EUROPEAN GLOBAL CENTER: UTOPIA OR STRATEGIC OPTION?
A Russian View

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"Suffering encourages action".
Immanuel Kant

Abstract
The COVID-19 pandemic broke out shortly after the new leadership of the European Union outlined an ambitious agenda for European integration aimed at upgrading the EU role in the post-bipolar world order. The EU emergence as a full-fledged power center built on liberal democracy, the rule of law, responsible development and shared sovereignty could significantly contribute to greater stability in the international relations. It is particularly important at the moment, when the global order is moving away from a ruled-based multilateral cooperation back into one of old-fashioned power politics. The COVID-19 has become a serious test for European integration since the EU faces a twin challenge. It has to cope with the pandemic repercussions while at the same time it must also address the old existential problems and dilemmas of European integration. European leaders have to make a choice: either they revitalize integration through solidarity and strategic projects, or they risk letting Eurosckepticism grow into Eurosclerosis. In case the EU succeeds in getting out of the pandemic stronger and more united, it has a chance to meet the ambitious goals of its agenda.

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The idea of Europe's global role is not new. The Pan-Europe project equal to the British Commonwealth, Pan-America and the Soviet Union appeared a century ago, long before the creation of the European Union. One of the architects of this project was the famous ideologist of Pan-Europeanism, the Austrian diplomat Richard Cudenhove-Kalergi. However, not only in the 1920s but much later no one in the most daring dreams could have imagined how much European integration would achieve evolving from the European Economic Community (1957) to the unique integration association - the European Union (1992). Despite all the successes in the development of European integration, the European Union has gained a reputation of an "economic giant and a political dwarf". One of the explanations of this perception is that the EU was constructed against power politics (Laïdi 2019:1), since security guarantees to Europe during the Cold war were provided by the US / NATO.

The EU global ambitions took concrete shape only in our time with the adoption of the European Union Global Security Strategy (GSS) - "A common vision, a unified approach: a strong Europe." The GSS, the first conceptual document conceived in the spirit of political realism, was introduced at the European Council summit held on June 28, 2016, which

set a goal of the EU strategic autonomy. It was recognized that only a strong and united Union with the autonomous defense potential could play a significant role in the world politics. At the start of 2020, when COVID-19 had yet to trouble Europe, Josep Borrell, High Representative of the EU and Vice-President of the European Commission, wrote: "the geopolitical upheavals we are witnessing today underline the urgency with which the European Union must find its way in a world increasingly characterized by raw power politics. We Europeans must adjust our mental maps to deal with the world as it is, not as we hoped it would be" (Bargués-PedrenyP. 2021).

The imperative of strategic autonomy

If we have to single out only one fundamental reason for the EU strive for strategic autonomy, then this will undoubtedly be the crisis of the Euro-Atlantic partnership. It has split security interests of the United States and Europe and called into question the US's readiness to protect European interests in the post-bipolar world. It is all the more so, since president Donald Trump did his best to widen the gap between allies. The crisis of traditional Atlanticism developed against the background of new trends in international relations: the emergence of a new China with global imperial ambitions; the strengthening of a self-assertive and nationalist Russia and the rise of numerous regional players - India, Japan, Turkey, Iran, Brazil and others. The latter are actively replenishing the ranks of regional hegemons fighting for influence and limited resources. As Zaki Laïdi, Professor of international relations at Sciences Po, wrote in 2019 the question of the EU global role became especially important at the moment, when Europe faced unprecedented American nationalism and a president who increasingly regarded allies as a burden, a Russian revisionism that targeted the liberal world and its institutions, and a Chinese government determined to take its place as a world power without regard for the old, Western order" (Laidi 2019:1).

The project of strategic autonomy is a course to turn the EU into a full-fledged power center with a full set of attributes that are inherent only to global players. Strategic autonomy has been widened to new subjects of an economic and technological nature, as revealed by the Covid-19 pandemic. However, the security dimension remains predominant and sensitive (Borrell 2020a.). For that purpose, the EU leadership identifies four integration areas for sustainable development - digital, green, socio-political and defense. Moreover, the creation of an autonomous military potential plays a decisive role in building global positions of the European Union, which was created as the antipode of hard power.

