Forum: EU: N.P. Ludlow: Europe and the rhetoric of crisis
by N. Piers Ludlow

The scenario is wearily familiar. As Europe is hit by a new, „unprecedented“ crisis, both the press and an array of senior European politicians start proclaiming the imminent „end of Europe“ or the collapse of the European Union (EU) unless an effective response is rapidly devised. In the days and hours before the hastily convened „emergency“ meeting of the European Council, this „make or break“ rhetoric ramps up still further, with the blood-chilling predictions of how close to the precipice Europe already stands, ensuring that maximum attention is directed towards the Union's heads of state and government as they gather. But inevitably the agreement that does emerge from the ensuing all-night marathon encounter in Brussels receives a highly mixed response. Most of the papers and TV channels faithfully report the grey-faced leaders' post-summit soundbites about disaster being averted or a corner successfully turned. But for many outside observers, whether commentators, newspaper columnists or rival politicians, the meeting's outcome is adjudged highly disappointing – a glass half full at best or more probably an unsatisfactory fudge that leaves the key underlying problems unresolved. At least one leading English-language newspaper will no doubt proclaim that the EU has once again „kicked the can down the road“ – i.e. staved off disaster temporarily, but only by postponing the difficult decisions to later rather than by properly addressing them. The whole cycle will have to begin again a couple of months later, sometimes less, when the next crucial European Council meeting is held.

The preceding paragraph could have described any number of summit meetings in the course of the Eurozone crisis from 2009 onwards. It equally could have applied to the EU's response to the migration crisis which began in 2015. And it could be recycled once more to describe the current situation and the bloc's response to Covid-19, although the accompanying TV images would now have to be altered to show individual leaders sitting alone (or with socially-distanced advisors) in front of their monitor for a video-conference in place of the usual shots of them getting out of smart cars in front of the Council building in central Brussels. This last difference apart, however, the interchangeability is striking. The cast of central characters slowly evolves, the exact subject and focus of the crisis meeting varies, but the basic pattern of the EU's recurrent flirtation with disaster endures, as does the breathless nature of its analysis and discussion in the press.

The repeated iterations of this phenomenon could of course simply indicate that we are living in an era of unparalleled crises and challenges. I certainly wouldn't want to dismiss the importance or the seriousness of any of the crises that Europe has had to confront over the last decade or so. But it does strike me that the frenzied nature of the debate is not just a measure of the genuine difficulties which have afflicted Europe since 2009. Instead it also suggests a certain banalisation of the notion of an existential crisis and a widespread belief that only by invoking imminent doom can a system as cumbersome and risk-averse as the EU be spurred into action. The Union at times, seems like an old car on a chilly morning, which can only be kicked into life by a furious revving of the engine, or a sulky teenager, requiring ever more extreme threats from desperate parents before undertaking some unwelcome task. There has been in other words a cheapening of the language of crisis, with extreme consequences routinely forecast in the hope of using the sense of dire peril to overcome political inertia. This is not just an approach, however, that is always likely to be subject to a law of diminishing returns. It is also a tactic that seriously misleads and carries with it several inherent dangers.

The first problem is that the language of make or break summits, of single opportunities to avert catastrophe, creates an unrealistic expectation of miracle cures, of silver bullet solutions. As historians we all ought to be more aware than most that this is not, by and large, how crises are met and survived. Whether we look to the history of Europe's collective efforts at decision-making or the political trajectory of individual European countries, there are comparatively few

instances of major challenges being overcome by single moments of genius, by inspired or inspirational leaders, doing just the right thing at just the right time. Instead the pattern is much more often one of confusion and delay, of halting decision-makers muddling through to some combination of responses that eventually suffices to blunt the worst ill-effects of the crisis. Previous moments of destiny, whether wars, economic crises, or major social unrest are more likely to have been overcome by trial and error, messy compromise, less-than-perfect improvised fixes, unintended side-effects, and a dollop of good fortune rather than with-one-bound-and-he-is-free heroics. And yet still we seem to go into each European summit expecting the assembled leaders to perform miracles, only to complain bitterly when, entirely predictably, they fail to do so. We have even re-told the stories of how earlier disasters were averted in order to make them fit with our desire for a narrative of heroic decision-making. It is much easier, for instance, to attribute the solution of the Eurozone crisis to Mario Draghi's „Whatever it takes" soundbite, than to the multiplicity of untidy technical and political compromises and the gradual accumulation of experience amongst Europe's exhausted leaders that almost certainly mattered much more.[1] The inflated rhetoric of imminent disaster feeds into this largely fruitless yearning for the miracle cure and the miracle-worker.

