

PUTTING AN END TO “CRISIS EUROPE”

The term “Crisis Europe” simply defines the current state of the EU affairs. Within the last ten years, the financial crisis, the entrance of refugees, the pandemic, and lately, the Russian invasion have deeply damaged the actorness of the bloc. Under the shadow of war, European decision-makers have once again turned to their endless search for solidarity and more integration as a response. Yet, it seems that the EU has a mountain to climb to convince its inner circle and the outer world. This short analysis tries to understand the dynamics that pushed the EU into a crisis stage and issues that consistently pulled the rug out from under the idea of unity. Moreover, it also offers a more flexible approach as an alternative plan to unblock the ongoing impasse.

Mensur Akgün* & Ahmet Cemal Ertürk**



TPQ

Spring 2022

* Mensur Akgün is a Professor at Istanbul Kultur University’s Department of International Relations.

** Ahmet Cemal Ertürk is an Assistant Professor at Istanbul Kultur University’s Department of International Relations.

Those who wish to put a nametag on what the EU has experienced in the last decade would do well to call it “Crisis Europe”. Getting over the enduring financial consequences of the debt crisis was a puzzle, but when coupled with others, it certainly created a mess. Moreover, this series of misfortunate events, namely the arrival of refugees, the calamity of Brexit, the dark days of the pandemic, and war’s apparent return to the continent, have profoundly shaken up the organization’s position as an actor internally and externally.

To cope with the trouble, as per usual, the EU had turned to its famous normative power to seek solutions and frequently verbalized two existing doctrines, principled pragmatism and strategic autonomy. Unfortunately, although High Representative Joseph Borell declared the anticipated implementation of strategic autonomy as a long-term issue,¹ the short-term performance review gives us a rather gloomy picture.

So far, the crisis management efforts of the EU, particularly on the foreign policy front, have not been particularly impressive, despite the implementation of the above principles. So, “What went wrong?” is a reasonable question that every European decision-maker must ask themselves. In that sense, this short article tries to make sense of this turbulence by encountering several cases of incapacities in the EU policy-making.

We believe that these incapacities should serve as a wake-up call regarding the actual capabilities of the organization in both internal and foreign policy issues. Therefore, instead of pressing on far-fetched promises and too good to be true experiments, we would like to suggest alternative ways of cooperation and a much “flexible Europe” as a possible solution. In other words, Europe must adapt to the realities of the current era rather than continue to follow the same outdated remedies to the ever-changing problems.

In Ukraine, for instance, the EU has been caught between a rock and a hard place, and it is all about its very idiosyncratic position in international politics; namely the pretty unknown actorness of the bloc, whether it aspires to be a hard power or prepared to stay as a soft power? Decades ago, gifted French writer and advisor François Duchene coined the bloc’s role as a “civilian” one. Duchene wanted to see a virtuous, principled, and strong Europe different from the others in a significantly chaotic world order.² In the 70s and 80s, the EU was a promising economic force with its emerging market and was therefore ideally suited to the concept.

Later, Ian Manners picked where Duchene had left off, offered “normative power

¹ J. Borell, “Why European strategic autonomy matters,” (2020). https://www.ceas.europa.eu/ceas/why-european-strategic-autonomy-matters_en

² F. Duchêne, “Europe’s Role in World Peace,” in R. Mayne (ed.) *Europe Tomorrow: Sixteen Europeans Look Ahead* (London: Fontana, 1972).

Europe” as a sequel to the original concept, and advised European policy-makers to change others’ perceptions through the imposition of democratic principles and values.³ To give the benefit of the doubt, the EU has tried both pathways and clinched a measurable amount of success. It has transformed and democratized Central and Eastern European countries, become the world’s leading aid provider, and established itself as the world’s dominant trade bloc.

“Searching through rapid reactions, the EU has obviously turned to square one and did what they do best; exerting its “civility” to challenge Vladimir Putin and his fellow oligarchs through one of its popular instruments, the sanctions policy.”

However, the new millennium has brought back many ghosts of the European past; the military conflicts as well as failed states. In Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria, and Nagorno-Karabakh, the EU has consistently failed to match up with high expectations and, even in some of them, never have been a part of the decision room. The question is therefore quite simple: in such a situation, can armed conflicts be managed with civilian instruments?

