

SOCIETY AND CORONAVIRUS

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Drifting towards Anarchy or a New Beginning? The Coronavirus vis-à-vis Political Changes in the European Union

Abstract: The article deals with the issue of the impact of the COVID-19 coronavirus pandemic on political changes in the EU from a neo-institutional perspective. The pandemic has created qualitatively new challenges for the European Union after a “decade of crises.” Due to the dramatic and destructive nature of COVID-19, it is becoming a catalyst for unprecedented systemic changes in the Member States and EU institutions. The impact of the coronavirus on conflicts and divisions in the EU is analysed using the category of Europeanization in selected key dimensions: political unification within the EU, institutional changes at the EU level, the impact of the EU institutions on the Member States, the territorial scope of the EU and the spread of EU institutions beyond Europe. Selected consequences of the pandemic affecting the future of European integration are discussed in terms of different variants of disintegration or reintegration of the EU and the role and place of Central and Eastern European countries in these changes.

Keywords: anarchisation in the EU, coronavirus pandemic, diversified disintegration, future of the EU, role of CEE

Introduction

In November 2019, the first cases of infection with the SARS-CoV-2 virus, causing acute respiratory disorder, occurred in China. Due to its increasing incidence and the rate of its spreading into other countries, on March 11, 2020, the World Health Organization announced a global pandemic. The disease spread very fast, initially hitting the EU (Italy, Spain, France, the UK, Belgium and Germany) with particular force, as well as afflicting the United States, Iran, Japan and South Korea. The estimated number of confirmed infections worldwide soon surpassed many millions, and the death toll in the United States in May 2020 was already much higher than the total number of casualties in the Vietnam War.¹ Although the coronavirus pandemic is not characterized by a very high mortality rate, due to poor epidemiological preparedness, most governments have taken unprecedented measures against its spread, deviating from the canons of politics and economy dominating in the Western world since the 1980s, and exceeding even the post-World War II standards.

¹ Updated data on the coronavirus pandemic is presented by the World Health Organization <https://covid19.who.int> and more comments on the EU are presented at <https://www.politico.eu/coronavirus-in-europe/>.

The COVID-19 Pandemic as a New Catalyst for Systemic Change

The coronavirus has become a key issue for both individual Member States and the EU as a whole. In a systemic sense, the COVID-19 crisis represents the greatest challenge faced by the European integration process initiated in Western Europe after World War II. The pandemic revealed weaknesses (and the level of differentiation) in the preparedness of various EU countries to counter the epidemic threats. They resulted partly from lack of the kind of experience Asian countries gained while, for example, fighting against SARS in 2003. However, there are also other reasons for this state of affairs, of a structural and systemic nature, resulting from e.g. limiting expenditure on healthcare after the financial crisis of 2008–2009. On the other hand, the Brussels website “Politico” argues that the dramatic course of the pandemic in the EU was largely the result of the initial negligence of its emergence in China, as well as of poor coordination of the actions of the European Commission and of the governments of the member states whose response to the problem was chaotic, delayed and self-interested.² The applied methods of counteracting the spread of the pandemic, such as lockdown, general quarantine or restrictive social distance, turned out to be extremely costly. Especially that it was not accompanied by adequate preparedness of the health service. Compared to Taiwan or South Korea, they were a failure.

Lockdown and other radical measures in the EU countries have led to, among other things, the unprecedented breakdown of economic development and to recession, estimated by the European Commission at 7.4% of GDP per annum (7.8% in the euro area), i.e. significantly exceeding the consequences of the 2008–2010 financial crisis in the EU. By comparison, the global GDP decline in 2020 is estimated at 4.3% (European Economic Forecast 2020: 1). The negative economic and social consequences of the pandemic have no equivalent in Europe after World War II. They have and will have a multidimensional impact on the international position of the EU and will weaken its impact on global politics (due to the reduction of the economic potential overlapping with Brexit and the reduction of funds for foreign aid, among other things).³ The dramatic course of the pandemic, especially in southern Europe, quickly became the subject of controversy in political discussions about the effectiveness of Western democracy in comparison with the actions of authoritarian governments, especially that of China (Farrell, Newman 2020). At the same time, the pandemic is a test for verifying the basic principles of the functioning of the EU in such areas as community solidarity, the role of the state in the economy, the rule of law, civil rights, common market rules, public assistance, property rights, personal data protection, etc. Counteracting the coronavirus has created an extraordinary situation that dynamically differentiates the policy of the Member States and translates into the directions of their economic and institutional development. Such changes will affect the scope and forms of cooperation within the EU.

² https://www.google.com/search?q=Hershernhorn+D.%2C+M%2C+Wheaton+S.+How+Europe+failed+the+coronavirus+test&rlz=1C1AVFC_enPL874PL874&oq=Hershernhorn+D.%2C+M%2C+Wheaton+S.+How+Europe+failed+the+coronavirus+test&aqs=chrome..69i57.4019j0j8&sourceid=chrome&ie=UTF-8 (23.05.2020).

³ In 2004, the share of the EU in global GDP was 31%. According to the latest comparative data from 2018, this share decreased to 18.6% of the global GDP (EU in the world 2020: 66).

It can be assumed that European integration, regardless of what political shape it will take, is going to significantly change its character. Many rules which the European Union relies upon are already interpreted differently, although it is difficult to predict the directions of their further modification. The pandemic is radically reevaluating the political and economic criteria adopted in another period of development—during the “relatively normal times.” As noted by Jan Zielonka (2020),

the limits of individual freedom, the concept of the common good, understanding where territorial sovereignty begins and ends, all these basic—let’s call them—social agreements, the common understanding of why we are on a friendly footing with each other—all this is turned upside down by the current epidemic.

The EU is going through the biggest crisis in its history, which forces deep system changes. Ivan Krastev (2020) emphasizes that the pandemic has renewed the problems that shook European countries during the previous crises, the war on terrorism, the financial and migration crises. They have been joined by the suspension of democracy in many states that have introduced a state of emergency, and by an increase in authoritarian tendencies, as well as by the risk of a collapse of the EU which is beginning to resemble the last decades of the Roman Empire, when the people living on its territory were not aware that they were part of it.

