

To thrive in the post-COVID world, Europe needs a Plan B

Benjamin Zeeb considers the EU's COVID-19 rescue package and argues that government by consensus rather than majority is not the right method in times of crisis

Hailed as a bold move and new chapter in the EU's development, the COVID-19 rescue package still follows a logic that is doomed to failure. On 5 August 1943, Jean Monnet declared: *"There will be no peace in Europe, if the states are reconstituted on the basis of national sovereignty... The countries of Europe are too small to guarantee their peoples the necessary prosperity and social development. The European states must constitute themselves into a federation..."*

But after the European Defence Community failed in 1954, Monnet took on a more practical approach, aiming to gradually integrate bits and pieces of national sovereignty until little was left for the state to decide over. Some in Brussels and Europe's capitals have taken this workaround as gospel and to this day misunderstand its intention.

The Methode Monnet was always intended to be directed at a final state of European federalization. It was never intended to be an endless process of baby steps aimed at an 'ever closer union' whose realization is projected into some distant past.

Europe paradoxically has come to fully endorse Monnet's Method, without approving its goal. Like a race car driver that is fundamentally and on principle opposed to reaching the finishing line, Brussels continues to make mockery of the man it holds in such high esteem.

This same mechanism is on display in the handling of Europe's latest crisis, one that once again requires the entire continent to act, when only few are capable and even fewer willing to do so.

Yes, a common debt is a step in the right direction, but what we are witnessing now is a far cry from the Hamiltonian moment required. Government by consensus rather than majority was never a great idea. In times of crisis it can prove fatal.

It is this lack of clarity and focus, this intellectual weakness, more so than any pandemic, that presents the largest danger to the European idea and by extension its citizenry. It could not come at a more critical time.

Across Europe, advocates of liberal democracy, rule of law, equality, solidarity, and free civil society have been pushed in a defensive position. The very same individuals and organisations who had traditionally been engaged in the drive to move the continent forward are finding themselves in the trenches of a hard-fought political, cultural, and ideological clash.

Rather than moving ahead, so it seems, in many European countries the order of the day has moved to defending what has been achieved in previous decades, by previous generations.

If one wants to Europeanize executive power, this means that democratic process needs to be Europeanized as well

The classical divides between left and right, conservatism and progressivism, individualism and solidarity no longer apply. It is not only historians who are increasingly listening for the echoes of the 1920s and 30s in the speech, policies and demeanour of illiberal governments and movements around Europe.

Are we paranoid or is a second coming at hand? What if it is true that - in the words of William Butler Yeats - things are falling apart, the centre cannot hold, and a new rough beast is slouching towards Bethlehem to be born? Isn't it our responsibility then to try and kill it before it reaches its destination?

In this critical moment Europeans cannot leave politics to politicians alone. What is required is a strong civil society. This includes business and requires industry leaders to rediscover their sense of responsibility for the shared security and health of the continent.

What is happening here, too slow for many to catch on, has already happened elsewhere. And happened after business elites had failed to respond adequately to a moment in history that required more than just economic savvy.

The very same night that Donald J Trump was elected the 45th president of the United States, early trading on stock exchanges around the world saw prices plummet. The investor Carl Icahn, who was worth an approximate 20 billion dollars at the time, and a Trump supporter from the very beginning, left the election party before midnight. He went on a big shopping tour.

Unfortunately, he was only able to mobilize about one billion dollars on the quick, Icahn told the New York station Bloomberg TV later. Icahn, who would later become Trump's special advisor for economic reform, put everything

he was able to scrape together into US stocks - and he turned out to be right. A year later, the S&P 500 had risen by almost a quarter.

One year later, the markets had learned their lesson. When the authoritarian right-wing populist Bolsonaro won the elections in Brazil last October, investors responded to the news with display of financial fireworks. What does this tell us about our economic culture?

At first glance it is not surprising that many business representatives shrug off the fact that Salvini is meeting with the PiS government in Poland, that Steve Bannon together with Gloria von Thurn und Taxis was mobilizing the conservative clergy against Pope Benedict, before being charged for fraudulent activities, or for that matter, that Cambridge Analytica, the dubious company that helped to win Trump the 2016 election, is also in contact with the heads of the Brexit campaign.

Populists, it seems, are good for business. But European industry, and Germans in particular, should be aware that an alternative to the post-war order is being created here. In this world, there is no room for the German business model.

All this requires a new radicalism in the strive for European unity that goes far beyond the tedious processes of the Methode Monnet.

The recent history of the European Union has shown that its members are extremely reluctant to cede sovereignty to the continental bureaucracy and until the creation of the Troika there was no governmental structure to be found anywhere in Europe that would have been worth the trouble for European federalists to even consider taking over.

Historically, nearly all political entities in Europe and elsewhere that successfully changed from authoritarian regimes or monarchies to democratically legitimated nation states achieved this by some sort of internal or external revolution.

Basically either the people took away political authority from those who had ruled them (as in France or in the US), or political authority was given to them by the victors following a conflict (as with Germany).

In nearly all cases, however, centralization had already occurred beforehand. It is hard to find cases in which stable democratic states have been established within a territory not previously consolidated.

However, European history also shows that suspending democracy, even for the briefest of moments is not a very good idea. Already Europeans don't trust the European institutions with the management of the rather mundane duties they are tasked with today.

How could we expect them to trust them with managing the fate of an entire continent? At times European elite's utterances seem to reveal the desire for a new kind of philosopher king that captures the minds of everybody walking the halls of the Berlaymont in Brussels.

Suspending national democracy is not an option until there are institutions in place and ready to take over as a functional equivalent. We cannot allow the state to crumble before we have a very clear gameplan for what comes next.

What we must push for instead is a one single and well-prepared moment of parliamentary fusion, that ensures continued representation and guarantees that democratic accountability remains in place.

This will necessitate something many dread, an element of direct democracy. Simultaneous referenda in all member states and regions of the eurozone that will determine whether or not a country or region joins the new federal Union. The new Union will then be constituted the very same moment in which two or more entities decide to join it.

A European Union that continues to rely on structures that are built from the top down, whether this affects all members at once or only a handful at a time, especially if it doesn't grant citizens the power to collectively decide on varying policy ideas, will never be stable.

If one wants to Europeanize executive power, this means that democratic process needs to be Europeanized as well. In the end, whether or not a state's citizenry is willing to make this change, should be where the line is drawn. ■

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