According to Josep Borrell, the EU High Representative and Vice-President, the global order is moving away from a ruled-based multilateral order back into one of old-fashioned power politics, organized around confrontation between Washington and Beijing. Thus, amid this shift, "the EU needs to "learn the language of power" to assert its own independent voice and to

avoid being squeezed by a new clash of titans. In a world marked by increasingly less concealed hostility and open disagreement on basic principles, the EU should reassess its global role…" (Morillas, Quero 2020:1).

The realities of the polycentric world in the times of COVID-19

The polycentric world, where the European Union will have to build its global positions, is more flexible and mobile than the bipolar world. Moreover, the traditional boundaries of international relations are being eroded by the powerful currents of globalization and the information revolution, the rising tide of nationalism around the world and the trend of transnational economic, political and even military players coming to the forefront. Unlike the time of bipolarity today's opponents in a multipolar world can become tomorrow's partners, and vice-versa. Unreasonably weakening one's opponent does not automatically result in gains – it can also lead to a third party rapidly gaining strength and result in an even greater threat than that posed by the original opponent. Excessive strength gained by one side does not guarantee victory – it unites the other power centers against the strong side and inevitably leads to losses. In other words, it is the state or coalition best able to build better relations with the other power centers than they have among themselves that will maintain the most advantageous position within this polycentric system.

Presently there is only one full-fledged center of power - the United States of America whose economic and military potential guarantees its political influence in the world affairs. Prior to the pandemic China was approaching these standards. As for the European Union and Russia, they represent two opposite models. The EU is the center of economic power, while the Russian Federation is the center of military power. Relations between these four disparate centers play an important role in the modern polycentric world, which is characterized by the evolving balance between two opposite trends - the tendency towards multilateral cooperation on global problems (WMD proliferation, international terrorism, climate change) and the tendency towards a new bipolarity with two global leaders US and China (G2) and their respective allies. This latent bipolarity creates only a general context of relationships between the main international actors, blurred by internal disagreements within each group and the emergence of new regional hegemonic powers, claiming their share of influence in global affairs.

The COVID-19 pandemic has made adjustments to the postbipolar world order and "Great Power" competition. "COVID-19 could be the final nail in the coffin of a rules-based international order and the European project within it. But it could also give birth to a new phoenix rising from its ashes" (Tocci 2020: 1). The overall impact of COVID-19 on the global world order is yet to be understood but some of the trends can already be traced. The pandemic has radically changed the everyday life of people. It has claimed many lives in the different parts of the world. It has changed the format of

international cooperation beginning with online summits at the highest level and ending the cancellation or postponement of important events. The coronavirus has strongly hit the global economy. According to the Economist Intelligence Unit, the global economy will shrink by 2.5% in 2020 as a result of the pandemic, while in Europe, the effects could be even more severe – a drop in Eurozone GDP of up to 7% (Fleming 2020). At the sectoral level tourism and travel related industries elsewhere are among the hardest hit. Economic recession has led to lower energy demand and affect those countries that are dependent on energy exports like Russia (Prince 2020).

The Covid-19 crisis has revealed the basically asymmetrical nature of interdependence, and the vulnerability of Europe. In a globalized economy, where everything is related to everything else, risks are varied and include disruptions in the supply chain as well as the erosion of a strong industrial and technological base. It looks that the so-called re-shoring will become an alternative trend to hyper-globalization. With the most optimistic scenario of China's recovery from the worst of the virus impact, "its major export markets and trading partners in Europe and the United States are smack in the middle of an exponentially growing outbreak, threatening to kneecap any recovery China could begin" (Johnson 2020).

Economic security is on the rise elsewhere and the future of global economic cooperation will depend on policymakers' ability to support their national interests, without discarding international cooperation and rules. At the same time the pandemic has opened a window of opportunity for a circular economy model. Prior to the pandemic the EU introduced Circular Economy Action Plan aimed at preserving Europe's natural environment, strengthening its economic competitiveness, fostering sustainable consumption and closing loops. These actions can be accelerated with the support of the COVID-19 rescue plan.