The second problem with constantly proclaiming that Europe is on the verge of disaster and total collapse, is that it seriously underestimates and entirely hides from general view the resilience of Europe's system of collective governance. No historian, it is true, ought to assume the permanence of any governmental institution or system. The rapidity with which the structures of Soviet domination in Eastern Europe fell away in the course of few months in 1989/90 should have emphasised this for anyone of my generation, but there are plenty more examples throughout history of seemingly robust and enduring political edifices that have collapsed, with astonishing speed and with little warning. But equally most political historians would recognise that many governmental systems bounce from one crisis to another for decades, even centuries, without collapsing altogether. The rhetoric of imminent disaster should thus be viewed with extreme suspicion in any political context, but perhaps particularly so in a set of structures as widely misunderstood as those of the European Community/Union. Is this not the same set of institutions that many believed all but brought to its knees by General de Gaulle's policies in the 1960s?[2] That was written off as impotent and irrelevant during the „dismal decade" of the 1970s, when European countries struggled to find effective individual, let alone collective, responses to the first major economic downturn of the post-World War II era?[3] Or that was famously proclaimed moribund by *The Economist* in March 1982, with accompanying grave-stone adorned magazine cover?[4] Needless to say the fact that predictions of collapse have proven incorrect so far doesn't provide an absolute guarantee that such doom-saying will always be wrong. But it should surely be enough to encourage more sensible commentators, armed with some knowledge of Europe's recent past, to pause and reflect before joining in the chorus of those announcing the imminent end of the integration process?

We are not dealing, after all, with a hastily constructed set of institutions, thrown up with little thought of permanence to deal with a short-term crisis. Instead, the EU represents the outcome of sixty plus years of collective institutional experimentation by European

[1] For a nuanced assessment of Draghi's role, see: Draghi's ECB tenure: Saving the Euro, faltering on inflation' in: Financial Times, 21.10.2019, https://www.ft.com/content/a62b221c-eb64-11e9-a240-3b065ef5fc55 (15.06.2020). The headline tells its own story. To reconstruct the crucial series of European Council meetings where the key decisions were actually taken, the best source are the regular assessments now published by Leuven University Press: https://lup.be/collections/series-european-council-studies (15.06.2020).

[2] For details, see Philip Bajon, Europapolitik „am Abgrund": die Krise des „leeren Stuhls" 1965-66, Stuttgart 2012; N. Piers Ludlow, The European Community and the Crises of the 1960s: Negotiating the Gaullist Challenge, Abingdon 2006.

[3] A good introduction to the Community during the 1970s is Richard Griffiths, Under the Shadow of Stagflation: European Integration in the 1970s, in: Desmond Dinan (ed.), Origins and Evolution of the European Union. 2nd edition, Oxford 2014, pp. 165-188.

[4] The Economist, 20.03.1982.

governments. Wrapped up within its structures, laws and operations, therefore, are countless bargains, deals and balances of interests, that while certainly less than perfect, would be immensely disruptive and damaging to seek, rapidly, to recast and replace. Even that most malcontent of (former) members, the United Kingdom, has spent a lot of the time since its vote to leave the EU in 2016 discovering quite how complex, multi-faceted and uncomfortable a challenge it is to disentangle itself from the outcome of more than four decades of tight cooperation. Indeed there is almost certainly a great deal more discomfort in store for the country in the months and years ahead as the realities of life on the outside begin to be felt. And this has been the voluntary disengagement of an already semi-detached member state from a Union that while disappointed to see the UK leave is able to continue functioning in its absence and hence carry out a reasonably organised and coherent negotiation with its departing member. (Rather more organised and coherent, indeed, than the UK's own position – but that is another story!) How much messier and infinitely more disruptive would be an involuntary and multilateral collapse? And so in the circumstances is it surprising that most European governments, regardless of their belief in the European ideal, have tended to prioritise the survival and continuation of their cooperation with one another over most other political or economic ends? The very complexity of the European bargains that link EU member states to one another, to put it slightly differently, actually lend strength to those ties and make them more costly to abandon. And yet this very strength and resilience is partially concealed by a debate about Europe which continues to be conducted in terms which imply massive fragility and the high risk of imminent collapse.

