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Is the European Union at a Dangerous Crossroads?

Introduction

European integration is a process that can bring many benefits to sovereign states. The form and pace of this process should result from their decisions. States are still the subjective basis for international relations. Of course, more actors are emerging, and global and regional processes are gaining new importance. As a result, dependencies are growing. However, states still play a major role. In Europe, pressure from European Union (EU) institutions has been growing over the last dozen or so years. Subsequent proposals increasingly interfere with the subjectivity and interests of sovereign states. In many cases, it is difficult to accept several solutions that constitute a kind of coercion by the EU. Some solutions are completely incomprehensible, sometimes harmful to Europe's development and competitiveness, and can even be dangerous. Directives adopted by the European Parliament and then institutionally imposed by the European Commission raise many concerns in the Member States and the societies that create them.

The article aims to outline several challenges related to Europe's integration processes. The examples provided illustrate key challenges for present and future generations. The analysis focuses on three questions: 1. What is

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the vision of European integration within the current EU? 2. What are the social and political differences based on? 3. How is Poland's membership in the EU assessed?

Dilemmas concerning European integration as a 20th-century research subject

European integration in the 21st century has become very important, both subjectively and objectively. In the case of processes taking place within the EU, this can be observed in the context of subsequent enlargements, undertaken reforms, and new ideas introduced to deepen integration. This is not always a quality-promoting activity. Attention has been drawn to this in many studies in Poland and abroad.

Researchers pointing to integration dilemmas within the EU do not question the importance of this process. They are convinced of the validity of cooperation in Europe. However, they do make clear analyses based on the subjectivity of the EU Member States. These sovereign, democratic states are to decide on the direction and pace of integration. Restricting rights, mainly by EU institutions, does not have a positive impact on their position and Europe as a whole. A Europe of Homelands has an advantage over a federal Europe. Imperial plans to create a European superstate do not bring any benefits. The EU is an international organization, and that is all it is. Thus, it should remain so.

Membership in such a structure is both an opportunity and a challenge for a state (Oudenaren 2022; Riddervold, Trondal, & Newsome 2021; Podraza 2007). Most certainly, a healthy balance is needed between those who support the full sovereignty, self-regulation, and independence of nations and states and those who support full unification and federalization (Grosse 2017; Zielonka 2002). A discussion about development and civilization dilemmas is extremely necessary. It should be put into action in the form of specific decisions that serve states and societies in Europe. Sustainable development is the key, but it must be based on sensible actions that take into account the continent's freedom and competitiveness.

The European vision

Robert Schuman advocated European integration in the spirit of traditional values that have shaped Europe's identity for centuries. Greek philosophy, Roman law, and Christianity are of fundamental importance in this region

(Łukaszewski 2002; Buttiglione 1996). Such a vision of Europe was to be free from hegemonic attitudes and state egoism, especially in the largest nations. Cooperation, interdependence, and mutual service were key values. These seemingly naive ideas are, however, today the basis for Europe's peaceful coexistence and development (Schuman 2009).

The currently dominant narrative based on the downright communist doctrine adopted by Altiero Spinelli is completely different. In this proposal, nation-states have no *raison d'être*. The main formally and legally imposed practice is Europe's full federalization. This is done in close connection with shaping society around liberal and leftist ideas. They are deceptively presented as progress, concern for future generations or a new order, and even supported by democratic ideas (Spinelli 1941).

The visions presented above are irreconcilable. Europe's contemporary reality is a struggle between one option or the other. In the first case, rational arguments are presented in favor of the logical choice to base European integration on lasting and traditional values. Additionally, the groundlessness and harmfulness of utopian visions limiting human freedom and development are pointed out. The second approach proposes a set of unverifiable slogans and forced solutions based on concern for future generations. Their supporters do not respect the opposition and use a kind of ideological terror against them. An example of these differences is the issue of climate change or the role and rights of nation-states. The consequence of imposing solutions that increasingly interfere with the development of nations, states, and societies means effectively limiting Europe's freedom and democracy. This takes the form of restrictions, prohibitions, and orders addressed to various entities that have been multiplied in recent years.