At the level of "high politics", the pandemic has become not so much a turning point or a game changer but rather a catalyst for trends that existed before. It did not contribute to the solidarity of the United States, the European Union, China and Russia in the face of a common enemy. The international rivalry has affected even the healthcare sector where national vaccine competition has reached unprecedented proportions, not to mention the relationship between the world's centers of power. Almost immediately after the outbreak of the pandemic, it became clear that Russia and the West would not be able to unite against the deadly virus. This would have required resolving numerous contradictions over the sanctions wars, the Crimea problem, the situation in Donbas, the causes of the arms control crisis, and etc. It won't be an exaggeration to say that the EU-Russia relations that have experienced many ups and downs over the past three decades, more than once finding themselves on the edge of a crisis have never been as bad as they are now.

Some political analysts argue that the "COVID-19 pandemic has evidently accelerated the shaping of the new US-China bipolarity... The emerging rigid bipolarity carries systemic risks for all participants in global relations…" (Kortunov 2020). However, it should be noted that the pandemic has strongly affected both poles as two leaders of globalization. The pandemic has shaken fundamental assumptions about American exceptionalism — the special role the United States as a global leader played for decades after World War II. The signs of Europe's deep dissatisfaction with the US selfish behavior appeared before the COVID-19. "Ever since Mr. Trump moved into the White House and turned America First into his administration's guiding mantra, Europeans have had to get used to the president's casual willingness to risk decades-old alliances and rip up international agreements" (Bennhold 2020)

The same applies to China. According to Israeli scholar Ehud Eiran, "The fact that the virus broke out in China is of particular significance. The rising Eastern power plays a critical role in the global economy, inter alia as the production hub of most goods we consume. We hailed this global production chain and the cheap goods it provided. Now that the crisis in China is preventing production and export, many countries will presumably try to bring back home some of their essential production elements" (Eiran 2020). Many experts say that the coronavirus has already halted China's mega project - Belt and Road Initiative. Put simply, neither US, nor China are viewed in Europe as a model. As Germany's foreign minister, Heiko Maas, has pointed out, China took "very authoritarian measures, while in the U.S., the virus was played down for a long time…These are two extremes, neither of which can be a model for Europe" (Bennhold 2020).

Sino-Russian relations are now at their highest point since the mid-1950s, when Moscow and Beijing were communist allies. The Russia–China entente is likely to get even stronger in the wake of the coronavirus pandemic. Facing an intensifying hostility from Washington, Beijing will need Russia— its only major-power friend—even more. Meanwhile, Moscow looks to China, and its continued demand for Russian energy and commodities, as Russia's best chance to recover economically after the pandemic (Gabuev 2020).

Brussels' slow response to the coronavirus outbreak dented the image of the EU. Fortunately, the EU leadership had the courage to recognize its mistakes and apologized for its confusion and inaction at the beginning of the pandemic. Likewise, the Member-States, including the critics of "the EU shared sovereignty", realized pretty quickly that they would not survive the crisis alone. According to the April opinion poll, 79% of Italian and 85% of Spanish respondents asking for more European cooperation, which is very telling, because only recently these countries were among the strongest euroskeptics (Biscop 2020b). After the poor start, the European Union managed to group up and present an Action plan aimed at eliminating the devastating consequences of the deadly virus. The EU economic response to COVID-19 as a program of financial measures can be viewed as the

strongest anywhere in the world.[1] The EU recovery policy is kind of a litmus test for its global ambitions.

Can the European Union find its proper place in the post-pandemic polycentric world and define world politics on a par with other centers of power? The answer to this question will depend not only on the EU ability to cope with psychological, political, logistical, financial and other problems related the future of strategic autonomy, but also on the EU relations with other power centers - the United States, China and Russia. It will not be an exaggeration to say that the EU foreign policy skills and abilities will be crucial for the future configuration of the international relations - polycentric or bipolar.

