

THE EU AS A MODERN POLITICAL NETWORK

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Abstract

The successful future of the EU is a function to its complete political and conceptual rethinking as a political project. The EU should stop being considered as some utopian project with an idealistic end, or the so-called French „finalité“ – it has to be increasingly perceived as several parallel political projects or as a network, a system of interconnections mainly in the field of economic competition and political cooperation, which is self-balancing. The EU will certainly have to part with what we can define as a political culture of total optimism.

There are many developments in this direction which define the EU as a „decentralized network-like structure“ or even directly as „the Network Europe“, which is at the service of its members and where the „imperial“ political center does not have the weight and influence it had in the past. The EU is a structure in which currently and paradoxically, the member states have much greater and equal opportunities, and despite the apparent instability of the structure, it is precisely the flexibility and the mentioned new rethinking as strategic factors that will allow it to be developed successfully in the future.

Keywords: rethinking, network, decentralization

Introduction

The issue of the transformation and development of the EU into a modern polycentric political network (with all the conventionality of such a concept) has several aspects, and we should note that many of the elements of the development of the EU which so far, and also in the future, imply and allow make similar metaphorical comparisons.

First of all, it is the very transformed character of the EU, which, as a result of its repeatedly increased heterogeneity, has become a hybrid organization in its own right, in which there are both elements of classical international organizations and also of federal states (not coincidentally, some of the leading states in it are federal like Germany or quasi-federal like France or Spain), and, why not, some from a contemporary modern empire. The overall nature of the EU is indeed suggested by its likening to a network-like flexible structure.

Next, the management of the ever-increasing differences within the EU is possible precisely through the creation and strategic development of a similar network-like structure, which on the one hand guarantees the diversity of all the elements involved

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in it, and on the other – is sufficient flexible and responsive. This has already been „tested“ in recent years during the Covid-epidemic and the asymmetric shocks resulting from the military conflicts in Ukraine and the Middle East. The development of such a political network in the future can be strongly supported by factors such as the ever-increasing power of companies – social networks, the non-governmental sector, regions and other (sub)-national players.

The network as a concept – imperium and/or federation?

The idea of the EU's polycentric network actually exists for a long time and is mostly related to the theories of the so-called „differentiated integration“ (DI), which, however, often also represents difficulties of a methodological nature, mostly related to the semantic horizon of the individual concepts mentioned, such as „federalization“, „Europe at different speeds“, „Europe à la carte“ („Menu Europe“), „variable geometry“, „Europe of concentric circles“, etc. For example, „federalization“ can be understood hypothetically as such of the entire EU, i.e. the realization of the old idea of a „United States of Europe“ and a federalization of a part of the EU, concentrated mostly around the member states of the Eurozone. The versions sometimes could hardly be distinguished if we add also the concepts like „Europe of concentric circles“ and „Variable Geometry Europe“. Similarly, definitional difficulties also create many of the existing instruments of DI in the treaties, which can be used as a transitional stage to something quite different, i.e. to actually mix several DI models. Adding to the difficulties is the complexity of the political debate at the highest level, in which various other concepts such as „center of gravity“, „hard core“, „flexible Europe“, „Euro-Union“, „group of leaders“ and („Pioneer group“) intervene, but in this case the important thing is to point out how this whole debate is proof of the existing unanimity that the EU cannot develop evenly and equally for all its members and the individual views mainly aim to find the most suitable formula for its management. The development of concepts about the types of integration in the EU contributes to it truly acquiring the character of a modern political network.

One of the main theories or rather realities that fuel such comparisons is the likening of the EU as a modern empire – many-faceted and diverse, sometimes unpredictable, but at the same time flexible and adaptable. Although the concept of „empire“ has an ambiguous character, which makes it difficult or rather risky to draw firm conclusions about such a development of the EU, such comparisons are very tempting and quite natural, since the history of Europe is, to a large extent, actually a history of empires and they are an inalienable part of the continent's past. The belief that the EU is a modern, inclusive and cooperative empire (if we can even talk about an „empire“ in such a model) finds basis both in the researchers on the issue and in the very practice of the organization – for example, the enlargement of the EU can be seen as a kind of imperial policy, but it should not be forgotten that countries become members of the EU entirely of their own desire and after negotiations. In addition, in the EU „empire“ it is the

member states that play a decisive role in the future of the organization, unlike the „provinces“ during the actual empires. Such comparisons and definitions actually serve rather as a support for the conceptual clarification of the contemporary essence of the EU through analogies from the past, thus becoming a starting point for research on its future development and governance. In this sense, the positives of the EU being likened to a new, modern empire are mainly sought, mainly in the direction of flexibility, the ability to balance and more effectively adapt to different trends. After all, the multiplied diversity in the EU is, among other things, an opportunity, as it represents the testing of new forms of cooperation, new negotiations and new alliances, more competition and more innovation. In this direction are the definitions of the EU as a „decentralized network-like structure“ or „Network Europe“, which is at the service of its members and where the „imperial“ political center does not have the weight it had in history.