Diverse accents

The fundamental, practical problem underlying these different visions described above is the issue of the EU's subjectivity. This issue has been controversial since at least 1993. Today's EU is nothing more than an international organization. It is composed of sovereign member states that have voluntarily joined this structure. They have limited their sovereignty, but a decision about any kind of restriction is theirs. The EU is not the goal of the integration process. It is a means, a tool for implementing this process. All decisions regarding this organization's structure belong to the member states. Bureaucratic institutions imposing their will on member states is an unauthorized action. States are not and cannot become hostages or incapacitated subjects of undertaken actions. Plans to turn the EU into an empire are doomed to fail in practice due to several underlying conditions.

The main reason for this is the blurring of Europe's identity. Cosmopolitan slogans do not have a permanent basis, because they do not take into account the continent's history and specificity. Rather, slogans are a repetition of what has caused serious problems in Europe's history, including conflicts and wars. Europe's identity results from three indicated realities: Greek philosophy, Roman law, and Christianity. This is particularly important in the context of dynamic demographic changes and migration processes. Questioning this identity triad will result in the continent's downfall and its takeover by foreign cultural influences. As a consequence, social differences are becoming more and more visible in the countries that constitute the main arena of migration to Europe. Many districts, including some in France, Germany, and Belgium, are becoming closed social environments that do not want integration with the local population. Immigrant communities do not identify with tradition and socio-cultural norms.

Attempts to apply a new version of existing values to society do not change this fact. The rule of law, democracy, and freedom result from principles established over the centuries. They cannot be redefined solely based on statutory law, but result from the basic principles of natural law, which are now being questioned in contemporary Europe. This is visible in the example of so-called minority rights (including those based on cultural gender), reproductive rights, or unlimited individual freedom. In many cases, this leads to questioning natural social development based on generational bonds. They are weakened, sometimes even broken, for example, due to the lack of new births in indigenous European communities. It is a fact that Europe's depopulation is progressing. The fertility rate is well below 1.5 children per woman. Even if it is higher in some countries, this is only because it is the result of births in immigrant communities, especially the Muslim population. The consequence of this fact is that advanced social and political changes among European nations are already taking place and will develop in the following years.

Europe lacks leaders and role models in the classical sense. Authority and social credibility are key in this area. Most European politicians support particular interests, business connections, and political correctness. Society is limited to the objective role of the masses voting in elections. These masses make choices that are supposed to democratize and confirm the rule of narrow interest groups. Presently, power is often held by people who, a dozen or so years ago, would have had no chance of holding public office, not because of system limitations but because of their lack of minimum competencies. Politics has become a celebrity reality, with little or no connection to the public good. Political struggle and the exercise of power in many cases focus on managing fear, building a sense of dependence, and depicting the other as hostile, even within ethnically and nationally homogeneous societies.

This is also quite common in Central European countries, including Poland. The situation of social polarization has a destructive impact on the ability to maintain national and state identity, weakening possibilities for building socio-economic stability and defense capabilities. This is particularly dangerous in times of the current crises and the warlike attitude shown by Russia toward Ukraine, with the prospect of its further escalation into other countries. The divisions in Europe are greatly benefiting Putin and his neo-imperial plans. Those currently in power in Europe simply do not draw any constructive conclusions from this situation.

Poland in the EU – an account of experiences

Poland has been a member of the EU for 20 years. In 2004, together with nine other countries, it joined a completely different organization. Expectations related to membership are currently not limited simply to benefiting from participation in European funds. Poland is no longer a so-called new member of the EU. Its level of social and economic development, especially after 2015, is clearly evident. This is visible in macroeconomic indicators, including its GDP level, low unemployment, and high investments. Moreover, Poles' enthusiasm toward the EU is not decreasing. The level of support for European integration in Poland is the highest among all other EU countries.