In a versatile triangle: the USA, China and Russia

Josep Borrell, speaking at the presentation of his book "European Foreign Policy in the Times of Covid-19", said: "We must remember that foreign policy is about changing the domestic politics of other countries. What is foreign policy for us, means domestic politics for others" (Biscop 2021). Such a position cannot but inspire serious concern. First, the foreign policy goal of any state or association of states at all times has been to ensure the most favorable external environment for its functioning, primarily through the strengthening of international stability and security. Human rights can and should be part of the foreign policy agenda, but they cannot crowd out other existential issues related to international and regional security - the settlement of regional conflicts, the fight against the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, arms control, etc.

Second, Borrell's position is a retreat from the EU's Global Security Strategy where the traditional rhetoric of promoting democracy has been replaced by the notion of "resilience" as the guiding principle of EU relations with neighboring states. Third, changing the domestic policy of other countries is a recipe for disaster. However beautiful European principles and norms may be, they cannot be imposed by force on unprepared societies because the result will be only counterproductive. Nevertheless, there is a connection between the foreign policy interaction of states and positive internal political changes, but it is opposite to what Borrell spoke about: the better the external environment for a country, the better its internal development.

Surely, Borrell's foreign policy mantra does not apply to the United States but to China and Russia. Even in the days of Trump, the European Union did not question its allied relations with the United States although it

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[1] The European Commission put forward a new Marshall Plan for Europe and a European unemployment insurance scheme. The short-term recovery plan agreed at the April video-summit is estimated 540 billion euro. The long-term plan (the next EU budget for 2021-2027 and a new fund Recovery Instrument) that should produce about 2 trillion euro to finance a European economic recovery was adopted in December 2020.

became obvious that the return to the status quo ante was no longer possible. It is possible to revive a new Cold War but not those specific international relations that ensured an inextricable link between the Euro-Atlantic partners. No doubt, the Biden administration is more pro-European and more prone to persuade its allies rather than give them orders. Joe Biden will change the tone and the form of American foreign policy. It will be easier and more pleasant for Europeans to talk to Biden, and, most likely, the new president will try to replace Trump's "exit strategy" from the international agreements with "a return strategy". However, even in the best-case scenario of Euro-Atlantic relations, Europe will continue to be seen in Washington as a tool for achieving US goals. As Sven Biscop has rightly pointed out, "Europe will continue to be seen in a more instrumental way, as a source of allies to be mobilised against America's adversaries; and the EU's economic and energy interests as such will never be a priority for the US. Nor will they be for China or Russia, obviously" (Biscop 202a: 2). In other words, neither Biden nor anyone else will change the European Union's aspirations for strategic autonomy. This process will also determine the evolution of allied relations in NATO towards a more pragmatic functional partnership.

The Report of the European Commission "*EU-China – A strategic outlook*" 2019 identifies three faces of China for EU: a partner, economic competitor and political opponent and labels it as a "systemic rival" (EU-China – A Strategic Outlook 2019). The growing military potential of China doubled with its global ambitions and plans to acquire the most technologically advanced armed forces by 2050 already poses a threat to the EU security. In other words, the EU-China relationship is about a mix of cooperation and competition (with China clearly winning in the latter). In order not to become a pawn in the China-US big power game, the EU should find the right balance between the EU-China beneficial economic cooperation and the EU economic and military - political security. According to Sven Biscop, "The approach to China can be summarised as: ***Cooperate When You Can, But Push Back When You Must*** (Biscop 2020a: 2).

The EU and the US positions on the trends in China's domestic evolution, first of all, its repressive laws and violation of human rights, are almost identical. At the same time, unlike the US not everyone in the EU sees China as a real threat. In case of a simultaneous tightening of sanctions of Brussels and Washington against China, the partnership between the EU and the PRC will be called into question, and rivalry will inevitably prevail in the triad of partner-competitor-rival. Moreover, the united front of Brussels and Washington against Beijing will contribute to reformatting the polycentric world order towards bipolarity, which, in fact, does not meet the EU interests.