It should have occurred to the European leaders that it was unlikely that it would, and perhaps as a result, they have been working on ways to create a more defensive and securitarian approach since the famous summit of St. Malo in 1998, where a British-France joint declaration proposed an autonomous capacity and collective commitments.⁴

In the meantime, the idea of decreasing Europe’s defense dependency on the U.S. and the famous “Europeanist-Atlanticist” divide has never really disappeared and resurfaced amid the Russian-Ukrainian war. Present High Representative Joseph Borell introduced the “Strategic Compass” doctrine⁵ and announced Versailles Declaration to prepare Europe for expected later stages of the war to create a response to ever-growing expectations.⁶

³ I. Manners, “Normative Power Europe: A Contradiction in Terms?” *Journal of Common Market Studies*, Vol. 40, Issue 2 (2002): p. 235-258.

⁴ *Joint Declaration on European Defence*. (1998). “Joint Declaration issued at the British-French Summit, Saint-Malo,” 3-4 December 1998. [ON-LINE]. [s.l.]: Foreign and Commonwealth Office of the United Kingdom, [12.08.2008]. Disponible sur <http://www.fco.gov.uk/en/newsroom/latest-news/?view=News&id=2244063>

⁵ European External Action Service. “A strategic compass for Security and Defence,” (2022). https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/strategic-compass-security-and-defence-1_en

⁶ European Council. “The Versailles Declaration,” (2022). <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/54773/20220311-versailles-declaration-en.pdf>

This new pathway includes several defense inputs ranging from rapid reaction forces to increased expenditures.⁷ Waking up to reality seems a leap forward, but another long-term structure still fails to provide the much-needed immediate responses that Ukraine desperately needs as Ukrainian officials on the 25th of April, again criticized the EU for being too slow and insufficient to provide arms to the country.⁸ Reality bites- and even though such declarations could be powerful to show solidarity, it simply means nothing if you cannot contain the conflict.

Searching through rapid reactions, the EU has obviously turned to square one and did what they do best; exerting its “civility” to challenge Vladimir Putin and his fellow oligarchs through one of its popular instruments, the sanctions policy. In principle, it was the right move to make. Cutting off Russia’s financial supply and tying them up would definitely shake up the dynamic in the country. However, was this a pragmatic move?

Alienating an entire Russian population and cutting their ties with the outer world could have consequences. Wouldn’t that also exacerbate Russians’ negative views of Europe and contribute to Putin’s cause? Frankly, many scholars had also analyzed the harsh humanitarian results of past EU sanctions on Iran and Syria.⁹ Another experience as such could potentially put a much more permanent stain on the “civilian power” identification. Moreover, it also seems that after five rounds, sanctions have also reached their tipping point, leaving one key area left- oil and gas.

It is not a secret that almost all Central and Eastern European countries are dependent on Russia for oil and gas. It is simply impossible to escape the Russian influence here without a strategic plan to replace this dependency with a Western one. Against all the EU’s propositions so far, members such as Hungary have been fiercely opposing- citing that they “would kill the country.”¹⁰ Others like Austria and Cyprus have also filed reservations due to various reasons.¹¹ This modest rumble was just another indication of how fragile the EU solidarity actually is, even with one of its best conflict resolution mechanisms. A larger fish, such as oil and gas, entering directly into the pond can cause the members to lose their unity.

⁷ European Council. “The Versailles Declaration,” (2022). <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/54773/20220311-versailles-declaration-en.pdf>

⁸ Financial Times. “Zelensky urges EU to do more after warning of renewed offensive on Kyiv” (2022). <https://www.ft.com/content/8c4652e8-1892-4540-80c1-9d9c0de5fe57>

⁹ E. S. Moret, “Humanitarian impacts of economic sanctions on Iran and Syria,” *European Security*, Vol. 24, No.1 (2014): p. 120-140.