The pandemic revealed further areas of insufficient coordination and cooperation. However, the limited competences of the EU in healthcare may indicate the need to develop common policy directions in another area. The effects of the spread of the coronavirus engender new inequalities, tensions and conflicts both within the states and between Member States, constituting an additional source of centrifugal and anti-EU tendencies eroding the process of European integration. At the same time, COVID-19 has shown that the resources of the nation state are insufficient in the face of the challenges related to the post-crisis economic reconstruction, which in turn may help stimulate the development of the EU in a new way. Due to the pandemic, some countries decide to deepen their integration, while others, reluctant to such solutions, want to limit themselves to narrower cooperation, for example within the common market. The coronavirus is therefore becoming, on the one hand, a catalyst for strengthening integration and, on the other hand, another factor of division within the EU, and perhaps even of its disintegration. It also significantly influences the negotiations of the EU budget for 2021–2027 and the shape of the program of the European economy reconstruction. Especially since in the EU there is a crisis of leadership that for several years has been shifting towards intergovernmental centers (the Council of Europe, the ECB); due to the recent political divergences, cooperation between Germany and France has weakened and has ceased to play the role of the “driving force” in the EU. In addition, the forced changes in the budget priorities overlap with the looming, unprecedented economic crisis and the reduction in contributions resulting from Brexit and with other not fully known consequences.

From Enhanced Cooperation to Diversified Disintegration?

The theoretical framework of this article is a neo-institutional perspective in the version of historical institutionalism and sociological institutionalism, considering the conditions of

EU policy. In this approach, Europeanization is one of the most frequently used categories, defined as the impact of the European integration process on the internal dimensions of the political and socio-economic life of the Member States, as well as some aspects of international relations. This category appeared in the scientific and political discourse as a result of increased reflection on the development of the EU, and due to its intensification, in the second half of the 1990s, it even became a synonym of a new research orientation at the intersection of political science and European studies (Riedel 2010).

A narrower scope, however, is applied for the purpose of this study. The concept by Johan P. Olsen (2002), who reviewed the definition and interpretation of Europeanization, and distinguished the main fields of application of this category is being cited here. The order of the listed areas is modified in a way corresponding to the new political situation of the EU. Europeanization covers five dimensions of the European Union's action in distinct but interrelated areas: 1) the political unification of Europe within the EU; 2) institution building at the EU level; 3) the impact of EU institutions on the Member States; 4) the expansion of the territorial scope of the EU and 5) the spread of European institutions beyond the Member States. Each of the dimensions is considered taking into account the impact of the coronavirus and against the background of previous negative tendencies which have been accumulating since the financial crisis of 2008–2010. Using the category of Europeanization at the present stage of the EU functioning requires several comments to be made. It gained significant importance during the domination of integration tendencies which were manifested, inter alia, by the growing status of the EU institutions and their influence on the member states and on the international environment. During that time, Europeanization was typically defined as a process of closer and deeper integration—the “ever closer union.” Such associations were especially promoted by the enlargement of the Union to include the countries of Central and Eastern Europe in 2004 and in 2007 (Rifkin 2004; Zielonka 2006; Giddens 2007). The process of institutional and development convergence was launched, which was to enable the prompt entry of new Member States into the euro area. Deepened political unification in the EU seemed to be only a matter of time. However, this did not happen, and the connotations of Europeanization distinguished by Olsen began to change meanings. In all dimensions, opposing, contradictory or ambivalent tendencies have intensified. Some of them have been growing for a long time—for example, the US invasion on Iraq contributed to the division into “old” and “new” Europe, differentiating member states in the sphere of international relations and transatlantic relations.

On the other hand, in Western Europe voices opposing the development of the EU materialized, resulting from, inter alia, the estimation of the costs of its enlargement (financing the cohesion policy, concerns about lower-priced service providers from CEE, relocation of enterprises to countries with lower labor costs, inflows of migrants, etc.). They were manifested in centrifugal aspirations reflected in the rejection of the constitutional treaty by the French and by the Dutch. The state in which the interests of all member states are pursued proportionately has been achieved with great difficulty. Parallel to the increase in centrifugal forces, the sphere of common interest narrows. This was confirmed by successive EU crises brought about by the growing internal diversity of the EU and management which, due to the lack of strong leadership, reacts not promptly enough to new challenges (Zielonka 2018; Przybylska-Maszner 2013).

In the states of Western Europe, which played a leading role in the EEC/EU, one of the remedies for such tensions was seen in the differentiation of the level and scope of political unification. The terms “flexible integration,” “multi-speed Europe,” Europe of “variable geometry,” “concentric circles,” “a la carte” etc. have long been popular in the EU discourse. The common denominator of the political concepts referring to them are visions of differentiated integration assuming the emergence of—variously defined—vanguard of states moving faster towards a politically united EU. Early proposals in this regard were contained in the Tindemans report (1975), although differential integration had not become a legal category until a decade later in the Single European Act (1986). Debates on this topic increased after the EEC opened up to Greece, Spain and Portugal. They gained even more importance during the EU enlargement to include the post-communist states.

Most of these states entered their accession negotiations at a much lower level of economic development than the “old” EU members, and only just shaped new systems and models of democratic culture. In the new circumstances, some of the Western power elites were afraid of losing their position and limiting the manoeuvrability of the EU. They sought opportunities to accelerate integration in selected areas corresponding to their interests (Riedel 2018). They found the answer in the institution of enhanced cooperation, providing for the possibility of taking up integration activities, as well as strengthening mutual cooperation by some EU Member States (the group forming them is formally open for other countries). It was established under the Amsterdam Treaty and subsequent treaty modifications. It includes the procedures and mechanisms provided for in the treaties establishing the Community and the European Union. The euro area and the Schengen system are the most significant areas of application of this institution.

