.

While their participation is what actively binds the EU together, their respective personal stories are quite frequently only the one, shiny part of the coin. They are the reasons for which splits and re-establishing the borders seems so unthinkable. But the other side of this is the history of social tensions, which are more and more perceptible within the EU Member States. **The “newcomers” are welcome with a fear, that they will agree to work with lesser pay and will be a burden to the already challenged welfare states.** “Social dumping” is what underpins fear, personalised with posters of Polish plumbers or Bulgarian nurses. The obvious question here is what the social standards are that the EU wants to see its Social Model committed to. The European Commission plans to tackle it within the new work programme under the quest for a blueprint for “social rights”, but there is no yet a guarantee that they will be focused on a progress. That they will in fact be a guarantee that the talk on competitiveness will be overshadowed by the one about convergence, that the productivity will not be about race to the bottom but about vanquishing fears that now accompany workers at the workplaces, and finally that the new generation will see an advancement and will see they dreams about a better future within the EU seriously attended to.

And this leads to the fourth and the final point. Beyond any doubt Europe finds itself in a turning point. While the economic backbone of vested interests is what still strongly bring it together, there is a lot of hesitation on the societal side that have not been answered politically from within the EU. This brings a reflection that Member States get together around the table these days more out of obligations resulting from the treaties than for a purpose of really seeking a common solution. **The habit is what in a very passive way still brings them together, while the continuous disagreements is what divides them.** Since 2008 there has not been a single issue of a greater relevance that would not make them clash – the bailout of Greece, the nomination of the President of the European Commission, the refugee crisis. While structurally and strategically they may not afford to leave the debate table – of which the slamming of the door by Prime Minister Cameron was the best example – this does not mean that jointly they are ready to leave the meeting room with the common conclusions. The EU meetings have shifted from the debate on “what is good for Europe” to a bargaining market of each and everyone willing to secure a “fair deal” for their own respective country. For that more frequently than ever before they wave threats of opt-outs.

Per definition splits will never bring EU further, but to the contrary will hinder the integration. And knowing that so well, social democrats should overpower those by pointing to a new horizon instead. They need to set a new mission for Europe. **They have to do it by truly re-uniting within their European partisan community (PES and S&D Group), retrieving their traditional political competence and revitalizing the project of a Social Europe.** EU has to become about people's aspirations in order to move more into the “together – activating” field of the cartography displayed before. The current social climate is more than favourable, as citizens seek a hope and a guarantee that their living and working conditions can and must improve. In that sense, progressives must see the existing tensions as issues to solve in accordance to values and not as threats. Additionally, also

the timing is on their side – as the EU is assessing its social state after the 2008 crisis in parallel with reviewing the EU2020 agenda. What it will take is courage, imagination and consequence – but as Willy Brandt was appealing to his contemporary during the first ever EU elections in 1979: “*we have to believe in the hopes that are entrusted in us*”.

The article was published also in [Frankfurter Hefte/Neue Gesellschaft 11/2015](#) issue under the title "was Europa zusammenbringt, was es auseinandertriebt"