For all the importance of China, which is a distant country, Russia remains the main unknown in the European Union's policy. Presenting a new strategy on Russia on the eve of EU summit on June 24-25 2021, Josep

Borrell, said**:** *"Under present circumstances, a renewed partnership between the European Union and Russia, allowing for closer cooperation, seems a distant prospect… The EU will simultaneously push back, constrain and engage with Russia, based on a strong common understanding of Russia's aims and an approach of principled pragmatism."* (EU-Russia 2021*)*. Like with China, Borrell's triad on Russia lacks a clear strategic goal. What is more important for Europe of three options? It is all the more so, since the list of issues for selective engagement with Russia is not very long.

Today, Russia and the EU do not have a common enemy like the one that created the anti-Hitler coalition. Neither international terrorism, nor the pandemic brought Russia and the West together. Even the blacklists of terrorist/extremist organizations do not coincide in Russia and European Union. Nevertheless, they are facing a common and most terrible threat - the threat of a global conflict due to the possible escalation of regional conflicts, incidents and irreconcilable contradictions. In this regard, one cannot but recall the Eastern policy of Willy Brandt, which aimed at democratic transformation of the USSR, but aimed at strengthening European security and changes through rapprochement. French President Emmanuel Macron has repeatedly spoken about this. Undoubtedly, the European Union as a full-fledged center of power can play a very important positive role in a polycentric world, which is more stable than a bipolar world, especially if all centers of power play by common rules. The formulation of such rules is another imperative for the cooperation of all centers of power.

European integration: imperatives, dilemmas and risks

"However beautiful the strategy, you should occasionally look at the results", - these words are attributed to the prominent twentieth-century politician, Winston Churchill. For almost 70 years, Brussels ignored this wise advice, living surprisingly well, without major shocks, until the motherland of the great Englishman presented an unpleasant surprise. Undoubtedly, the future of European integration, scenarios and models of its development became particularly important after the referendum on the UK's exit from the EU. Leaving aside the traditional "island" psychology of the UK, it should be recognized that Brexit, in fact, was the British response to those existential problems that exposed the defects of the European construction. Under the pressure of these existential problems the European mirror has cracked having drawn dividing lines between" the new and old Europe", between the rich north and poor south, between Eurooptimists and Euroskeptics.

Imperative of solidarity

Only thirty years ago the CEE countries demonstrated an amazing ability to adapt to European norms and principles. Today they form the core of the populist nationalism within the EU. Through the combination of the rise of "illiberal democracy" and heightened concerns about identity in the face of

the migrant wave, the authoritarian and sovereigntist turn in Central Europe has revealed a rupture in the fabric of the European Union (Rupnik 2017:25). But the bitter truth is that not only the CEE countries but also those of the old Europe demonstrate fear of losing their national identity as well as disbelief in democratic institutions.

The Russian question has become another apple of discord in the EU and sharpened divide between the CEE countries and Western Europe. This was mostly vividly demonstrated at the June summit of the EU leaders on Russia. The EU leaders failed to agree on a proposal by France and Germany to hold a summit soon with Russian President Vladimir Putin after Poland and Baltic countries rejected this initiative. The split between the New Europe and the tandem raises a number of questions whose importance goes beyond the "Russian issue". Is Merkel's and Macron's defeat related to the uncertainty of the upcoming elections in Germany and France, or does it reflect objective changes in the enlarged EU, namely the reformatting of the existing hierarchy of relations?

As Robert Schuman, the French foreign minister and founder of the European integration, has pointed out in his famous Declaration presented on 9 May 1950, "Europe will not be made all at once, or according to a single plan. It will be built through concrete achievements, which first create a de facto solidarity The coming together of the nations of Europe requires the elimination of the age-old opposition of France and Germany. Any action taken must in the first place concern these two countries" (Schuman 1950). The traditional tandem of France and Germany, which remains the engine of integration, is verbally united by the common idea of a stronger and more autonomous EU. However, on practical issues of reforming the European Union in order to turn it into a full-fledged power center on the world stage, they have fundamental differences. It seems that France and Germany have changed their traditional places in tandem.