However, the crisis in the euro area revealed the structural divisions and differences that began to weaken or erode EU rules, often violated by governments for which the protection of their own citizens and national interests became a priority. As a result, political integration and convergence tendencies in the EU have given way to processes of divergence or disintegration. Douglas Webber (2014) distinguished three basic situations that singularize this state of affairs: limiting the directions of policies implemented by the EU, reducing the number of Member States and reducing the capacity of the European Union to make separate decisions. The key manifestations of such phenomena include the implementation of the “Europe 2020” strategy, Brexit—questioning the linear logic of integration processes, as well as the disputes over Art. 7 TEU between the Polish and the Hungarian authorities on the one side, and the EC and the CJEU on the other. The reasons for disintegration include, first of all, differences in interests and political concepts, as well as centrifugal tendencies that weaken the cohesion of the EU.

The differences run along several main dividing lines: between the countries with trade and budget surpluses and those with trade and budget deficits, between the euro area and the countries of “second speed” (outside the euro area), between the countries of the developed northern “core” and those located in the not very innovative “periphery”—the south and the east, between those states that observe the EU’s rule of law and those that are in breach of it, between the countries that accept and those that oppose the admission of migrants from North Africa and from the Middle East.

Such divisions were overlapped by conflict triggering challenges leading to the fragmentation of the political and economic potential of the European Union, such as Brexit, and separatist tendencies in other large countries, including in Spain (Catalonia) or Italy (northern regions). In CEE, an additional factor causing particular controversy is energy policy, including the role of Russia in the construction of the Nord Stream 2 gas pipeline. For several years, such dividing lines have been overlapped by strong populist (both right-wing and left-wing), Eurosceptic, nationalist and xenophobic tendencies, often referring to strong leadership and authoritarian methods of governance, present in all of the EU states with varying strength. Left-wing and liberal circles compare them to the “fascist situation” in Europe in the 1930s or refer to them as an anti-liberal counter-revolution also aimed against European integration (Bohle, Greskovits 2012; Muller 2017; Albright 2018; Zielonka 2018).

As a result, the European Union is gradually diverging politically in various directions, which is manifested, among other things, by forming coalitions representing separate interests of the countries of Northern Europe, of Southern Europe, and of Central and Eastern Europe. They are reflected in the activity of subregional groups of different status, such as Benelux, the Nordic Council, the Visegrad Group, the Three Seas Initiative, and Hanse 2.0, promoting their own political and economic projects. The crisis questioned the assumption that differentiated integration would weaken over time and different speeds would lead to similar results and to the convergence of development.

On the contrary, various concepts of differentiated integration have found themselves at the heart of the political debate in Europe and are seen as a way to solve various types of integration problems (Riedel 2018: 40).

As shown by Brexit, the implementation of some of them may lead to disintegration and to leaving the EU. This situation is a consequence of the advancement and development of European integration, which will entail further differences and political dilemmas in the future.

Responses to the Pandemic in the EU

COVID-19 initially reinforced centrifugal tendencies in the EU. Due to the violent course of the pandemic and the accompanying social responses, governments took actions confined to the area of nation states. The lack of decision-making powers at the EU level and the inertia in cooperation by national authorities have exacerbated the divisions that have existed since the euro area crisis. Governments showed lack of trust in other member states and separated themselves from their neighbors, unilaterally reintroducing border controls or illegally banning the export of medical products, violating the rules of free movement of people, products and services. The introduction of internal sanitary controls, the refusal of entry into the territory of the country for citizens of other Member States, as well as the partial or complete closure of borders, constitute another threat to the Schengen area and to the common market after the migration crisis. COVID-19 showed the limitations of the EU in the area of not only epidemiological threats, but also in the sphere of the will and instruments of political cooperation. According to Art. 4 sec. 2 TFEU, competences

in the domain of public health are reserved to Member States, in line with the concept of subsidiarity. Crisis management can most effectively be carried out by national health-care systems, therefore the accusations by some states of being left to fend for themselves struggling with the pandemic are debatable, although not without validity in the face of the passivity of national and EU politicians.

Ursula von der Leyen, the new president of the European Commission, admitted in the daily *La Repubblica* that many EU countries initially focused on their own problems. “They did not realize that only together, as a Union, can we overcome this pandemic. It was unfair and it could have been avoided” (*Rzeczpospolita* 2020). Italy, with the highest number of deaths from the coronavirus at the time, was outraged over the lack of response from the EU, and the right-wing Northern League questioned the country’s continued membership in the EU. The pandemic revealed the weaknesses of the EU’s influence on its member states in various aspects of internal changes, unprecedented in the history of integration. Tanja A. Borzel (2005) distinguished four types of such influences: adaptive pressure in the sphere of regulatory changes, redistribution of resources, normative socialization and institutional isomorphism. For each of these mechanisms, the coronavirus crisis has challenged the existing principles and accelerated the process that can be described as a drift towards anarchy:⁴ the chaotic shifting of key decisions to the level of the Member States as the community character of the EU erodes, e.g. in the provision of economic aid by the state.

This tendency already occurred during the eurozone crisis which stopped the dynamics of political integration and contributed to greater stratification in relations among Member States.⁵ In this context, the pandemic additionally reduced the adaptive pressure in the regulatory sphere and revived disputes over basic principles, such as the primacy of EU law over national law or the division of powers between the EU and the Member States. A very important expression of the new situation is the decision of the Federal Constitutional Court in Karlsruhe which ruled that the European Central Bank exceeded its powers by purchasing state bonds between 2015 and 2018, which violated the rights of German citizens. This is the first case in which a national Constitutional Court found the actions and decisions of EU bodies to be contrary to the European competency regulations.

The consequences of this ruling may undermine the authority and credibility of the ECB, whose activity is of key importance for the implementation of programs to stimulate the EU economy after the crisis related to the COVID-19 pandemic.⁶ In Germany, this rul-

⁴ This term is borrowed from an article by a former Australian prime minister, who called the US-Chinese relations of the last few years, especially during the pandemic, “a drift toward international anarchy” (Rudd 2020).

