

IS THE EUROPEAN PROJECT IN DANGER?

*„What does this crisis mean for our social thinking? What lasting influence will the crisis have on the political balance of power?
Where do the new ideological ruptures of tomorrow lie?
This crisis will lead us into a new era, but in which one?“
(Guy Verhofstadt)*

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Abstract:

Can the simple questioning of all the premises that formed the basis of the creation of the European Union (peace, stability, prosperity and solidarity) endanger the contemporary European construction itself?

This paper seeks through exploratory research of the historiography of crises, to demonstrate that the immediate effects of recent and current crises (instability, lack of solidarity, mistrust or fear), deeply affect precisely the identity foundations of the European construction: well-being, mercy and Christian empathy, trust in institutions and peace. By means of causal demonstration, the text highlights the immediate psychological mass effects after each crisis, then seeking to highlight the connection between these effects and the objectives and values of the EU that they affect, undermine, threaten. The final purpose of the paper lies in the answer to the research question announced, namely in an initial assessment of the extent to which the period of recent European history and its crises affect the European project itself by questioning its identity elements.

Keywords: Common values, European Construction, Trust, European Solidarity, The survival of European construction.

Introduction

From whatever perspective we look at things, a careful look and evaluation shows that the last 15 years posed significant challenges for the Union, marked by crises which tested its resilience. They can be classified in different ways, one of the perspectives we also offer in a recent work. „In evaluating the mentioned period, we will resort to a classification of the crises recorded by the European Union from the perspective of their sources: we will first refer to **endogenous crises**, i.e. those whose source is internal to the Union; we will

remember them as we have already referred to them, namely the Empty Chair Crisis, the Danish rejection of the Maastricht Treaty in 1992, and the fate of the Constitutional Treaty. Subsequently, we classify **as exogenous crises**, the Oil Crisis, the Financial Crisis of 2008, the Immigrant Crisis, and the Global Pandemic of 2020, the War in Ukraine. **The first assumption proposed is that in the past 15 years the crises that have affected the Union are very often endogenous**, as we have already pointed out in another article.¹

Starting from the premise that all these crises, regardless of their source, have produced effects, we will direct our attention, throughout this work, to them.

More precisely, the effects that the crises recorded by the EU can produce changes in the collective mentality of the citizens of the Union. The institutional effects have already been addressed by us in the article already cited, emphasizing the importance of the term „resilience“ which has already entered the usual vocabulary of the Community Acquis.

The effects on the collective mentality are of interest to us, therefore, and then we will have to look for their interrelationship with the general atmosphere registered by the EU from the perspective of its own citizens' trust in the EU institutions, in their ability to deal with the times we live in and, obviously, the ultimate goal of our work, to see if these effects do not question the very foundation of the European construction and, therefore, its future.

Crises and mass psychological effects

Starting from the configurations of the term crisis, according to which „any group in which at least the leading and fluent members or active minorities are aware that the control mechanisms and their identity are subjected to a generally unforeseen test, considered transitory, dangerous, and with uncertain resolution, is in crisis“², we will insist on the four crises we have mentioned (budgetary-financial 2008, asylum seekers 2015, pandemic 2020, Russian aggression in Ukraine 2022). We will try to capture and then suggest what their effects may be in the collective mind of European citizens, *specifying that we are interested in the effects of crises from the perspective of the fundamentals (principles, objectives and values) that underpin the European construction*. More precisely, we will not look for scientific, economic, financial, institutional configurations, but we will be interested in the psychological aspects and effects on the collective mind, more precisely, which could undermine the authority and even the legitimacy of the European Union. In other words, we will seek to observe whether the successive crises registered by the EU can affect its citizens' confidence in the general course of European unification and, automatically, in its identity.

¹ Dorin Dobra, *The perpetuation of the Crisis at the level of the European Union. It's time for Resilience*, in volume *Strategic Narratives in Turbulent Times: Communication, Legitimacy and Global Stakes*, Ed. Presa Universitara Clujeana, Cluj-Napoca, 2025, p. 63.

² Larousse, *Dictionar de sociologie*, Ed. Univers Enciclopedic, Bucureşti, 1996, p. 73.

1. The financial-banking crisis of 2007 represents the first presumed event to cause damage to the trust of citizens. „The transparency and integrity of U.S. financial markets have always been a magnet for global financial flows. Much of this trust has now dissipated and will be put to the test even more difficult in the years to come. To restore credibility, U.S. officials and world finance leaders must openly acknowledge the proportions of the problem. (...) Otherwise, the costs – the loss of confidence in the U.S. markets – will be far greater than a single trillion dollar drop in assets, as painful as that may seem.“³

The „trust“ is a feeling that seems essential to us in the light of the demonstration attempted at in this paper. Because citizens' trust, first Americans and then Europeans, in financial institutions later develops ramifications that have additional effects. „The exit from the crisis that began in 2008 will involve many measures of different natures: financial, economic, social. Things seem to be so that such measures will not be enough. The crisis is related to the way in which globalization has been practiced until today and, through this, to the „mode of development“ that has been assumed in recent decades in late modernity.“⁴

Sufficient references, therefore, to the depths of the effects of the financial-banking crisis of 2008 are necessary, because without great memory efforts we will refer to the specific issues of the period, regarding globalization, interdependence of markets and monetization of the economy. These are all the premises of what we want to emphasize in the next chapter of the paper regarding the profound effects of each crisis.