Initially, the Gaullist France did not seek to create supranational institutions, while the tradition of German federalism was one of the foundations of the ideology of European unity. Charles de Gaulle was very suspicious of the European Commission, which, in his opinion, should have remained only a technical institution under the supervision of national states. Today, French President Emmanuel Macron wants the European Commission to strengthen political control over the Eurozone, and advocates deeper integration in the areas of migration, taxation, foreign policy and defense in order to increase the EU's ability to protect its interests on the global stage (Laïdi 2019:3).

In contrast to France, Germany, historically an ardent supporter of federalism, after the global economic and financial crisis, has become much more committed to the model of intergovernmental cooperation, especially in the Eurozone, which is, in fact, fully corresponds to the Gaullist traditions. Today, Germany does not dare to give the EU institutions more power. According to some political analysts, in Germany, a key EU country, it is the

Federal lands that are among the most influential opponents of the widening and deepening of the European integrationist model. This is particularly noteworthy in the context of Germany's previous position on the simultaneous processes of widening and deepening that prevailed in Brussels and turned out to be a failure. Now the pendulum goes to the opposite direction –neither deepening, nor widening.

Similarly, the French and German positions about the dilemma of primacy of institutions or rules differ significantly. France chooses the former, while Germany chooses the latter. "Institutions allow for political assessment whereas rules applied in isolation and without political context lead to a certain dogmatism, itself generating popular rejection. This was explained by Mario Draghi, until recently President of the European Central Bank, and a critic of German economic policy: "the rules are generally static and require states to adhere to specific actions, while the institutions prescribe goals. As a result, rules cannot be updated quickly when unforeseen situations arise while institutions can be dynamic and flexible" (Laïdi 2019: 2).

In practice, ideological changes of the German political elite reflect the internal struggle between liberals and neoconservatives, which is also enhanced by the transit state of the country's leadership. Only time will tell who will prevail in this battle of ideas. But it is already clear that without solidarity among the EU Member States, let alone the tandem, it will be unrealistic to build a really strong and autonomous European Union. The split of the EU into French and German Europe will make this common dream irrevocably lost.

Strategic autonomy: a myth or reality?

Lack of solidarity is considered one of the obstacles to the EU strategic autonomy. It is claimed that the European Union cannot pursue a power policy since its member countries are deeply divided on many issues. The de-jure Brexit on January 31, 2020 has made many think in the EU that the Union will be more homogeneous and solid. But if the UK's departure can in some way facilitate integration in the European Union, it is also clear that the EU will lose access to the UK's military assets. Aside from this, it is not yet clear whether the rest of the European Union will be equally committed to the idea of the EU strategic autonomy and formation of its military component. This primarily applies to the countries of the "new Europe", who still tend to rely on US security guarantees and do not trust Brussels ideas.

Brussels faces the ambitious task of not only creating an industrial base of strategic autonomy, but also changing the EU political culture, which has been evolving as an antithesis to the hard power policy and Realpolitik. However, there is a broad consensus in the EU countries regarding common transnational threats (illegal migration, international terrorism, the proliferation of WMD, etc.), on which a common European strategic culture can be built. "More and more, Europe finds itself confronting an increasingly

illiberal world, the emergence of which it had not foreseen. However, we cannot say that Europe remains unresponsive. Indeed, over the past year, Europe has taken important decisions at an EU or national level (Laïdi 2019:5)".

Despite the existing differences and diverging security priorities of the individual Member-States, the EU leadership managed to achieve some concrete results. The most important decision of the EU in terms of hard security (December 8, 2017) seems to be the revitalization of the Permanent Structured Cooperation – PESCO. PESCO allows participating Member-States (except for Britain, Denmark and Malta) to strengthen cooperation on specific projects in the field of defense and security, to reduce the number of competing weapons systems in Europe and promote regional military integration, as well as joint military training. At the same time it would be naïve to think that the current 47 PESCO projects form a coherent whole which goes beyond joint procurement or even improved interoperability. "As it is, PESCO and the European Defence Fund (EDF) have gone far enough to strain relations with the US (because of Washington's rather hypocritical anger over the EU's aim to promote European defence industry), but not far enough by far to guarantee the quantum leap that European defence so urgently needs" (Biscop 2020a:3). Together with a strong industrial base of European defence, the EU needs a new decision making mechanism with QMV on foreign policy and security issues. Given the obsession with "sovranismo" in some European countries, this will be a difficult endeavor.

