

Navigating Complexity: The EU's Rationale in the 21st Century

by Nathalie Tocci

For my parents, Europe was an ideal: it meant peace after the unspeakable death and destruction brought about by two World Wars. Europe was a dream, admittedly a minoritarian dream, whose power fostered the longest era of uninterrupted peace on the continent, first in Western Europe, then expanding eastwards after the end of the Cold War.

For me, Europe has been the opportunity of a lifetime: from the thrill of interrailing as a teenager, to my studies in the UK, my first job in Belgium, my wedding in Spain, up to the relief of not having to switch off data roaming every time my flight landed in the Union. For me, and for many, Europe has been a luxury.

But for my seven-year old son, the question must be asked: what is and will be the point of European integration in his lifetime? Will it simply rest on the fading memories of

his grandparents' childhood stories? Will it stem from a sense of resentment for the opportunities enjoyed by his own parents and which he is unlikely to ever experience in the same way? Will the European project be seen by him with indifference, or perhaps even with scepticism and disdain, as the relic of a past he never had the opportunity to live?

I would argue not. For my son, as for all European citizens in the 21st century, the European Union will be even more vital than it was for past generations. The European project, from an ideal of a few, and a luxury for many, will become a necessity for all in order to navigate the complexities of the 21st century.

Let me explain. Europeans within and between member states are diverse and often divided. Their particularistic interests at times converge, often differ and sometimes diverge and

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clash. History and geography cannot be changed. Yet all Europeans share the same basic human needs: security, wellbeing and freedom. None of these can be fulfilled by Europeans without the EU.

Why?

The security of European citizens is no small feat these days. We are threatened internally by criminal and terrorist networks; we are surrounded by fragile and collapsed states to our south in which areas of limited statehood have opened the space for regional and global contestation; and we have dramatically re-entered a geopolitical age, from Russia's aggressiveness to our east, through to the looming confrontation between the US and China, in which an escalating trade and technological war, conceals the spectre of a possible military confrontation in the years to come.

Faced with all this, what can little Netherlands, little Italy or even little France and Germany do? Precious little. In security, including defence, scale matters. All member states, including the largest ones, are simply too small to protect their own citizens from the turmoil brought about by the messy transition from one global order to a yet undefined future.

No wonder that Europeans are talking about "strategic autonomy" and integration in security and defence, traditionally the laggard areas of European integration. Even more striking, they are doing so despite the unprecedented wave of nationalist populism, which poses an existential

challenge to the EU as a whole.

Strategic autonomy, let us be clear, does not mean autarky. What it does mean is the ability to act, preferably with others, beginning with NATO and the US, but when necessary also alone if Europe's allies and partners do not wish or may not be able to help. In such cases, the Europeans cannot simply give up on their security. They must be able to cater autonomously for it. Without this ability to act, traditional allies, read the US, will progressively lose faith in Europeans, while the continent will become the prey and playground for other regional, global or transnational forces.

All Europeans care about their wellbeing, given by the quality of their work, as much as of their leisure, by their education and their healthcare, by the food they eat, the water they drink and the air they breathe. In the complex and connected world we inhabit, none of these goods can be secured by small-to-medium sized states like our own.

Just imagine having to negotiate free and fair trade agreements ensuring the wellbeing of Dutch or Italian citizens if the Netherlands or Italy were to negotiate alone with the likes of the US, China or India. Just imagine what it would be like if tech giants like Microsoft, Amazon or Google were to negotiate how much tax to pay or competition to allow if they were confronted not by the European Commission, representing the weight of 500 million consumers, but with Lisbon, Nicosia or Vilnius. Would 28 small and separate European countries succeed in saving our planet from

climate change and environmental degradation? Clearly not.

Last but certainly not least is our freedom, enshrined in the rights and rules of our democracies. We are nowhere near the end of history: we have long left the illusion of a world steadily moving towards liberal democracy, in which the European Union's mission was that of helping others become more like itself.

We now know that diffusing magnanimously our goodness, through our enlargement and neighbourhood policies or by fostering regional organizations modelled on ourselves, is little more than a pipedream. Today these policies, while infused by greater pragmatism, still exist of course. Yet they contend with contrasting forces: we no longer only have to project our values outwards, we also, and perhaps more importantly, have to protect our rights and freedoms from the insidious "soft power" of other governance models, viewed with increasing interest and admiration by segments of our own populations.

The truth is that underpinning "soft power" lies, more crudely, power itself. To the extent that illiberal, authoritarian and autocratic political systems are viewed as successful by our own populations be it in economic – China – or strategic – Russia – terms, these alternative models come to exercise an irresistible pull on our own societies. This pull is no doubt aided by active policies, be it Russia's disinformation campaigns or China's mammoth Belt and Road initiative.

Yet at times it is the pure power of attraction that does the trick: take the case of Italy and Russia today. Russia arguably need not invest many resources to persuade the current Italian government to support its policies and approach. It is the admiration for the "strong man" Putin that suffices to draw nationalist leaders closer to Moscow. To protect the rights and rules that guarantee our freedom as individuals and as societies, size matters once again. We will only succeed in protecting our liberal democracies and continue to attract others to our way of life if we stand, and are perceived to be standing, united.

This brings me to my final point, which touches on global governance as a whole. We are living through an age of profound global transformation. Power is shifting from west to east, it is diffusing beyond state boundaries, it no longer resides within subjects but rather flows between them and across land, sea, air, space and cyberspace through webs and nodes.

The institutions, rules and regimes built upon the power configuration that once was – the international liberal order for shorthand – will inevitably have to change to reflect this profound shakeup of the international system. State and non-state actors that do not share our interests on all issues and at all times will inevitably have a louder voice in shaping the future order or disorder that will be. Here too size matters: only if we stand united as Europeans can we expect to have a seat at the global table. Fragmented and divided we will simply end up on the proverbial menu.

Unless we stand united my child, like yours, will be relegated to become a spectator rather than an actor of his own future.

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