⁵ The most significant example of such a tendency was the creation in 2010 of the so-called troika, composed of the EC, the ECB and the IMF, which was responsible for establishing the conditions for financial aid for Greece, Ireland, Portugal and Cyprus and for supervising their fulfilment. The EP accused the troika of, inter alia, deviation from the community method, which could lead to a division of the European Union, weak democratic accountability and insufficient consideration of the political, economic and social consequences in the countries covered by the program. See: The European Parliament, *The Report on the Inquiry on the role and activities of the troika (ECB, Commission and IMF) vis-à-vis euro area countries covered by the program (2013/2277 (INI))*, <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/sides/getDoc.do?type=COMPARL&reference=PE-526.111&format=PDF&language=PL&secondRef=01> (May 20, 2020).

⁶ The judges of the FCC thus opposed the ruling, issued in December 2018 by the Court of Justice of the European Union in Luxembourg, which approved the action of the ECB. In their opinion, this ruling

ing could spark a constitutional dispute between the Federal Constitutional Court, and the government and the Bundestag. At the same time, the case is a precedent of great importance for the EU. Politicians, reluctant to the position of the Brussels institutions, in their comments to the Federal Constitutional Court judgment emphasize that

...the content of the Treaties is decided by the Member States, not the EU bodies, and the states have the right to control (including the CJEU), and renouncing this right would lead to an uncontrolled extension of the competences of the EU bodies—and de facto to altering (EU) Treaties (Osiński 2020). In this interpretation, the FCC judgment is “the beginning of a serious discussion about the limits of the competences of the ECB, of the CJEU and of other EU bodies” (*ibid.*). This is in line with the rhetoric of many right-wing circles which, accused by the European Commission, the CJEU, by some Western politicians and the media of questioning the primacy of EU law over national law and violating the rule of law, demand—as the governments of Poland and of Hungary have—that the competences of EU bodies be limited.

On the other hand, in terms of the redistribution of resources, the weakness of the EU’s influence on the Member States in the initial phase of the spread of COVID-19 was confirmed by the already mentioned actions suspending the Schengen system and the rules of the common market. The dramatic course of the pandemic in Italy and Spain has revived disputes, which since 2008 have been threatening the euro area, between deficit countries (Southern Europe) and countries with trade and budget surpluses (Northern Europe). The South demands that all euro area countries join forces to jointly issue debt securities (Eurobonds). Such debt pooling would allow them to finance the recovery of economies at significantly lower costs. However, the proposal of the so-called corona-bonds meets with opposition from the North, which fears creating an opportunity to become over-indebted and to abandon public finance discipline. According to Austria, the Netherlands, Finland and Sweden, the risk of setting a precedent by shifting onto them the responsibility for the debts of the South seems too great. In contrast, in the CEE region, the pandemic raises concerns about new EU development and budget priorities.

According to the announcements of EU politicians, priority is to be given to the particularly affected countries of Southern Europe (which, in addition, have been struggling with the consequences of accepting a large wave of migrants since 2015). At the same time, the collapse of supply chains from Asian countries caused by the spread of the coronavirus and tensions in relations between China and the USA are starting to change the economic preferences of Western governments and large corporations; as part of the capital relocation policy, they will probably invest more in EU countries. Such circumstances are likely to increase tensions among Member States keen on acquiring capital, although attempts to reach an EU consensus in this regard (e.g. under the Green Deal policy combined with reindustrialisation) can also be expected.

Another area where COVID-19 has exacerbated the already existing tendencies to limit the influence of EU institutions in the Member States is the European normative socialization of the national and EU elites. It has long combined the patterns, behaviours and directions of policies in the EU countries. Olsen lists among such similarities the values and paradigms of European policy assimilated at the national level which influence discourses and the sense of collective identity, and the formation, among elites, of common

was “absolutely no longer enforceable in Germany.” See: A landmark judgment in Germany. It is about the operation of the ECB. <https://businessinsider.com.pl/wiadomosci/skup-obligacji-przez-ebc-postanowienie-tk-w-niemczech/wxtlbr6> (6.05.2020).

ideas about macroeconomic policy. For more than a decade, successive crises have contributed to changes, erosion and regression in this area. They launched the processes of economic destabilization, social disintegration and systemic delegitimization, which then caused the breakdown of the liberal-democratic consensus in the EU. The convergence of patterns, behaviour and policy directions began to give way to the previously characterized Eurosceptic or anti-EU centrifugal tendencies. It is also fostered by different among the Member States views regarding macroeconomic policy and the future of the EU, which limits the possibilities of taking joint actions at the EU level.

Marine Le Pen, Matteo Salvini, Viktor Orbán and Jarosław Kaczyński, among others, have in recent years become influential examples of this type of policy. Their actions reinforce centrifugal tendencies in the EU and differentiated integration, or even disintegration, as in the case of the United Kingdom.⁷ In the CEE region, symptoms of such tendencies appeared shortly after accession to the EU, manifested in the departure (*backsliding*) of some countries from the neoliberal economic transformation strategy and the standards of Western democracies. This can be seen as a reaction to the costs of the systemic transformation and adjustments to the EU and the growing dependence on foreign capital, the negative effects of the euro area crisis, or the negation of the liberal political culture, embedded mainly in the largest agglomerations, but less accepted in smaller towns and villages (Jasiecki 2013; Grosse 2012; Bohle, Greskovits 2012).

In many CEE countries, as well as in southern Europe, membership in the EU is no longer perceived mainly as an opportunity for modernization, but is seen also as a source of problems, which stems from, among other things, depending on the richer countries of Western Europe or is a result the wave of Muslim migration. Dissatisfaction with the development of the EU is also present in those countries which, like Italy and France, were the initiators of European integration. This was significantly confirmed by the elections to the European Parliament in May 2019, as a result of which the two main European factions (Christian Democrats and Social Democrats), dominant since its inception, lost their majority. On the other hand, party fragmentation has deepened, and the representation of Eurosceptic or anti-European politicians has increased (Groszkowski 2019). The accumulation of the above phenomena and processes has clearly weakened the mechanisms of institutional isomorphism arising from the interaction of the European and national levels. These mechanisms occur in various forms: coercion (harmonization of the law), normative pressure or imitation related to the implementation of solutions recommended by the EU or considering the positions of other Member States.