Obviously, the implementation of such an agenda will require an unprecedented solidarity as well as understanding that exactly in the areas where Brussels faces the most serious problems it could find common solutions that will give European citizens a sense of greater security and revive trust in the European Union. Summing up, the EU strategic autonomy is no longer a myth but not yet a reality. However, it has every chance to become a reality.

Crisis of liberal democracy
The current internal disunity of the European Union is not the main cause of its problems, but rather a consequence of deeper causes, without understanding which it will be impossible to move on. In the middle of the nineteenth century liberalism as an elite project of a citizen-owner and democracy as a system of the majority representation merged together, creating an attractive model of government - liberal democracy. This model for a long time ensured the protection of the rights and interests of each citizen, including the protection of minorities against the arbitrariness of the majority. The European project was built on the shared liberal democratic principles, ideas, norms and institutions. However, the virtues of liberal democracy, brought to the point of absurdity, invariably turn into their opposite, creating a retreat in society. Thus, tolerance one of the guiding principles of liberalism, turns into hypocrisy and disregard to the most acute

problems out of fear to be labeled a conservative or a reactionary or even a racist.

The growing gap in the link between liberalism and democracy led to the current crisis of liberalism and the emergence of the phenomenon of illiberal democracy. The deficit of democracy in the European Union, which is manifested in the lack of trust of ordinary citizens in the EU political elite, has been a sensitive issue at each stage of European integration. However it was two crises – global economic and financial crisis and migration crisis that made their contribution to the growing distrust of European citizens to the EU supranational structures, since the latter could not quickly and adequately respond to new challenges. In addition, some decisions of Brussels, in particular the migrants quotas imposed on the EU Member-States, caused a sharp rejection in the CEE countries who do not want to pay for the colonial past of the "old Europe" as well as in the countries of the EU southern periphery who have been strongly hit by the migrants' wave. Therefore, it is not surprising, that the citizens of these countries have been the most vulnerable to the influence of populist nationalists. As Marc F. Plattner, *the founding coeditor of the Journal of Democracy,* has written in his article "Illiberal Democracy and the Struggle on the Right", "One of the biggest challenges to democracy today is posed by the dramatic change in the political-party landscape, especially in Europe but in some other parts of the world as well. Attention understandably has focused on the rise of a variety of populist candidates and movements, but what has enabled their rise is the drastic decline in support for the parties that had long dominated the political scene" (Plattner 2019). In this regard, it should be emphasized that the crisis of liberalism does not stem from nationalism, but, on the contrary, nationalism in today's Europe is generated by the excesses of liberalism.

Risks of liberal empire

Thirteen years ago, the head of the European Commission, Jose Manuel Barozu, answering a question about what the European Union was, said that it could be compared with a non-imperial or, in other words, a liberal empire: "What we have is the first non-imperial empire" (Mahony 2007). Of course, Barozu's definition is a metaphor, a figure of speech, a rhetorical device, but like any analogy, it contains some kind of rational thought. Although the 21st century European Union is not the 5th century Roman Empire, there are striking similarities in terms of challenges to both the Roman Empire and the European Union. A changing climate reduced the empire's resilience to various shocks - droughts, crop failures, epidemics, destructive wars - that spurred migration of Eurasian tribes to the Roman empire ultimately leading to social tensions and the collapse of the western empire in the fifth century. "The Roman Republic and the Roman Empire both fell because they failed the sustainable development test. There is a cautionary lesson for our own times in how that failure played out—a breakdown in time-honored social norms, entrenched political polarization driven by economic inequality, repudiation of the common good by elites,

and environmental havoc leading to disease and disaster (Anthony, Lipsky 2019)".