Currently, the EU is a structure in which, paradoxically, the member states have much greater and equal opportunities, and despite the apparent instability of the structure, flexibility is the strategic factor that will allow it to develop successfully in the future. The increased cultural diversity within the European value tradition certainly contributes to this flexibility, or in other words – the EU has become „a flexible community of clashing identities with different historical and cultural narratives“¹. The well-known British researcher Paul Taylor also shares a similar opinion, namely the transformation of the EU into a complex, diverse, networked structure, according to whom the EU currently represents a miniature model² and, above all, a harbinger of the evolving international system – polycentric, diverse and in essential degree unpredictable.

We can add other authors to the arguments that precisely the quasi-imperial nature of the EU actually represents an opportunity for greater flexibility, the ability to react and adapt at any moment, guaranteeing the durability and stability of the structure. For example, the British diplomat Robert Cooper's article „The New Liberal Imperialism“³ for the publication „World Observer“ draws interesting parallels between the main characteristics of empires that are known from history and the contemporary character of the EU, which he called „a cooperative empire based on cooperation and freedom at the expense of ethnic domination and absolute monarchy“⁴. Similar positive attitudes towards the imperial modernity of the EU can also be found in other works sustained in the spirit of Weltinnenpolitik, which emphasize the possibility that such kind of characteristics actually mean, or rather guarantee, a stability and durability of the EU. An interesting work in this direction is the book of the American scholar Mark Lennard „Why the EU will rule the 21st century“⁵, an essentially strong apologetic of the EU,

¹ Lattarulo, Alessandro „European Union Enlargement“ New York: Palgrave; 2004; 55.

² Taylor, Paul, „The End of the European Integration“, 137.

³ Cooper, Robert, „The new liberal imperialism“, Observer Worldview, 7th April 2002.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Leonard, Marc, Why Europe should run 21st century, 2006.

but in this case the more interesting thing is that Leonard sees the advantages of the EU in its flexibility or „a decentralized, networked structure“ that allows for flexibility and adaptation to any historical context, in addition to the EU's „soft power“ to enforce European values around the world.

The federal elements as a network – based structure

In many of the classics of federalism, the federal structure is not understood as a centralized state association with strong power, but on the contrary – a decentralized flexible structure that itself includes a large amount of heterogeneity. Under this idea, the federal government retains only some basic competences, most often foreign policy and defense, while at the same time leaving decentralization as the main principle in economic relations. Moreover, it is believed that the Single Market project of the 1980s has actually been similar since the years immediately after WWII. Nevertheless, pushing individual federal elements into the governance of the EU would have a strong positive meaning for it, but not in the sense of stronger centralization, on the contrary – in accordance with the mentioned classical postulates of federalism for greater flexibility. Pushing through such elements, but without creating a true federation, would actually bring back much of the power that is now concentrated in the EU at the European or regional level, mostly through its openness and polycentricism. Currently, for example, and paradoxically at first glance, the EU is much stricter towards its member states than many federal states in history – for example in the areas of budget, economy and finance. In a structure with more elements of federalism, its individual components would have more freedom in this regard, the most important thing being not to disrupt the overall structure.

In the aforementioned book „Why Europe Will Run the 21st Century?“ – a strong apologetic of the EU – the American researcher Mark Leonard develops the idea that it is the heterogeneity, or more precisely the presence of many power centers, that is the basis of the EU's strength, as it guarantees the flexibility of its political construction and ability to react¹. To this, he adds as a positive the lack of a specific political vision (including a federation – DP), which would limit and stiffen its development, as well as the idea of the „soft transforming power of Europe“. In our opinion, such views correspond only to a certain extent to reality, especially when it comes to the EU's ability to react quickly – in recent years, precisely the inability of the EU to react quickly and adequately to various international crises has been pointed out as one of its main weaknesses. By introducing federal elements, however, which are most often associated with seizing more power in the field of foreign policy, the EU could significantly improve its ability to quickly react to various foreign policy crises.