Poland's twenty years of experience through integration have been politically diverse. Until 2015, the dominant practice was unconditional acceptance of the integration reality dominated by federal concepts and the leading role played by France and Germany. In the years 2015–2023, the subjectivity of Central Europe and Poland's attempts to play an important role in EU reform processes were emphasized. In many cases, this brought certain benefits, including drawing attention to the needs and opportunities of countries in the region. As a consequence, this strengthened their positions or established new initiatives like the Visegrad Group (V4), the Three Seas Initiative (3SI), and the Bucharest Nine (B9).

These initiatives do not aim to create an integration against the EU but remain within it by promoting proposals that intensify reforms for improving the quality of European integration. The United States' active role in Europe was a key element in this action. Yet, they were not understood constructively by the so-called old EU members, especially France and Germany. After Poland's government changed in 2023, there was a return to full loyalty to federal plans, with France and Germany playing the leading roles. This relates to, among others, compliance with plans for the development of a climate policy (the so-called zero emissions policy) and the migration package concerning the need to accept relocated migrants, including those

arriving in Europe illegally. This will most certainly result in a decline in the standard of living and the competitiveness of Poland's economy and cause an increase in social tensions due to cultural differences.

Conclusions

The troubling question in the title refers to contemporary decisions made at the EU level. Answering this question is difficult due to the lack of willingness of EU institutions and some countries to clearly and precisely define political goals, especially France and Germany. It seems that the classic Roman maxim *divide et impera* has a new meaning in contemporary Europe. Severing with one's identity, lack of precisely defining basic values, and limiting the subjectivity of states and societies is, in this case, crucial for maintaining power in the hands of narrow political "elites". For Poland, this is an unfavorable reality and a dangerous development prospect. For the entire continent, this means a decline in the importance of individual states and a lack of real influence on the future of current and future generations. This was partly the reason for Brexit. British society was unable to accept the increasingly visible interference in its state's internal decisions and the actual limitation of civil liberties.

However, Europe has a future. It can regain control and choose its precise direction of development. This will involve implementing integration ideas that take into account the peaceful coexistence of sovereign nations and states. This is not just an idealized vision but a real necessity that results from the will to survive.

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Abstract

European integration needs new impulses. This also applies to the European Union. Nowadays, there is a clear decline in libertarian and democratic ideas, and the importance of sovereign member states is diminishing in favor of the development of federalist concepts. The vision of a superstate, especially pushed forward by France and Germany, harms the interests of, among others, Central Europe, including Poland. The article aims to outline several unfavorable practices enforced in the EU and to give examples of possible ways to reverse the trends dominating at the level of European technocrats. A return to integration based on sovereign states, following the assumptions of the Founding Fathers, may have a positive impact on the continent's competitiveness and quality of life for Europeans.

Czy Unia Europejska stoi na niebezpiecznym rozdrożu?

Streszczenie

Integracja europejska potrzebuje nowych impulsów. Dotyczy to również Unii Europejskiej. Współcześnie obserwuje się wyraźny spadek znaczenia idei libertariańskich i demokratycznych oraz suwerennych państw członkowskich, które tracą na rzecz rozwoju koncepcji federalistycznych. Wizja superpaństwa, forsowana szczególnie przez Francję i Niemcy, szkodzi interesom m.in. Europy Środkowej, w tym Polski. Celem artykułu jest nakreślenie kilku niekorzystnych praktyk stosowanych w UE oraz wskazanie przykładów możliwych sposobów odwrócenia trendów dominujących na poziomie europejskich technokratów. Powrót do integracji opartej na suwerennych państwach, zgodnie z założeniami Ojców Założycieli, może pozytywnie wpłynąć na konkurencyjność kontynentu i jakość życia Europejczyków.

Keywords: Europe, European integration, European Union, crisis

Słowa kluczowe: Europa, integracja europejska, Unia Europejska, kryzys