Nor, to move to the third consequence of the rhetoric of semi-permanent existential threat, is this implied vulnerability and weakness without political cost. On the contrary, proclaiming Europe's fragility and describing each summit meeting as the last chance to avert total disintegration, only serves to encourage and to reinforce the views of those, within the EU's borders and without, who would love to see European cooperation falter and fail. And their views matter. They matter because they stoke internal discontent, which makes it harder for each member state to cooperate fully in whatever collective action is needed to keep the EU going. They matter because external scepticism undermines the international effectiveness of Europe's collective voice, despite this last being one of the key reasons to go on cooperating in a world otherwise dominated by Trump's America, Putin's Russia or the China of Xi Jinping. And they matter because in the echo chamber of international debate and discussion they reinforce some of Europe's own self-doubts and vulnerabilities. Even worse, they make much more likely lemming-like behaviour by a misguided government within the EU, so unsure of the continent's collective future that it begins to calculate solely on the basis of its own national interests without any regard for how these would be affected by a clash with the rest of the Union. Once more, my own country's recent experience, can serve as a salutary guide. For one of the reasons why Britain's Brexiters were so nonchalant about how a detached UK would regain its freedom from and steer a course alongside the Union that it had left, was their conviction that the EU would not long survive Britain's departure. Brexit would rapidly trigger a chain-reaction of similar national self-liberations, thereby bringing the whole European structure crashing down and rendering the question of how the UK would relate to the much larger Union on its doorstep an irrelevance.[5] And why were they so convinced of this outcome? Well at least in part because many of the EU's own leading authorities had spent much of the previous six or seven years talking loudly about Europe's existential crisis and the probable collapse of the European integration process. While I would hesitate to go so far as to say that

[5]For just one example of such predictions, see Michael Gove's claim that „But for Europe, Britain voting to leave will be the beginning of something potentially even more exciting - the democratic liberation of the whole Continent", 19.04.2016, https://d3n8a8pro7vhmx.cloudfront.net/voteleave/pages/271/attachments/original/1461057270/MGspeech194VERSION2.pdf (15.06.2020).

the rhetoric of European doom is bound to be a self-fulfilling prophecy, precisely because of the systemic resilience I talked about earlier, it is certainly something which makes more likely both damaging internal dissent and harmful external dismissiveness. It is therefore a verbal cliché Europe's political elite might do well to expunge from their repertoire.

As the leaders of Europe slowly and painfully struggle to agree amongst themselves the best response to the current Covid-19 induced crisis, I for one would hence welcome a distinct dialling down of the rhetoric around Europe's future. This certainly applies to the hyper-optimists as well as to the prophets of collapse. Agreeing on an ambitious financial response to the current situation will not be Europe's Hamiltonian moment, any more than the multiple past occasions when advances, successes and agreements have been over-dramatized and oversold. Systems that run on compromise and need to win the consent of 27 different governments and electorates before major change can be made don't easily make dizzying leaps forward, but instead must rely on gradual, incremental, and highly imperfect advance. They move forward like an elephant, not a gazelle. But by the very same token a failure fully to pass the Commission's draft budgetary plans or to agree to the full scale of grants and loans proposed will not be the end of Europe, the prelude to inevitable disaster and dissolution. Instead Europe's public and those who comment on its political affairs need to accept the somewhat more prosaic reality of a system that gradually inches its way to a collective response, while at the same time retaining a degree of pride in, and wonder at, the fact that so much is being done collectively at all. For in an era and in a world where we are repeatedly told about the weaknesses of international cooperation and the triumphant return of nationalism, the continuing existence of any collective endeavour as ambitious as the EU is both remarkable and reassuring. The glass half-full is already much more than we should take for granted.