¹⁰ *Euronews*, “Hungary ‘helping Putin’ in the war, says Ukraine’s Foreign Ministry,” (2022). <https://www.euronews.com/2022/04/07/search-launched-for-three-missing-european-divers-off-malaysian-island>

¹¹ *Euronews*, “Ukraine war: Where does each EU country stand on cutting off Russian oil and gas?” (2022). <https://www.euronews.com/my-europe/2022/04/16/ukraine-war-where-does-each-eu-country-stand-on-cutting-off-russian-oil-and-gas>

On security, things have been even more chaotic. Policy-makers in Brussels were undoubtedly more optimistic about a solid European response this time, but the evolution of the conflict has let them down. To clinch full strategic autonomy, Europe still has a mountain to climb. For so long, the Macron-Borell axis has been trying to push its agenda to the neck of member states, and in that sense, Versailles Declaration could be considered a hopeful document for designating the future goals of the bloc.

“Coined as the standing “illiberal democracy” of Central Europe, it would be fair to say that Viktor Orban would not jeopardize its national interest over a common cause such as Ukraine. His latest stance on oil and gas sanctions was a visible indication of that.”

Nonetheless, it is merely a pathway forward, and the U.S. and NATO’s shadow is ever-growing upon the Eastern European and Nordic/Baltic front. Currently, the U.S. has nearly 100,000 troops on the continent, where 10,000 are located on the front lines of the war.¹² So, it is undoubtedly about keeping a delicate balance. Getting the EU free from the U.S. dependency hook is a highly complex calculation and takes the agreement of both sides into account; the member states’ and the Biden Administration’s. Trying to remove the ugly mark of the failure in Afghanistan, the latter is still eager to use the U.S. security domination in Europe as a showcase at home.

On the other side, even though the member states reluctantly agree that they shouldn’t trust the continent’s future entirely on the U.S. decisions, alienating the U.S. would not also be the answer, especially against a very hostile Russia. We still remember the famous summit of last year where Poland and Baltic countries warned the EU about the probable estrangement of the U.S. and its potential dangers to transatlantic relations.¹³ Would more Russian aggression alter the position of these states? Of course, we must wait and analyze, but the ongoing U.S.-Polish rapprochement tells us otherwise.

As one might expect, the conflict in Ukraine has also overshadowed the EU’s inner rumblings for some time. In spite of this, two particular members and their

¹² *Foreign Policy*, “Macron’s Vision for European Autonomy Crashed and Burned in Ukraine,” (2022). <https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/04/08/macron-putin-france-russia-ukraine-europe-sovereignty-strategy/>

¹³ J. Gotkowska, “Poland and the Baltic States: A Preference for a Renewed West,” (2021). <https://www.boell.de/en/2021/01/08/poland-and-baltic-states-preference-renewed-west>

unpredictable behavior raise alarm bells and present a challenge to Europe to remain either pragmatic or principled. But first, we need to talk about the somewhat awkward position of Poland. Through the Russian-Ukrainian conflict, Poland has solidified its place as a major stronghold of European and NATO defense. Moreover, on humanitarian grounds, it has provided most shelter to the displaced people of Ukraine. All these efforts pulled up the country's ranks from being the mischievous member to a regional influencer.

As a result, Poland has much stronger leverage against the EU in their seemingly never-ending internal conflicts. Even while the EU appreciates the country's security efforts, it continues to wrestle with the country's increasing de-Europeanization as it relates to matters concerning EU law. Not so long ago, the EU launched infringement procedures and took legal action over the problems that had compromised the integrity of its judicial decisions.¹⁴

In addition to that, The European Commission seems not convinced enough of any change, therefore, they have also decided to put the pandemic recovery funds on hold for Poland, citing the same reason.¹⁵ Due to this awkward double-play, Poland is seeking solidarity on the one hand and constantly causing trouble on the other, putting the decision-makers in a very challenging position. Would they sacrifice the integrity of the EU law over solidarity on defense? Is there a possibility of balancing both?