2. The Middle East Migrant Crisis which threatened the European Union in 2015-2016, was a crisis whose management underwent corresponding analyses and evaluations at the time. Not leaving emphasized the decision of German Chancellor Angela Merkel, who, in our opinion, saved the European Union in the face of a possible crisis of solidarity between states by accepting the main wave of immigration, we will draw attention to a more profound aspect: the fact that European immigration policies have been weak, uncoordinated and have not offered viable solutions to the phenomenon even today, although it is at the top of European citizens' concerns. „For many years, throughout Western Europe, the issue of immigration has always been at the top of the list of public concerns. (...) If the reaction, beyond ignoring the concern, is to affirm that, in fact, nothing can be done to solve the problem, then radical alternative solutions will certainly begin to be woven. In the best case, such concerns will manifest themselves at the ballot box.“⁵

We will return to the term „confidence“ also underlined in the paragraphs dedicated to the financial-budgetary crisis. „The refugee crisis is ravaging Europe

³ Charles Morris, *Criza de un trillion de dolari*, Ed. Litera, Bucureşti, 2010, p. 16.

⁴ Andrei Marga, *Crisis and after the crisis*, Eikon Publishing House, Cluj-Napoca, 2009, p. 90.

⁵ Douglas Murray, *Strania sinucidere a Europei*, Ed. Corint, 2019, pp. 89-90.

because it shakes, first of all, trust. (...) Think that this „quarrel“ will be resumed with each wave of refugees. And each time we will look at the effects and turn our backs on the true causes. This is how trust is eroded.⁶ The author's projections give us enough reasons to refer again to the contents of the next subchapter of our work.

3. The Covid-19 Pandemic, a global crisis, at the level of history was only the latest in the series of pandemics that have accompanied humanity throughout its history. At the European level, however, it has configured reactions during the effort to interrupt the spread of the virus, which have registered initiatives to suspend freedom of movement (obviously affecting the Schengen Treaty) by closing national borders, as well as disparate examples of „national selfishness“ in the administration of medical resources, especially until the Health Security Committee came into force. „Pain and suffering, economic hardship and displacement have led world leaders to abandon the idea of international cooperation and stay safe, close their borders and forge their own plans for resilience and recovery.⁷

However, the great tension created by the methods identified by governments and then supranational institutions, has brought into debate precisely the citizens' confidence in the professional capacity of the medical system, and especially in the political and administrative competence of EU representatives. From this perspective, the continuation of the investigation of the President of the European Commission regarding the contents of the direct dialogue with the representatives of the large vaccine manufacturing companies is an eloquent example.

4. The Russian aggression in Ukraine, which started in 2022, the unprovoked Russian aggression on Ukraine's sovereign territory goes on with few signs of predictable peace. By offering various configurations and creating expectations to match (Donald Trump's promises are an example in this case) the criminal campaign started by Russia puts the European Union, perhaps, in front of the greatest test in its history. The Union not only delivers solidarity in the spirit of its founding values but defends its own existence in the face of Russia that would endanger its very foundations and objectives, and, therefore, its own existence. Aware since the very beginning of the Ukrainian crisis, reconfirmed along the way, these issues are the greatest that the Union must overcome. „(8)The EU is united in its solidarity with Ukraine and will continue to support Ukraine and the Ukrainian people together with its international partners, including through additional political, financial, humanitarian and logistical support and an international donors' conference. Following the decision of the Heads of State or Government in December 2016, the European Council recognises Ukraine's European aspirations and choice of the European path, as set out in the Association Agreement.“⁸

⁶ Paul Dobrescu, *Crizele de după Criza*, Ed. Litera Bucuresti, 2016, p. 297.

⁷ Fareed Zakaria, *10 lectii pentru o lume postpandemică*, Ed. Polirom, Bucuresti 2021, p. 210.

⁸ Consilium.Europa.eu, *Concluziile Consiliului European din 24 februarie 2022*, <https://www.consilium-europa.eu/ro/press/press-releases/2022/02/24/european-council-conclusions-24-february-2022/>, accessed on 30.05.2025.