The assumption that the convergence of political systems will be the effect of EU socialization was not confirmed in practice. The diversity of factors influencing the system of internal changes which differently internalize norms, rules and practices transferred from the EU level remains the same or is increasing. As stated before the crisis in the euro area, the mechanisms of adaptation to the EU order do not fundamentally change the political structures in the Member States which retain their individuality and specificity (Cowles,

⁷ It is worth recalling the statement by Nigel Farage, who expressed his hope that Poland would be the next state to leave the EU. The fate of the Eurosceptic or anti-European movements in France and in Italy, the success of which would call into question the continued functioning of the euro area and of the European Union, even in a limited version of 'Carolingian Europe,' will be important for the future.

Caproso, Risse 2001). In recent years, changes have been directed towards deepening institutional divergence. In some countries the phenomena of state appropriation by party leaders, systemic corruption, violations of the rule of law and of minority rights, and restrictions on the freedom of expression are intensifying, which additionally differentiates political systems (Zielonka 2018; Muller 2017). The political changes in Hungary are paradigmatic manifestations of such tendencies. Since 2010, under the rule of Victor Orbán, the model of national “illiberal democracy” and the model of “state capitalism” in the economy have been built. This direction of systemic changes is reflected in some other CEE countries—especially in Poland since 2015 (Dąbrowska, Buzgany, Varga 2019; Jasiecki 2019; Góralczyk 2019). These issues have gained new importance during the pandemic. On the EU forum both countries face accusations of taking advantage of the current situation in order to strengthen the authoritarian rule.⁸ COVID-19 has thus become another catalyst for differentiated integration, accelerating and strengthening the already existing political and institutional differences in the EU.

Also, the last two dimensions of Europeanization mentioned by Olsen, i.e. the expansion of the territorial range of the Communities and the spread of EU institutions beyond the Member States, contribute to the growing political divisions. In the “decade of crises” (financial, terrorist, migrant, etc.), both the EU as a whole and individual Member States experienced demographic, economic and political weakening of their positions, compared to the US to and some developing countries, especially China. Strong centrifugal tendencies, like Brexit which focused attention of the elite on relations with the United Kingdom, emerged and sparked disintegration movements in Europe. Due to the position of the UK as the second economy in the EU and to its political, financial, military and cultural role in the world, Brexit significantly reduces the ability of the EU to play the role of a centre of gravity attracting more countries. The pandemic has exacerbated this type of tendencies by contributing to the reduction of the potential of the Member States and that of the European Union on the international arena.

The focus of the EU elite on the fight against COVID-19 and on counteracting the largest recession in the history of EEC/EU postpones (and perhaps revises) the announced enlargement of the EU by the states of the Western Balkans and of the Eastern Partnership. Especially that in recent years the relations between the EU and the countries of these regions have deteriorated. This occurred due to, among other things, internal divergences within the Community itself and a change in relations with the United States, which is now more of a competitor than an ally of the European Union and supports European disintegration, including Brexit and other decentralization efforts.

In addition, the EU, which has been weakening since the crisis in the euro area, in international relations encounters increasing in strength external actions of states that implement their own geopolitical and economic projects, taking advantage of the differences in interests of the Member States and the ineffective in the EU coordination of foreign pol-

⁸ Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the Hungarian parliament has conferred on Prime Minister Orbán the right to indefinitely rule by decrees (including the possibility of imprisonment for disseminating disinformation about the virus), which raises concerns of the European Commission. The way in of organizing the presidential election on 10 May 2020 in Poland also posed a problem. The new funding criteria adopted in connection with the pandemic may make the disbursement of EU funds conditional on adherence to democratic standards (Wanat, Eder 2020).

icy. The outbreak of the pandemic has become an opportunity for the governments of China and of Russia to provide propaganda medical aid to Serbia and to Italy which were initially disappointed with the lack of EU support. As a result, COVID-19 initially contributed to a further reduction in the EU “normative power,” including the spread of European institutions, normative and legal standards (e.g. minority rights) outside the EU. Since the crisis in the euro area both the EU as a whole and individual Member States have become more susceptible to external influences, not only from the US, but also from China, Russia and Turkey, which is another reason for the divisions in the EU (Grant 2020; Frankopan 2018).

The Impact of the Pandemic on the Future of European Integration

The current situation is aptly expressed by the concept of John Eric Fossum (2015) concerning the EU development prospects in terms of differentiated integration, which is supported by additional divisions and conflicts. According to the researcher, the EU can combine three scenarios at once: accelerated integration for some countries, disintegration in the case of other entities, and greater differentiation for the rest of the countries. At the political level, a similar direction of thinking in a more extensive version was presented by the Juncker Commission during the meeting on 1 March, 2017, outlining five variants of the EU development: continuation, return to the single market, Europe of many speeds, faster implementation of selected policies and progress in implementing all key strategies (EC 2017). In the discussion on this subject, the authorities of the EU and those of the Member States did not significantly respond to the presented proposal, and the European Commission disavowed the two-speed Europe variant. However, the evolution of the European Union seems to confirm the view of those researchers who note that

differentiated integration has already reached such a level, scale and advancement that it should be treated as a systemic feature of the European integration process (Riedel 2018: 40).

COVID-19 revealed significant differences between EU states also in terms of health-care systems, effectiveness of state institutions and anti-crisis actions of governments, economic situation, social behaviors and the condition of public finances. The pandemic hit all the Member States, and, according to the European Commission, the restrictions introduced decreased the economic activity of EU countries by as much as one third in the second quarter of 2020. However, its consequences differ significantly depending on the levels of infection, the duration of the measures to limit the spread of the virus and the state of the national economy. As Valdis Dombrovskis, vice-president of the EC, noted, in this context

...stronger economies are in a better position to support employees, households and businesses. We must now avoid a scenario that would lead to serious disproportions within the single market and to perpetuating the divergences (Słojewska 2020).