With all the relativity of the analogy with ancient Rome, the European Union's sustainable development also undergoes serious tests - from climate change, epidemics, economic and financial shocks to unprecedented flows of illegal migrants in search of better life in Europe. No doubt, unlike the ancient time, the modern EU economy, equipped with technological achievements of the XXI century, is much stronger and more stable in relation to external threats. However, of all challenges to the sustainable development of the EU as a unique integrationist project the main problem is still related to the migration crisis. Introduction of quarantine measures in the EU countries forced Brussels to tighten control over external borders that temporarily brought down the Exodus of migrants. It is likely that the protection de-jure and de-facto of the external borders of the European Union will remain the most important task of its leadership even after the pandemic. However, illegal migrants, who are already in the EU both in temporary detention camps and hiding from the authorities, will remain a problem for Brussels and for national governments. Undoubtedly, a Muslim or a Jew or a Buddhist can easily become a full-fledged loyal citizen of the EU, if he or she accepts its rules and shares European values, such as principles of liberal democracy, tolerance to the norms of European life - the emancipation of women, religious pluralism, existence of LGBT community and so forth. If not, then a migrant cannot be integrated into European societies.

Back in 2010 Angela Merkel, David Cameron and Nicolas Sarkozy had to recognize the complete failure of multiculturalism in their countries. The most natural consequence of this recognition should have been a search for new conceptual approaches, but in reality, nothing happened. The EU leaders and politicians continued the previous practice of silencing this acute problem. Support for cultural and religious specificity minorities in the countries of the Union have turned into support for communities' identity, which suppress any freedom of an individual and hinder personal integration into civil society. Paradoxically, political correctness as one of the essential features of liberalism prevailed over its substance.

Another fundamental problem for the sustainable development of the European Union, the solution of which will require certain courage from Brussels, related to the question of the EU final borders. Once again there is some analogy with the Roman Empire, and with any Empire in principle. Overextending borders lead to an administrative confusion, decline of civil infrastructure and erosion of traditional values. Certainly, the nature and form of the Roman Empire's expansion that occurred by violent conquest of new territories and enslavement of indigenous peoples in order to strengthen the imperial political and economic influence, have nothing to do with the EU enlargement aimed at the natural reunification of Europe split by the East-West confrontation. However, the widening of the

European Union based on European norms and values has gradually given way to an expansion based on geography. Brussels already needs to decide on where the EU future borders will end, because it is impossible to build a house without knowing where its doors and gate will be. Any full-fledged regional integration, like in the EU, requires certain criteria: common political and economic interests, compatibility of economic, social and political systems, shared sovereignty for the sake of supranational bodies, equality, and common cultural identity. In fact, these criteria determine the borders of the European Union, which, in all likelihood, will end in the Western Balkans, that is, on the territory of the former Yugoslavia. Those neighbours of the EU that will be left outside its borders could develop common spaces of integration without actual membership.

Conclusion

Will European Union become a new full-fledged power center at par with other power centers? It will depend on many factors of ideological and material nature. Idealistic perceptions of the European political elite about the post-bipolar world, in which power politics would be replaced with economic interdependence and multilateral cooperation, turned out to be erroneous. From this point of view, the EU needs to realize that a European integrationist project based on shared sovereignty and liberal democracy is opposed by many great powers that would like it failure. In other words, the European political elite will have to learn realism in order to get rid of the former complacency and see the modern world as it is. Moreover, in order to implement the EU strategic repositioning in the global world, its leadership should avoid the emergence of competing groups within the Union. Internal divides will undermine any possibility for the European Union to play a significant role in world politics. Exactly for these reasons, while preserving its traditional values, the EU should have all the tools to protect its development model, including hard power potential. Strategic autonomy is not only an extension of the EU military capabilities, but also a catalyst for the formation of common foreign policy goals.

The European Union has already outlined its strategic reorientation aimed at gaining an equal role in the "big powers game". Obviously, if the European integration is destined to develop further, it is impossible to stop the formation of its military component. At the same time, it will have to cope with other problems: restoring the link between liberalism and democracy and defining the geographic contours of the European integration. If the EU meets its ambitious goals, it will ensure its freedom of action that will allow not only to protect European political, economic and security interests, but also to play a stabilizing role in the international relations.

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