

MATERIAŁY NADEŚLANE

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QUO VADIS, EUROPA?

Abstract

In the paper current challenges facing European Union and crucial steps needed to overcome difficulties are addressed. It is emphasized that a further successful development of the fundamental idea of Common Europe requires a renewed settlements between citizens, nation-states and EU institutions. A key precondition is our joint ability to turn the already well identified Union's weaknesses into an instructive lesson and then victorious revival, while never giving in to an ultimate discouragement.

Key words: European Union, challenges, European identity, institutional improvement, revival of the Union

Different questions concerning the pace and nature of the European integration have been asked over and over again since the first emergence, more than sixty years ago, of the idea of a European nations' formalized, economic and political rapprochement. After many ups and some downs in the history of the integration process, and in view of its complexity we experience today, a relevant and urgent question appears to be the following – has problems and occasional malfunctioning of the European Union managed over years to dominate its widely acknowledged achievements and optimistic prospects so that critical attitudes of Europeans have become a permanent feature of the Union? Is the current problem

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real and deeply rooted in the very construction of the Union or, perhaps, it is only a result of a misguided perception? Or putting the question yet another way – is the present situation a right time to continue the implementation of a dream of a harmonious development of the Union, or should we rather only try to come to terms with the complicated situation as it is now and give up, perhaps for ever, the ambitious intention to build our European future truly together?

Nobody may today be certain when and how the current pessimistic mood in the European population will come to an end. We do not know whether we shall soon see a development breakthrough or a progressive disintegration with, God save us, a possible collapse of the whole European project. Many of us are wondering whether the EU turns out capable of overcoming problems that have impacted us in recent years. Has the present model of the Union based on achieving a new state of equilibrium every time after overcoming a crisis become exhausted, bringing the Union to a state of the permanent crisis? The fact is that the situation today is turning into an extremely difficult period which in the opinion of many will probably require in the future some thoughtful modifications in the way the Union operates in both its day-to-day functioning as well as in setting long-term development priorities.

The critical perception of the situation by many people and growing nationalistic attitudes in many countries form certainly an important part of the image of Europe today. Here, a comforting fact may be that individual and often overly emotional opinions turn out as rule to be more pessimistic than the description of problems in more objective, evidence-based terms. An interesting observation in this context appears to be that the most severe critique of Europe comes not from the outside but from within of it. It is us, the Europeans, who demonstrate a dissatisfaction with ourselves which is in a stark contrast with the situation in other world superpowers where there is as a rule a significant citizens' consensus regarding their common interests and desired future. It is truly paradoxical that the rest of the world looks up to us as an example of a huge historical success story – there are no anti-European feelings outside Europe whatsoever – whereas many of us seem to be so unhappy with ourselves. Again, we may try to console ourselves as it is in a sense easier to put to order our own house than to change the outside perception of it. However, this observation would only matter if we had a clear and solid idea how we should now proceed to change the situation, given the pressing circumstances. While problems we face are truly serious, the way out of the situation does not seem to be easy. For decades Europe was the champion of the soft power. With its attractive economic and social model it set standards, attracted migrants and inspired reforms in post-communist states. Today, European identity becomes more and more difficult to define, lost in the financial uncertainty, social unrest and growing national particularism. Europeans appear

to increasingly fail to comprehend why they should form a close community. Fortunately, very many of us still believe that there is no other way but to stand firmly together if only we want to successfully face the biggest challenges – mass migrations, climate changes, pandemics, religious extremism. Even if Europe consists of communities that are culturally not identical, we all share problems and goals despite whatever the differences among ourselves may exist.

One of the important reasons that the Union countries cannot find solutions to Europe's urgent problems is that they demonstrate individually very different attitudes and positions on issues each of the countries considers the most pressing. As a result, the EU's construction is in danger of toppling because its people are not sharing the same political and social goals on the one hand, and fears and doubts on the other. Look at France, and you will see a nation that is living under a state of emergency, desperately seeking a rational explanations of reasons which led to the shocking attacks by Islamist militants. Flip to Britain, and the talk is about national sovereignty and the cost of a possible Brexit. Switch to Germany, and the fierce debate is about how to cope with an influx of millions migrants and, more and more often, how to stop them from coming. Look further east to Poland and all the people appear to worry only about the new government's attempts to curb the constitutional court and who may have been a communist informer 40 years ago. Around the whole Central Europe the discussion is about how to resist the pressure to take in a share of refugees. In the south, the Italians and Portuguese are involved in a debate how to revive economic growth despite the EU's financial constraints. Spain, meanwhile, is preoccupied with political problems of Catalan separatism. Problems in Greece are too well known to be even mentioned in this context. It is thus not surprising at all that those countries' leaders have difficulties in setting priorities for the discussion in Brussels.