Another element that is related to the development of the polycentric network character of the EU is the so-called „enhanced cooperation“ that plays a preventive role to

¹ Leonard, Marc, Why Europe should run 21st century, 2006.

manage the EU's heterogeneity while preserving the Community approach, institutional structure and judicial review. Like other major changes in EU primary law, enhanced cooperation also builds on already established or imposed flexible practices in European law, such as the general flexible clause for moving from unanimity to qualified majority, the so-called „passerelle“ clause, or the accession of individual member states to already concluded separate agreements or European acts in force. The development of this practice in the individual treaties – from Amsterdam to Nice to Lisbon – aim to make it more flexible and more efficient. Apart from that, well before the start of the Brexit procedure, the role of the United Kingdom within the EU can be defined as the role of a kind of „laboratory“ for participation in various flexible formats, including through subsequent inclusion in them, which in turn corresponds to the main principle of enhanced cooperation, namely openness. Nevertheless, at the beginning of its development, increased cooperation was perceived more often as a threat than as an opportunity. However, its current philosophy, also reflected in the TEU, namely its adoption as a last resort and once it has been established that the objectives of cooperation cannot be achieved in any other way shows that it is indeed a sought-after and essential tool to overcome the deadlock in EU due to its increased heterogeneity. For example, in the case of the European patent, the possibility of enhanced cooperation comes after more than 30 years of fruitless negotiations and proves that indeed this specific form of differentiated integration (DI) can serve to overcome the blocking of new initiatives within the EU .

The network like character of EU as a base for the re-thinking of the European project

One of the main conclusion for finding a successful model of the future EU development in that it goes through a complete re-thinking of the EU project itself, or in other words, the means of future management of the EU are primarily political and we can even say philosophical. The specific steps mentioned can help and should by no means be ruled out, but they should come second or, more precisely, a proper political rethinking of the EU will only show the steps in question that follow and can be taken. As an example, we can point out that all meaningful attempts to manage the EU more successfully from now on are in the form of political documents. However, this rethinking goes through several very painful moments, namely the direct recognition that the EU's aspiration to achieve some kind of finality (the so-called French „finalité“) in the form of a state or even a state-like entity is largely a failure and it will always be a failure when the development he submits to such thinking. In other words, and as mentioned, the EU should stop being thought of more as some ultimate, utopian, teleological project, and more as a network or system of interconnections mainly in the field of economic competition and political cooperation, which is self-balancing. Along with this, the EU must surely break away from what the Italian political scientist

Giandomenico Maggione calls a „political culture of total optimism“¹, or, loosely interpreted, the revision of the EU as a product of some ultimate, idealistic goal. To this we can also add the rejection of the „naive liberal-meliorist vision“ of the EU as an instrument for unstoppable historical progress². Last but not least, the EU must resolutely rethink and eventually abandon the now classic dogma of an „ever closer union“ of the states and peoples of Europe. The EU should start to be seen as a „governance platform“ or as „several parallel and not necessarily related political projects“.

Besides the strengthening of the intergovernmental elements in the relations between the member countries, they also bear the main burden of where and how the European project will continue to move. The important rethinking of the overall concept of the European union, as well as the finding of the specific technological tools for managing the overall union, also depend on the positions of the member states. It is this good interaction between the states that can meet the strategic vision of EU governance – without a single governance model, with a high degree of flexibility and with a clear awareness of its polycentric nature.

As highly sensitive crisis moments become more frequent (the Covid-19 crisis, the war in Ukraine), the role of the member states, and especially of their leaders, will increase, however, the opportunities and experience for mediation, the bases data and the ability to work with human capital, which the EC has and which cannot be replaced very quickly. Such an approach also requires the understanding that the aspiration to necessarily find a general solution for all (one-size-fits-all-solution) inevitably pits individual groups of countries against each other. Instead, the goal should be the creation of flexible coalitions on the principle of modern communication platforms, which certainly requires an increase in the coalition culture, and the EU institutions to play a more supportive role. These coalitions could be successfully joined by the non-governmental sector, the regions and other structures that over the years have built a system of connections and interaction within the EU and whose potential should be fully utilized. With a complex structure such as the EU, however, every statement related to its management should be understood and applied very carefully, which fully applies to the above conclusions. Each one of them, although the fruit of many studies, hides its own risks and should not be understood as the final model for EU governance – so, for example, in terms of flexible coalitions, for example, we can say that a problem in balancing the interests between these coalitions of states will certainly exist, and one of the reasons for this is the „deep aversion“ of the leading state in the EU – Germany – to severe political conflicts³.

¹ Rohac, Dalibor, cit., „Governing the EU in an Age of Division“, Edward Elgar Publishing, UK, 2022, 1.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

The future development of EU as a modern political network

We also come to the different patterns and degrees of commitment in EU governance that are valid for its present, and there is no reason to doubt that they will become increasingly inevitable for its future as well. Although developing this direction relatively recently, the sources on the matter are quite interesting and detailed, covering practically all possibilities – from the transformation of the EU into a pure federation to that of a classic international organization of the intergovernmental type. Some of the developments are devoted more or less precisely to these two extreme hypothetical models, while others consider the already existing possibilities of „variable“, „differentiated“ or „flexible“ integration.

