Europe in a State of Crisis: the Strategic Perspectives

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We are experiencing a European drama. Almost daily, the continent provides devastating news: “Europa als Alptraum (*Europe—a nightmare*)”,¹ “Die Euro-Rebellion (*The Euro rebellion*)”.²

And now the situation is getting worse: On its front page the German daily newspaper “Bild” titles in capital letters—“Euro Schuldenkrise droht zu eskalieren (*Euro debt crisis is threatening to escalate*)”,³ “Neue Horrormeldungen—Die Finanzmärkte reagieren nervös—Börse auf Talfahrt (*Horrible news again—financial markets react nervously—stock exchange in a tailspin*)”. Even the Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung dramatizes on its front page: “Die große Angst ums Geld (*The big concern about money*)”.⁴ And the intellectuals are joining in: Europe is currently being led by a “normatively disarmed generation of short-windedness”—as Jürgen Habermas writes.⁵ We will have to put this giant construction site of Europe in order—at least conceptually.

Europe is going through a change of times. This watershed can be compared to the great turning points in history. Today we are confronted with a loss of normative foundations on the one hand and a lack of strategic perspectives on the other. Accordingly, Europe is stumbling around in perplexity. The huge power apparatus is being confronted with the question of its legitimacy—with an intense urgency that has never existed before.

¹ Süddeutsche Zeitung, May 12, 2011, p. 4.

² Titel FOCUS, No. 19, May 9, 2011.

³ Bild, May 31, 2012, p. 1.

⁴ Frankfurter Allgemeine Sonntagszeitung, No. 22, June 3, 2012, p. 41.

⁵ Jürgen Habermas: Wir brauchen Europa! Die neue Hartleibigkeit: Ist uns die gemeinsame Zukunft schon gleichgültig geworden? In: Die Zeit, No. 21, May 20, 2010.

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The early successes of integration have provided Europe with unparalleled power. At the same time the normative objective appears to be strangely void. This puts the focus on the question of “legitimisation”. Should, or rather may Europe make essential decisions without asking for the consent of its approximately 500 million citizens? Is Europe entitled to act without fully involving the sovereignty of the people? The substitutes offered in eras past have disappeared—such as, for instance, the giant global development of the East–West conflict and the ever-present historical experience of war. Therefore Europe is currently searching for its identity, an identity that is sustainable and future-oriented.⁶

The daily news circling around the crisis is a pain in the neck and leads to a growing feeling of frustration. This could simply be seen as some kind of routine in the ups and downs of the political barometer of public opinion, but the current intensity of the crises really affects the Europeans’ elementary balance of symbols:

- The crisis of the common currency, the Euro, draws the attention to a repeatedly claimed elementary asset: the European solidarity. Is Europe standing on the verge of an era of desolidarisation? Should one draw back to national egoism? The billions of Euros in aid given to individual member states are constantly being increased while it is simultaneously getting more and more difficult to find majorities for this in the decision-making bodies.
- The attempts and debates concerning the re-establishment of border controls (such as, for instance, in France, Italy, Denmark and Austria) are putting at stake one of the successes of integration that is most clearly felt: the freedom of cross-border mobility and activity. Free movement was always considered to be the true asset of Europe.
- Germany’s withdrawal from nuclear energy was regarded as an action of desolidarisation by other member states. The neighbouring countries continued to produce nuclear energy and will probably also have to bear the consequential costs of such withdrawal for Germany. Moreover, the European Union will probably raise objections against programmes promoting energy efficiency and will deny energy compensation payments as inadmissible allowances. Serious controversies related to European politics are foreseeable. Thus nuclear energy has become a symbol of European divergence.
- The national reservations against supranational developments have aggravated reservations that had never really disappeared. In a number of the European Union’s member states anti-European parties are celebrating election successes—as can be seen in the Netherlands, in France, Denmark, Finland and Hungary. Putting the blame on Europe is providing right-wing populist movements with considerable political power.
- As regards its geopolitical joint responsibility, the European Union, eroding from inside, does not present a closed front towards the world outside. There exists neither a uniform strategic answer to the transformation of Arabian societies, nor a precise position in the decision making process of the United Nations. There is neither any accordance in the policy regarding Afghanistan,

⁶ More detailed, see: Weidenfeld (2011).

nor in the political attitude concerning the developments in the Middle East. This also holds true for the European foreign policy: it is strategic perplexity that prevails.

These symptoms of crises weaken the superpower Europe. There, the co-existence of approximately half a billion people is regulated in accordance with the rule of law, but the inner adherence of the people to this political system is on the wane.⁷ Here we have a well-regulated geopolitical power potential—the employment of which is getting more and more difficult to understand. Economy, finance, education and science, yes, even the military attribute a specific geopolitical ranking to this continent. But within all these categories strategic problem-solving concepts are scarcely to be found.