Given the situation, what would be in my view steps needed to get closer to a solution of the problem with the consequence, perhaps, of modifying the way the Union operates today? First, we all need to overcome a serious spiritual crisis, by which I mean our overwhelming helplessness in terms of sharing a convincing, lasting system of fundamental values. We observe a fast advancing, wider and wider opening split between the traditional set of values and new social attitudes. How then should we shape people's awareness of their European affiliation so that they can successfully operate on the global scene and still remain devoted Europeans? Some people would say – well, it is not that difficult. We simply have to wisely teach history of Europe, let everyone get in touch with our enormously rich cultural heritage, emphasize the significance of human creativity and innovativeness to assure our technological edge. All that is very important but it forms just the beginning of the European mission today. The future is extremely demanding. We need not only to understand the past and put to proper order the present but also – on this basis – to figure out possible scenarios for the future,

select the one which enjoys the widest support and define the role for each of us in its fulfilment. To do so we have to identify the critical mega-trends of the world development and address emerging challenges using the hard and soft power we have at our disposal. We should not be afraid to intellectually lead the world, using to this aim our political maturity, economic efficiency, scientific competence and artistic expression, all to address bravely such pressing issues as global solidarity hampered today by overwhelming consumerism, preservation of the environment and effective promotion of the sustainable development, assurance of security of clean water and energy supplies for everyone, thoughtful reactions to human rights violations, and many others.

Let us face it – the current crisis has created a sense of dislocation between the EU and its citizens. The immediate concern may be stability of the system as it is now, but in the longer run Europe needs a new settlements between the citizens, nation-states and EU institutions. We need a much more efficient European administration, and in particular a Commission which is not hyperactive in proposing too many detailed EU laws that are not focused on fundamental issues common to all the member states. In short, the EU institutions should do much more to counter the perception that Brussels is a regulatory machine that has run out of rational control of the citizens of Europe. Using with pride the attribute liberal democracy we should not exclude from our vocabulary another term somehow forgotten these days – a subsidiary democracy, which means a system ready to delegate problems down to a level at which they can be solved in the most efficient way, best satisfying those directly affected by it. In other words, we have to anew substantiate the idea of subsidiarity and apply it to our real-life political decision-making to find a lasting compromise between all-European universalism and specific interests of particular member states.

Furthermore, we need to restore the lustre of the European economic model. In it, innovative activities should play a much bigger role than it is today – the global population has become very savvy to creative solutions in everyday life and does not accept things which are not up to the dynamics of contemporary society. This is a vital prerequisite for us to stay competitive in the globalised world. I strongly believe a great majority of us are ready to pursue such very ambitious development goals. Many of us also know, on the basis of a broad worldwide experience and sophisticated scientific expertise, what is needed to define ambitious objectives, and would be fully committed to work hard towards their realization. Unfortunately, in the last decades our competence and readiness to act has not been translated into practical steps at a sufficient rate, the reasons being the policy-makers indecisiveness and populists' exploitation of citizen' unease creating the pessimistic mood of a coming doomsday.

Let me with all my might express in conclusion that I do not believe the EU is merely a fading phase in history of Europe as some overly critical people tend

to see it. We are too strongly united in universal values which are and will always stay pivotal for all of us, the Europeans. The vision of Europe's elites decades ago was probably too ambitious to be fulfilled in a few decades but that does not mean at all that the age of the European Union is gone. On the contrary, we have a bright future ahead of us, only that we have to believe in it and hardly work to achieve it. We have to remember that even a temporarily limited and imperfect version of being together is much better than the break-up of what we believe is so precious. However, to continue our dream of a successful and collective Europe we need today to demonstrate our ability of turning the already well identified weaknesses into an instructive lesson and then victorious revival while never and by no means giving in to an ultimate discouragement.

Streszczenie

W pracy dyskutowane są wyzwania stojące dzisiaj przed Unią Europejską i działania niezbędne do stawienia im czoła. Podkreślono konieczność uaktualnienia sposobu współpracy między obywatelami, państwami członkowskimi i unijnymi instytucjami. Za kluczowy warunek uznano naszą wspólną zdolność do przetworzenia dobrze już rozpoznanych słabości UE w pouczającą lekcję prowadzącą do ambitnego odrodzenia unijnej idei i nie poddawanie się zniechęceniu wobec bieżących trudności.

Słowa kluczowe: Unia Europejska, wyzwania, tożsamość, usprawnienie instytucji, odrodzenie UE