However, such intentions are difficult to translate into real actions. The effects of the pandemic in individual Member States strengthen the divergent development tendencies, increasing the likelihood of the implementation of the “European Union of different speeds” scenario as the main (and perhaps the only) solution to the integration crisis.

According to the European Commission data from spring 2020, more than half of the almost 2 trillion euros spent by the governments of the Member States on the economy in EU countries, goes to Germany (51%), France (17%) and Italy (almost 15%).⁹ Therefore, if we apply the Fossum concept or the EU development scenarios developed by the Juncker Commission, then—regardless of the declarations of the EU authorities—differentiated integration becomes a key feature of the new phase of development of the Communities. The catastrophic consequences of the pandemic emphasize the importance of this process and favour three parallel tendencies: 1) accelerated integration of countries benefiting from increased cooperation in the euro area; 2) the breakdown of the European Union's relations with countries that refuse to deepen European integration, such as the United Kingdom, and 3) greater diversification of integration among other countries which do not belong to the euro area, or which question the standards of liberal democracies. Referring to Olsen's concept distinguishing the main areas of "Europeanization," it can be concluded that the core of political integration in the EU is membership in the euro area. Such a practice (since 2010) has been supported by the need to take quick anti-crisis countermeasures, as well as the need to create new institutions at the EU level, which are to contribute to the reconstruction of the European Union, especially that of the countries of the South.

Due to the scale of the challenges and resources, the directions of political cooperation in the EU increasingly determine the extent to which countries belong to the core of the euro area, with Germany at the fore.¹⁰ It can be assumed that this tendency will soon be reflected also in the mechanisms, characterized by Tanja A. Borzel, of the influence of EU institutions on the Member States—regulatory changes, redistribution of resources, normative socialization and institutional adaptation, which are to legitimize new systemic practices. Countermeasures, strengthening EU solidarity, have become the seed of such mechanisms. The European Commission focused on preventing a situation in which national egotisms deepen the crisis. When member states began to ban the export of medical products, the European Commission threatened Germany (and potentially other countries as well) with a criminal procedure for treaty violations on charges of violating the principle of free movement of goods. As a result, governments withdrew from such decisions, fearing, inter alia, the weakening of the European project.¹¹ Financial regulatory actions were among the measures taken. These included the possibility of reallocating and faster disbursement of EUR 28 billion, remaining from the Structural Funds under the budget perspective, which is about to end, and the earmarking of EUR 37 billion from this budget to support healthcare and investment in small and medium-sized enterprises. In the case of Italy, the ECB's intervention turned out to be important, as it allowed the government of this country to stabilize bond prices and to issue a new tranche for the purpose of combatting

⁹ Europa boi się bogatych Niemiec (Europe is afraid of rich Germans), <https://www.dw.com/pl/europa-boi-si%C4%99-bogatych-niemiec%C3%B3w-chodzi-o-gigantyczn%C4%85-pomoc-dla-firm/a-53458610> (26.05.20202).

¹⁰ The 19 EU Member States that comprise the euro area accounted for 85.5% of the EU's GDP in 2019. Almost a quarter of the EU's GDP (24.7%) was generated by Germany, followed by France (17.4%) and Italy (12.8%) (Eurostat 2020).

¹¹ The rationality of joint actions was confirmed inter alia by purchasing medical equipment by the EU, guaranteeing lower prices and faster deliveries. The EC also launched additional funds enabling passengers to reimburse the costs of evacuation flights and initiated "green corridors" at border crossings and facilitating the borders crossing for selected categories of employees (Szymańska 2020).

the pandemic (Łapiński 2020). In November 2020, the European Commission announced the creation of the European Health Union, which is to organize coordinated actions against the pandemic in the EU.¹²

The use of such measures confirms the importance of and the significant role of the EU institutions from the perspective of the Member States, which creates a convenient starting point for rebuilding European integration, including increasing mutual responsibility and changing the risk distribution among countries. Their key manifestation are the initiatives of the European Commission termed in the media as the “new Marshall plan,” i.e. the financial package estimated at EUR 2.8 billion in the EU budget for 2021–2027, as well as strengthening the European Stabilization Mechanism (established after the crisis in the euro area) and establishing the European Monetary Fund, among other things. The purpose of these activities is to create a significant investment impulse. It is to become a source of greater cooperation among Member States, strengthening new mechanisms of redistribution of resources from the Northern core to Southern Europe and centripetal tendencies in the European Union.¹³

The pandemic brings with it new gigantic challenges: it forces a departure from the austerity policy, enables a more pro-social economic policy in the EU countries, and at the same time is part of the old controversies concerning e.g. methods of funding, future development trajectory and power-sharing in the EU. Due to the different causes of the current crisis, the shock caused by the pandemic is more conducive than the euro crisis was to the opening of the countries of the North to the demands of Italy and Spain calling for more support from the EU. In response to such expectations, the governments of Germany and France announced the creation of a joint Recovery Fund of EUR 500 billion in grants and EUR 250 billion in loans to countries most affected by the pandemic, especially in the south and in the east of the EU. They also propose to allow the European Commission to borrow this money on the financial markets on behalf of the EU, subject to the arrangements made under the EU treaties.

In practice, the approval of such projects at the summit of the European Council on December 10–11, 2020, with the support of the ECB, became another step towards creating a federal Europe. This step does not prejudice its creation (e.g. the Recovery Fund is to operate only until 2024), but it may transform the crisis into new opportunities for the development of European integration (Grant 2020: 8).

There is even a thesis about the utility of the pandemic, which came as a threat from outside the EU and contributed to the revival of the “spirit of the European community” (Bertoncini 2020: 2). Accelerated reintegration within the euro area gives a reactive and secondary character to other tendencies and changes taking place in the EU highlighted by Fossum. Brexit will increase the potential influence of Germany and France, which will fundamentally change the balance of power within the EU. As the UK with its own currency was a significant counterbalance to Germany in the EU, Brexit will strengthen

¹² https://ec.europa.eu/info/strategy/priorities-2019-2024/promoting-our-european-way-life/european-health-union_en (22.01.2020).