Nevertheless, the buck does not stop with Poland here. In his victory speech on the 4th of April, Viktor Orban has pushed one of his favorite attacks on the "bureaucrats" in Brussels, whom he sees as the aides of the globalist intelligentsia.¹⁶ What made his speech different from the past was his newest scapegoat, Volodymyr Zelensky. Orban criticized the rising face of the Western world as a mere part of the "forces that ganged against us."¹⁷

Although these criticisms do not automatically mean a Russo-Hungarian partnership, they do not also provide us with a clear picture of what lies ahead for Hungary's future in Europe. Coined as the standing "illiberal democracy" of Central Europe, it

¹⁴ European Commission. "Rule of law: European Commission launches infringement procedure to project judges in Poland from political control," (2019). https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/es/IP_19_1957

¹⁵ *Politico*, "Poland 'not there yet' in backtracking on judicial reforms to get EU cash," (2022). <https://www.politico.eu/article/poland-not-there-yet-reform-receive-eu-recovery-funds-vdl/>

¹⁶ *Euronews*, "A victory so big you can see it from the moon...and Brussels says Hungary's Viktor Orban," 4 April 2022. <https://www.euronews.com/my-europe/2022/04/04/a-victory-so-big-you-can-see-it-from-the-moon-and-brussels-says-hungary-s-viktor-orban>

¹⁷ *Euronews*, "A victory so big you can see it from the moon...and Brussels says Hungary's Viktor Orban" 4 April 2022. <https://www.euronews.com/my-europe/2022/04/04/a-victory-so-big-you-can-see-it-from-the-moon-and-brussels-says-hungary-s-viktor-orban>

would be fair to say that Viktor Orban would not jeopardize its national interest over a common cause such as Ukraine. His latest stance on oil and gas sanctions was a visible indication of that. It also seems that Hungary would be the first suspect of the new EU mechanism to strip funds for non-implementation of the rule of law. This new instrument came into life just two days after Viktor Orban’s inauguration, and the EU handed the letter of information after a reviewing process.

However, the effectiveness of such a move is a big question mark for both sides. Even though the representative of the PM’s office, Gergely Gulyas, has identified the letter as a direct attack on a democratically elected government,¹⁸ this does not change the fact that Hungary needs the EU funds in its fight against rocketing inflation. On the other hand, the EU could play into the hands of Vladimir Putin by allowing the anti-EU rhetoric to flame in one of the critical states of Central Europe.

In conclusion, victories or the strengthening of Orban-like leaders demonstrate that far-right rhetoric is still effective in Europe. In this manner, Marine Le Pen surely has put a fair fight against Emmanuel Macron. Nevertheless, what was significant in her mandate was a much intense emphasis on the cost of living crisis in France. In retaliation for Macron’s alleged “Elitist-Europeanist” plans, she proposed protectionist measures, including sets of renationalization policies.¹⁹

Whether this was enough to win the election or not, the attraction of the public to these very illiberal proposals should be a concern for Europe. It certainly indicates how vulnerable the European economy is in the public’s eyes, particularly in light of the debt crisis and the pandemic. Within this chaotic economic climate, the EU should find ways to cement efforts to recover from post-pandemic conditions and even introduce more ambitious policies.

One of these ambitions, the EU Green Deal, symbolizes a drastic turn in the European economy. According to the action plan, it would take all European countries to make significant sacrifices to deliver a green European economy with reduced emissions and energy dependency.²⁰ The current estimates calculate at least 1 trillion Euros to ensure the plan functions well enough. Member states must complement this budget with 114 billion Euros outside of the EU budget assistance.²¹

¹⁸ *France 24*, “Top EU body launches procedure to strip Hungary of funding over corruption,” 5 April 2022. <https://www.france24.com/en/europe/20220405-top-eu-body-launches-procedure-to-strip-hungary-of-funding-over-corruption>

¹⁹ *Financial Times*, “Marine Le Pen exploits cost of living fears as French run-off vote looms,” (2022). <https://www.ft.com/content/c606a189-4fe6-4c50-b7e5-5ed743c50a70>

²⁰ European Commission. “A European Green Deal,” (2022). https://ec.europa.eu/info/strategy/priorities-2019-2024/european-green-deal_en

²¹ *The Guardian*. “What is the European Green Deal and will it really cost €1tn?” (2020). <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/mar/09/what-is-the-european-green-deal-and-will-it-really-cost-1tn>

This is tricky, not just because of the historical opposition of right-wing parties but also due to the soaring energy prices and high inflation rates. The war has profoundly changed the dynamics of the energy economy, and the member states are now forced to choose between staying principled enough to save the planet or providing the necessary resources to keep industries and jobs operating. Another puzzle is implementation. As history has taught us, agreements are nothing more than goodwill gestures without effective implementation.