Currently, several powers in Europe are trying to gather political brownie points and win elections with the help of populist anti-European slogans.⁸ Out of this deficit of European identity the severe difficulties of a new era emerge: Each political system requires a certain orientation framework in order to be able to act, a framework which forms the basis for explanations and interpretations as well as for the justifications for the setting of priorities and the taking up of positions.⁹

There is no political system, in which political rationality exists quasi as a thing in itself without relating to an elementary consensus, to common experiences or interests. One might call it political culture or collective self-conception or also identity. Europe, however, can fall back on this resource of common self-perception only to a very limited extent. Of course, common experiences do exist also in this respect, the remnants of a history rich in conflicts and the adventures experienced in collective successes. But this layer of Europe-wide common ground remains comparably thin. It is sufficient to form the basis for a common market. But it reveals its weakness in every step that goes beyond this field.

Europeans don't tell each other the same, common story, they do not dispose of a common narrative. Even the traumatic experience of war returning to the Balkan countries in the 1990s was not processed together, but rather individually in separate national experience cultures—in Great Britain this trauma was dealt with differently than in Germany, in France differently than in Italy. This phenomenon also applies to other major topics, reaching from the Economic and Currency Union to the constitution issue.

Without such a context of European self-reflection, the course of European politics lacks both a compass and protective guard rails. Everything turns into a situation-oriented form of bazaar trading—just as we know it from the summit conferences. But this did not just happen to us like something inevitable imposed on us by the law of nature—it is also the reflection of decades of negligence of European orientation debates.

Some years ago, Walter Hallstein still used to talk about the “unfinished federal state”, Leo Tindemann spoke about the “existing European identity” and Joschka

⁷ See: Techau (2012).

⁸ See also: Hartleb (2011, 2012).

⁹ See also: Weidenfeld (1985) and Nida-Rümelin (2007).

Fischer referred to the “finality of Europe”. Today, all this sounds like an echo from an era long gone by. The current finding thus must be: Europe is in need of goals, perspectives and orientation. It then will have to build up a strategic culture. We could count on a historic experience, though: The pressure of a crisis always turns out to be a central tool for the ongoing development of integration.¹⁰

Based on the constellations of pressure exerted, Europe will develop a further strategic perspective: the “differentiated integration”.¹¹ This challenge combines questions of leadership strategies with questions of identity. It will become increasingly difficult to foster integration by marching in step. It is decisive, however, to perceive this fact not only as a problem, but also as a strategic opportunity for Europe’s future.

Differentiated integration might serve as a laboratory for the innovative potential of the European Union. The heterogeneity and the sheer number of different interests practically represent an invitation to push projects that are considered important by a number of states, but do not have a chance to be translated into reality if they require the convoy of the entire Union. In the context of differentiated integration a number of keywords and mission statements are circulating, starting from the graded integration via a “Europe à la carte” to the notion of a core Europe. A sustainable model of differentiation capable of prevailing in the future has to orient itself on the concept of an open area of gravitation. Both, a solid and closed core of member states always marching in lockstep and the randomness of unlimited options would necessarily lead to the splitting of the Union.

Differentiated integration yet does not mean the introduction a two-tier society in the European states. Instead, it means that wherever engrossed integration is currently not possible in all member states, fact-oriented forms of cooperation should emerge in a targeted manner. Once such a project has been successfully implemented, it will develop the necessary appeal to make further states follow the example and join in. Differentiation in this sense therefore has to be seen primarily as a temporary thing.¹² This means no permanent separation of competing integration spaces, but instead various differentiation initiatives which, step by step, can be implemented throughout the entire European Union. Therefore, differentiated integration does not represent a danger but an opportunity.

The consequence of all this as regards the condition, the future and the identity of Europe is the following: whoever wants to optimise Europe’s capability to act, not only has to speak about institutional reforms, but also has to take the effort of dealing with European self-reflection. The political and cultural elites will have to interweave their understanding of risks and opportunities. So, giving it a closer look, it is not only about potentials and institutions, but about the basics of political culture. This dimension, too, can and must be fostered and organised. It will be necessary in Europe to make an effort to form a prior understanding and a strategic future perspective, if one wants to avoid continuously re-starting at the very beginning and making the old mistakes again and again. In other words Europe has to be founded anew.

¹⁰ See also: Schulze (1998), Judt (2006), and Brunn (2009).

¹¹ See also: Weidenfeld (1997) and Möller (2012).

¹² See also Piris (2012).

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