¹³ Part of the EU anti-crisis measures is also the establishment of the *Pandemic Emergency Purchase Programme* within the ECB, which is to redeem, among other things, bonds of the governments of Italy and of Spain.

the division between the “hard core” and “integration periphery” of the EU, which will further weaken countries outside the euro area. Currently, they include six CEE countries (Bulgaria, Croatia, the Czech Republic, Poland, Romania and Hungary) and two Nordic countries (Denmark and Sweden). This diverse group is likely to shrink in the coming years. Bulgaria, Croatia and Romania before the pandemic took steps to “flee forward” and join the euro area.¹⁴ Denmark has obtained an opt-out to the Maastricht Treaty and is not obliged to adopt the single currency. Sweden does not participate in the euro area under the 1997 declaration of its parliament. However, Sweden pursues a disciplined economic policy that allows it to enter the monetary union on favourable terms.

On the other hand, three other countries—Poland, Hungary and the Czech Republic—are against adopting the euro due to their criticism of the EU federal development (although the pragmatic Hungarian authorities declare their readiness to change their position). Poland and Hungary also fit into the EU dividing axes in a qualitatively different way. For several years now, they have been criticized in the EU for departing from the liberal principles of the separation of powers, the rule of law, etc., which significantly weakens their political image and position.¹⁵ They provide some Member States (e.g. France and the Netherlands) with arguments in favour of marginalization of countries regarded as “disintegrating spill-overs” of the entire EU. Their position also contributes to the discussion on the inclusiveness of new institutional solutions introduced due to a pandemic (e.g. in access to funds in the Euroland) in the case of countries that do not meet EU democratic standards or remain outside the euro area. Controversies related to the possibility of veto of the EU budget by Poland and Hungary at the European Council summit in December 2020 reflect deeper political and cultural divides between most Member States and some of the Central European countries.¹⁶ In the dynamically changing political situation, it is difficult to formulate unambiguous forecasts of the development of the discussed tendencies. However, one can risk the thesis that Brexit and the pandemic are becoming a turning point in the history of Europe and of the EU as the beginning of its disintegration or the reverse process—reintegration and rebirth of the Old Continent. The implementation of these scenarios hinges on many circumstances. Member States often have fundamentally different expectations of the EU, and these divisions are deepening. For this reason, reaching an EU consensus in terms of budget can be extremely difficult—both in terms of the amount (reduced of contributions after Brexit) and the priorities for supporting the reconstruction of the South, the implementation of the Green Deal, and industrial development. Especially since the EP has announced increasing its impact on the new budget by regulating EU programs, including making them dependent on compliance with the rule of law.

¹⁴ According to the Bulgarian authorities, the countries in the euro area (or in the ERM II system) after the pandemic will have greater opportunities for their economies to recover thanks to access to EU financial resources (Manolowa 2020).

¹⁵ According to a prominent politician of the power camp in Poland, both countries are pushed to the defensive and weakened in discussions about the new EU budget, energy and climate policies, etc. EU criticism of Poland and Hungary is in this approach “interference in internal affairs” and “imposing a centralist-hegemonist model” (Wiejak 2020).

¹⁶ In mid-December, Poland and Hungary lifted the veto when EU leaders offered them various assurances, including a promise that the Commission would not start implementing the conditionality procedure until the European Court of Justice ruled on the appeal (Grant 2020: 9–10). In order to reach a compromise, the leaders of the member states agreed to delay combining the principles of justice with the payment of EU funds.

This is aimed at creating instruments of pressure on countries accused of breaking the rule of law, of corruption, etc., which will also translate into resistance of some of them against such criteria.

However, most of the tendencies weakening the cohesion of the EU stem from the previously outlined structural rationale for division between countries or groups of countries. Therefore, there is an ongoing discussion as to whether the implementation of the new financial proposals of Chancellor Merkel and President Macron is capable of changing the trajectory of increasing development disparities and other divergences within the EU. Their accumulation is one of the main sources of support for the centrifugal tendencies resulting from, *inter alia*, the fear that subsequent transfers might merely shift in time unresolved (or perhaps unsolvable) problems. The German-French initiative aimed at the communitarization of the public debt of the Member States may play a crucial role in giving European integration a new momentum. Deeper integration also requires strengthening the fiscal union and greater unification of the budget, which will not be possible without a new political consensus. According to some critics, the funds declared for the recovery of the EU economy after the pandemic are too thin and unevenly distributed.¹⁷ In such a context, there is widespread concern about the scale of aid to enterprises in Germany, which may distort the rules of competition and shake the EU market. The pandemic and its varied effects also generate important political consequences.

As during the crisis in the euro area, rich countries have a greater ability to impose their will on poorer economies. In this case, the aforementioned treatment of the countries under the control of the “troika” was a symbolic turning point, showing that the Union is led by a few highly rated countries, with Germany at the fore, and the real equality of the Member States is a thing of the past. Another problem was highlighted by the decision of the German FCC regarding the purchase of bonds by the ECB. It may initiate a constitutional crisis in the EU, with non-obvious consequences also in other issues important for the European Union, such as a settlement of the dispute over the judiciary and the rule of law in Poland. This would complicate or even prevent the implementation of financial projects for the reconstruction of Southern Europe, and in the extreme scenario, it would contribute to the final collapse of the EU (*The Economist* 2020).

This synthetic review of selected dilemmas of the EU proves that also other aspects of Olsen’s analyses, concerning the territorial scope of the Community or the impact of European institutions outside the EU structures, are primarily a derivative of internal conditions. However, due to the weakening of the EU, international factors are also playing an increasingly important role in this regard, especially relations with the United States, China, Russia and Turkey (*Grant* 2020). Without internal strengthening of the EU and better cooperation between its Member States, it is difficult to discuss its enlargement. The decision to accelerate accession negotiations with Albania and North Macedonia is a positive signal. The above remarks apply to an even greater degree to the dissemination of European standards outside the EU. A good impulse in this regard is the increase in EU humanitarian aid for Africa (*European Commission* 2020).