Kyoto Protocol is an excellent example of a failed climate bid that suffered long from non-implementation. So, the EU has to be careful and calculated enough to offer clear incentives and fair judgment to reluctant member states. As the bloc seeks to increase the likelihood of implementation at home, they must also pursue a coordinated approach with global emitters, such as China, the United States, and India. Yet to achieve that, the EU needs leverage, and currently, it is what they have been lacking. The recent climate collaboration with India called “Connectivity Partnership” is the right way to move forward, but it also needs to deliver some results by 2030.²²

Where should Europe go from here? It indeed seems that the good old glory days are long gone. Strategic Autonomy and Principles Pragmatism has been a very ambitious, integrationist policy, but it is unlikely to progress due to lingering populism and fluctuating geopolitics. So, what could be the cure for Europe to regain its game-changer position both at home and abroad? What we would like to suggest is nothing more than what the EU already knows, which is differentiated integration.

Differentiated integration as a concept is nothing new to the EU and has been a part of the EU since the 80s and 90s. It seeks to explain the territorial variation in member or non-member states concerning their changing level and scope in the alignment of the EU rules.²³ These variations could take a member state to opt-out from a particular policy area or a non-member to willingly opt-in when a reform suits both sides’ interests. Various scholars came through with distinct buzzwords throughout history to make sense of this differentiation, such as Multi-speed Europe, Europe a la carte, and variable geometry.²⁴

Decades ago, when European integration was in full force, opt-out or opt-in decisions

²² European Council “EU-India Connectivity Partnership, 8 May 2021,” (2021). <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/49508/eu-india-connectivity-partnership-8-may-2.pdf>

²³ F. Schimmelfennig, “Differentiated Integration and European Union Politics,” (2019). <https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190228637.013.1142>

²⁴ F. Schimmelfennig, “Differentiated Integration and European Union Politics,” (2019). <https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190228637.013.1142>

were instead a choice for member states. However, considering all the last decade’s problems, we believe it is more of a necessity for the EU to end the “Crisis Europe.” To move forward, the EU must become more flexible, and flexibility is only possible by accepting the inevitable.

Despite the EU’s insistence on unity, there will always be differences of opinion and national interests. It would be very difficult to change the tune of populist leaders like Viktor Orban in the future as it is today. So, insisting on solidarity and always striving for a unified policy-making seems nothing but a waste of time, especially for crisis scenarios that need an immediate reaction.

Therefore, the EU needs to develop plans to settle opt-outs as a part of its decision-making structure in the future. It is a piece of sincere advice to resist populist leaders and reluctant states not to build walls over the interests of others every single time. Whether it is sanctions or building security dimensions, willing members should have the flexibility to develop their approach by putting aside the constant upsets of the involuntary.

Wouldn’t that make more divisions or clusters in Europe? Yes, it is likely, and although this may not be reassuring, it could also give Europe what it seeks most: rapid and firm commitments/responses to its allies. The same mindset should be applied to the EU’s relations with third parties.

To contain Russian aggression, Europe needs more allies and must find ways to accommodate the older ones. Nevertheless, the famous process of conditionality has lost both its desirability and credibility. This reinforcement by rewards procedure has created lengthy and costly alignment periods for candidate/non-member states without guaranteeing success at the end and non-politicization of relations. In this manner, Turkey could be a textbook case.

Contrary to expectancies, the country has scattered into an impasse of democratic backsliding with an ongoing de-Europeanization. Several reasons have led to this situation, and European and Turkish decision-makers both bear responsibility. Nonetheless, their incapacities have not changed the fact that the membership incentive has long gone, and interdependency remains.

Consequently, if the EU is interested in retaining Turkey as a key partner, the only way to make progress might be to create an opt-in process that is more flexible. Rather than waiting for an endless full accession, both parties should accelerate their efforts to construct short-term “win-win” options through increasing bilateral

agreements, mainly on economic areas such as the modernization of the Customs Union. Hopefully, by allowing Turkey to opt-in to the areas where politicization is low and interdependency is high, the EU would be successful in keeping Turkey as a strategic partner and would help overturn Turkey's ill-fated record in fundamental freedoms.