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Article

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Intereconomics

Suggested Citation: Zuleeg, Fabian (2024) : Editorial: Europe's cognitive dissonance, Intereconomics, ISSN 1613-964X, Sciendo, Warsaw, Vol. 59, Iss. 3, pp. 122-123, <https://doi.org/10.2478/ie-2024-0025>

This Version is available at:

<https://hdl.handle.net/10419/301405>

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Europe's Cognitive Dissonance

The world has entered an age of permapolycrisis, where numerous interrelated crises and transformations occur simultaneously and severely block the resolution of common global challenges. Climate change continues to pose an existential threat to humanity, and war is back as an instrument of politics, with even the risk of thermonuclear apocalypse back in the realm of the possible. To say it in Thomas Hobbes' words, we face a real risk of a world with "No arts; no letters; no society; and which is worst of all, continual fear, and danger of violent death; and the life of man, solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short." While it is true that the world has faced many difficult periods in the past, that should not distract from the enormity of the current challenge and the significant risks we are facing in the years to come.

To some, this might seem overly alarmist. But Europeans especially should know better, having lived through an age of permacrisis over the past 15 years or so: the financial and economic crisis, the European sovereign debt crisis, Brexit, Trump, Russian aggression in Crimea and Georgia, migration, terrorism, a pandemic and so on.¹ At the same time, Europe had to contend with major transformations – climate, technology and demography – in a domestic and global political environment that is increasingly characterised by fragmentation and polarisation.

Within that context, Russia's invasion of Ukraine was a watershed moment,² ushering in a *Zeitenwende*, the beginning of a new era, where European security, prosperity and democracy are directly under threat. The war in Gaza only serves to highlight the level of global instability, while also increasingly pitching the West against the rest, accelerating the demise of the global rules-based order.

While lip service has been increasingly paid to the challenges of this new era, actions are falling far behind what is needed. This is in part because Europe is suffering from a collective progress illusion, where the (positive) actions taken have not come close to addressing the scale and scope of Europe's challenges. In other words, while Europe is facing exponential challenges, policy is still trying to respond with linear solutions.³

There is also a wilful denial of reality, often for contradictory reasons. On the one hand, some are arguing that Europe grows with crisis, that we have found solutions to fundamental challenges in the past and we will do so again when our backs are against the wall. They point to what has been done already, for example, in support of Ukraine or in response to the pandemic, and the unprecedented nature of these actions. In part, this is an illustration of the progress illusion but it is also ignoring what has not been done and the significant risks that poses.

There are also those who have fallen prone to despair, who believe that it is impossible for Europe to address these challenges and that we are doomed to live in a period of decline, where future generations face even worse constraints on their ability to shape the envi-

1 <https://www.epc.eu/en/Publications/Europe-in-the-age-of-permacrisis~3c8a0c>.

2 <https://www.epc.eu/en/publications/A-watershed-moment-in-European-history-Decision-time-for-the-EU~4628f0>.

3 <https://www.epc.eu/en/Publications/Overcoming-the-European-Progress-Illusion~505c44>.

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ronment in which they live and to defend their values and interests. There is much truth in this point of view; if we do not act, this will likely be the future that coming generations will face. But this should be a rallying call, not an excuse for despair and inaction. It is a moral imperative that we do all we can to change these dismal outcomes for future generations.

But why are we not doing what needs to be done, actions that many decision-makers deem necessary? At the heart of the problem lies democracy itself. The choices that we have to make will be painful and costly, in part because they directly affect our economic model and prosperity. The EU has to distribute the costs rather than the gains from further integration. While these costs are lower than they would be if every country would have to act alone, politically this is a far more challenging proposition, magnified by the cross-border nature of these costs and their distributional consequences. The common refrain from decision-makers is that the necessary actions are politically impossible, i.e. the dilemma that Jean-Claude Juncker summarised succinctly when he said, “We all know what to do, but we don’t know how to get re-elected once we have done it.” In other words, the rise of populism and nativism and the more challenging and contested environment is undermining the political economy of common political action and forward-looking strategic decisions.

In part, this is a trap we have created ourselves. Rather than acknowledging that the world we are facing will entail making difficult and painful trade-offs, and that such systemic and structural action will require sacrifices that will constrain our lifestyles, we have told populations that governments will protect them from these mega-trends. When it comes to Russia’s threat, politicians, at least in Western Europe, were quick to assure the public that our lifestyle would not be impacted fundamentally after the initial adjustment period, emphasising that, in essence, it is not our war. No wonder the realistic appreciation of danger present in many populations gave way to a more complacent attitude. Even worse, when it comes to climate action, populations were told that green policies would contribute to Europe’s competitiveness, almost inevitably leading to a backlash when climate action starts to hurt the pockets of households directly.

All of this adds up to a fundamental threat to democracy. Modern democracies will have to prove that they work in bad times, not just in good, and not only in the EU but across the world. The elections this year will provide a marker for how strong the essentially undemocratic and populist forces have become, including in the European parliamentary election and in the US presidential election. Negative outcomes can lead to vicious downward cycles, as democratic politicians feel increasingly unable to defeat the populist challenge and try to avoid controversy but at the same time undermine democracy by failing to meet the expectations of citizens.

The first step towards getting us out of this dilemma is brutal honesty. James Baldwin said, “Not everything that is faced can be changed, but nothing can be changed until it is faced.” Citizens want to see integrity and honesty in their leadership, and this is the only choice that will encourage populations to make the necessary sacrifices. But for that, European leaders have to stop acting according to the environment they would like to live in and start to live in the real world, which is becoming more challenging and contested, not less.

Rather than copying some of the policies from the populists, our political leaders need to provide a forward-looking vision that provides a feasible but painful path to protect the values and interests of future European generations. This needs to be underpinned by cross-border strategic thinking, first defining common objectives and then adjusting the means to achieve them. This also entails changing the European integration process, not for its own sake but to deliver common solutions that match the scale and scope of the global permapolycrisis we are facing.

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