The future development of the EU as individual models also implies the development of a similar type of network-like structure, regardless of whether it is the so-called „concentric circles“ or for something else. The main characteristics of the models are also relatively clear – in the case of concentric circles, this is the setting of a sharp border between the individual circles, i.e. lack of flexibility, while in the model of the so-called „clubs“ is the creation of vague and hard-to-predict structures, as well as the inevitable and unprincipled pursuit of „taking only the best“ (the so-called „cherry-picking“ strategy). In the end, the concentric circles model is clearer, more principled and simpler, and in addition to it, the institutional integrity of the EU can be preserved to a very large extent. However, it brings much more risks from a political point of view, especially in the long term because of the possibility of individual countries falling permanently and irreversibly to the extreme periphery of the EU, while the model of „interest clubs“ implies the participation of all willing countries in many more configurations. but they, as we noted above, are very unpredictable and difficult to manage. Ultimately, the most important thing about both models is that these are the main opportunities for the EU to continue its development.

Regardless of the different configurations that may develop from now on, it is clear that the EU will in any case be forced to adopt much more flexible forms of governance, in which the manner of policy-making is maximally adapted to its expanded diversity. With so many countries having different problems in implementing the fundamental characteristics of democracy, an „open method of coordination“ based on constant checks, good practices and an enhanced monitoring will be required more than the classical traditional community methods of adopting legislation. This seems considerably easier from a policy-making point of view, but raises well-known questions about the EU's capacity to ensure uniform implementation and policy coherence across all member states.

The future model of development and management of the EU will not be unique and definitive. In reality, to a very large extent, European integration is already carried out through several parallel moving and not always necessarily connected integration projects such as Schengen and the Eurozone as the most popular, but also many others, as we saw in the previous part. Some of them (Schengen) also involve countries that are

not formal members of the EU. Poland, for example, does not participate in the Charter of Fundamental Rights, and Denmark has an opt-out clause for non-participation in the EUROzone, but we saw the overall picture of participation in the various projects in the previous part. Here, it is more important to clearly state that the outline of the concrete possibilities for the future development of the EU necessarily goes through its conceptual, existential and even philosophical consideration. The fact is that such an academic and political debate takes place practically continuously, but its results can hardly be summarized unambiguously. As a result of the mentioned parallel projects, a „polycentric“ order and a polycentric governance is gradually being created in the EU through many decision-making centers that are formally independent of each other. This means „open centers that are sufficiently spontaneous, able to self-regulate and self-organize“.¹

As a result of the aforementioned parallel projects, a „polycentric“ order and governance is gradually being created in the EU through many decision-making centers that are formally independent of each other. This means „open centers that are sufficiently spontaneous, able to self-regulate and self-organize“.² This kind of management relies on horizontal intelligent deliberation to correct mistakes and self-reform, but one of the important skills of this system is „being able to set limits“.

Strong political leadership and vision are required to clearly state and rather follow the strategy that the EU is not (for a long time) a single homogeneous community, but is increasingly becoming several different integration projects running in parallel. For example, there is no underlying logic why membership of the Single Market should necessarily go hand in hand with membership of the Schengen or EMU system. These different integration projects do not always and do not necessarily overlap, nor do they necessarily cover the same countries. In some of them (Schengen) there are even countries that are not formal members of the EU, others are not members of individual initiatives, and others have the right to opt-out or de facto apply it. The paradox is that the above has been a fact for a long time, but until now it seems to lack its clear articulation at the highest political level, correspondingly its follow-up in the development strategy.

The topic of rethinking the European idea is multi-layered and can be looked at from a variety of perspectives. If, for example, we have to visualize it, the EU has long ceased to represent a linear sequence, but is increasingly becoming a network-like structure balancing its contradictions. The aforementioned polycentric governance is gradually being created in the EU through many decision-making centers that are formally independent of each other. This means „open centers that are sufficiently spontaneous, able to self-regulate and self-organize“.³ This kind of governance relies on horizontal intelligent deliberation to correct mistakes and self-reform, but one of the important skills

¹ Rohac, Dalibor, cit., „Governing the EU in an Age of Division“, Edward Elgar Publishing, UK, 2022, 1.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

of this system is „being able to set limits“ or in other words – the EU is too big to solve some problems and too small to to decide others.

Conclusion

Examples of successful adaptation of international organizations to changed conditions in modern political history are numerous, and we have no reason to think that the EU itself does not have the capacity to find a truly successful formula for its future development. In this case, we should emphasize that its problems are mainly internal, caused by the growing heterogeneity, and not so much by the changed external conditions, i.e. the decisions should also come from the union itself and above all from the member states and their leaders. More political will and vision are needed, which have always been crucial at difficult times in the EU's history.

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