¹⁷ „There is every indication COVID-19 will be a big force for further economic divergence within the EU, after a decade of weak growth and political turmoil.” (*Odendahl, Springfield* 2020: 2).

However, in the near future, countering the coronavirus pandemic will still be the key test of the effectiveness of the EU. This counteraction requires resolving structural problems, such as the introduction of new crisis management rules or a change in relations with large pharmaceutical corporations. Contrary to the arrangements made with the European Commission (EC), the AstraZeneca/Oxford and Pfizer-BioNtech consortia have significantly reduced the supply of the vaccines to the EU. Member States began to look for opportunities of purchasing vaccines outside the agreement concluded within the EU (Germany, among others). Hungary has purchased the Chinese Sinopharm vaccine, and a limited pool of the Russian Sputnik V vaccine is also available on the Hungarian market. The governments of the Member States have accused the European Commission of being ineffective and lenient towards vaccine manufacturers that fail to meet the contract. Without tackling the chaos around purchasing and distributing the vaccine, the EU will not regain the confidence of its citizens. The COVID-19 issue has a geopolitical dimension as well. “If a group including some of the world’s most successful societies cannot vaccinate their population swiftly, then any pretensions that the EU is a potential superpower look ridiculous” (*The Economist* 2021).

Summary

The coronavirus pandemic is an unprecedented phenomenon in the history of Europe after World War II. Its course and consequences are in line with the discussions on the twilight of the West and the marginalization and provincialisation of Europe, which have been intensifying since the financial crisis of 2008–2010 (Rowland 2016; Penman 2015; Robertson 2014). COVID-19 is becoming a catalyst for systemic changes in the EU, struggling to emerge from the “decade of crises.” The pandemic brings with it new challenges and may also be a turning point in the history of the European Union, marking the beginning of its reintegration and rebirth, or its disintegration. Paradoxically, it has also started to play a positive role as a mobilizing factor for the revival of the “spirit of the European community” and as a motivator for deepening integration and developing a strategy for economic development in the EU in response to post-crisis challenges—“reinventing the European Union” (Krstev 2020; Bertoincini 2020).

The strategic response to the effects of the pandemic in the EU creates the opportunity of reversing the negative tendencies in the process of European integration, which have been particularly strong since the euro area crisis. Such tendencies were manifested in the gradual political disintegration of the EU, limiting the implemented Community policies, reducing the number of Member States and decreasing the effectiveness of EU decisions. Successive enlargements and crises have placed the concepts of differentiated integration at the centre of EU political debate. Their concretization is the mechanism of enhanced cooperation. These solutions are becoming the key distinguishing features of the new phase of the EU evolution. Especially that the accumulation of problems during the pandemic initially triggered a drift towards anarchy and delegating key decisions, at the expense of the Community rules, to the capitals of the most important states and intergovernmental centres in the European Union.

In the fight against the pandemic, three simultaneous political tendencies are crystallizing: 1) accelerating integration in the euro area; 2) the breakdown of the Union's relations with countries that refuse to deepen European integration, and 3) greater diversification of integration among countries remaining outside the euro area or questioning other important elements of the Community *acquis*, e.g. the rule of law. The core of integration is currently membership in the euro area, which brings together most countries and has the greatest political and economic potential, with Germany at the forefront. Countermeasures preventing the crisis deepening due to national egotisms became the nucleus for the reintegration of the EU. The initiatives of the European Commission related to the adoption of the new budget for 2021–2027 and the Recovery Fund constitute the next, qualitatively new stage in this process. The application of these measures confirms the important role of the EU institutions from the perspective of the Member States and creates a convenient starting point for rebuilding European integration, with new rules of responsibility and changes in the risk distribution among the countries of the EU.

The new decisions of the EU Summit in December 2020 give political and financial impetus to move in this direction. They contain elements of a transition from austerity policy towards active investment support and communitarisation of financial instruments at the EU level (Eurobonds), expected by the southern states, which is to help the EU economies to create a more sustainable, competitive and coherent development model. They are commonly understood as a step toward the federalization of the EU. At the same time, accelerated reintegration into the euro area, involving most Member States, minimizes the importance of the other two tendencies of differentiated integration.

Viewed in such a context, Brexit deepens the division into “hard core” and “integration periphery” of the EU. Countries outside the euro area have lost their main champion in the EU, the United Kingdom. As Bulgaria, Croatia and Romania have taken steps to adopt the euro, and Denmark and Sweden have separate arrangements with the EU, Hungary and Poland are particularly at risk of marginalization in the new version of EU policy. As the only Member States, they are accused on the EU forum of systemic violations of both the standards of democracy and of the rule of law, and considered leaders of disintegration in CEE as well. Nevertheless, Germany's traditionally inclusive position on access to institutional solutions in the EU (rooted in the country's economic interests in CEE) suggests that the marginalization of both countries will not lead to their radical exclusion from European reintegration. Depending on the directions of national policy evolution, Hungary and Poland may also deepen their current status as centres of disintegration or “integration periphery” or join the “hard core” in the EU. The success of EU reintegration is not a foregone conclusion.

Among the basic issues that may contribute to the modification or even questioning of the expected changes, one can mention different political expectations of the Member States, different positions regarding the new budget perspective and the Reconstruction Fund, the constitutional crisis in the EU caused by the ruling of the German FCC on the purchase of bonds by the ECB or the insufficient pool of funds for the reconstruction of the economy. Great concerns are also related to the scale of aid for German enterprises, which threatens to disrupt the common market and additionally increases the already very significant political role of Germany in the EU. This direction of the European Union's evo-

lution, sometimes referred to as “Bundesrepublik Europa” with its main centre in Berlin, has long raised doubts in terms of both potential implementation and reception by other member states (Zielonka 2014). Therefore, it is difficult to say to what extent subsequent financial transfers will overcome the disparities within the EU, rooted in different development trajectories of individual countries. Such a change would be a key premise for a lasting strengthening of the European Union, necessary in view of the need to increase the role of European institutions in the global world.

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