Faced with the new reality of the transatlantic relationship, the EU is currently in the process of configuring a resizing of its own defence industry. Both the fate of the war and the assessments that EU citizens make for the first time during the more-than-70-year history of the common European construction in which they have to become aware of the existence of war on the borders of the current Union depend on the speed of this process, on the Union's unity and efficiency. Having profound effects on the collective mind, the possibility of expanding the war is on the lips of many, especially in the neighbouring countries of the two belligerent states. With profound effects on the collective mind, the possibility of expanding the war is on the lips of many, especially in the neighbouring countries of the two belligerent states.

Mass psychological effects and European values threatened

We will not try to prove that the European Union has lost its purpose. What we are aiming for is in an attempt to show that a process of erosion is taking place at the foundations of the EU. More precisely, we go further with the projection of the simple assessment of the effects of the multiple crises that the EU has gone through and is still going through. For more profoundly, the direct effects (financial losses, social disorder, temporary suppression of freedoms or increase in the price of products) touch precisely the foundation of the European Union by calling into question the objectives, values and purpose of construction. In addition, this produces even more profound effects. But let us go back to the in-depth effects specific to each crisis, as we have identified them, one by one.

More than the mere evaporation of a few trillions, the **financial-budgetary crisis** of the end of the first decade affects the fundamental objective of the EU, namely „prosperity“, as announced⁹. We are talking, therefore, about the first document related to the creation of today's European Union, in which (despite being out of operation after 50 years) the first objective of the European construction is assumed, see later the Treaty on the European Economic Community, the Treaty on European Union. „Improving the standard of living“ was the main objective of supranational construction, along with „maintaining peace“, and bringing financial instability to European citizens together with the financial-banking crisis brought them to the situation of questioning this „prosperity“.

In its turn, the **Migrant Crisis** has questioned the very Christian foundation of the citizens of the Union, namely their capacity for „empathy“ or „compassion“. „Throughout this era of out-of-control immigration, what seemed to triumph consistently was compassion. (...) Of course, the question has rarely been asked of how much compassion you show when you encourage

⁹ Art. 2 Treaty establishing the European Coal and Steel Community (Paris, 18 April 1951), https://www.cvce.eu/en/obj/treaty_establishing_the_european_coal_and_st... accessed on 30.05.2025.

people to travel all over the globe to reach a continent with too few homes and too few jobs, where they would be less and less wanted.”¹⁰

Without wishing to raise more questions than needed, we will mention the Constitutional Treaty on the EU which came into existence at the beginning of the millennium; we will only point out the fact that the fundamental values stemming from the Judeo-Christian identity of the European population are today put under great pressure by the immigration file on the continent and the proof is that in EU surveys, immigration ranks first in terms of threats or concerns.

The Covid-19 Pandemic has questioned another fundamental element of the European construction: Security. Provided for in the Treaty on the European Economic Community, existential security (food, health, etc.) is a fundamental objective of the EU. Moreover, in Article 3 of the Treaty of Rome, health is even provided for in paragraph 0, by which the newly established Community aims to ensure „a contribution to the achievement of a high level of health protection.”¹¹

The Russian-Ukrainian War, the result of the unprovoked Russian aggression in Ukraine, also calls into question the security of the continent, therefore precisely peace, the main initial reason for the common European construction, as it was provided for in the founding treaties and in the presentation of the project by the founding fathers. „The contribution that an organized and active Europe can make to civilization is indispensable for the maintenance of peaceful relations.”¹²

The very questioning of continental peace can certainly have effects on the conscience of European citizens and the way in which they perceive the European Union’s ability to face the most substantial threat in its entire history.

We have listed, in order, the objectives and values of the Union besieged by the four crises, trying to highlight possible profound effects of the crises on the European collective mind. Well-being, Christianity, health security and continental peace are all part of the essence of Europeanness and when the foundations are endangered, identities can disappear.

Final thoughts and evaluations

This paper started from the daytime reality available for personal evaluations. A certain social feverishness, precise political configurations (nationalist tendencies, even extremist in votes), the modification of the attitudes and opinions

¹⁰ Douglas Murray, *Ibid*, p. 405.

¹¹ Tratatul de la Roma, <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/about-parliament/ro/in-the-past/the-parliament-and-the-treaties/treaty-of-rome>, accessed on 30.05.2025.

¹² Schuman Declaration, May 9, 1950, https://european-union.europa.eu/principles-countries-history/history-eu/1945-59/schuman-declaration-may-1950_ro, accessed on 30.05.2025.

of EU citizens, and automatically, the belief that „something is happening“ at the European level at least may be even planetary, in the opinion of many. However, the present trends were announced a long time ago, J.O. Gasset being one of the many theorists who consistently referred (1930) to the current phenomena. „Democracy and law, the legal community, were synonymous. Today we are witnessing the triumph of a superdemocracy in which the masses act directly without law, imposing their aspirations and tastes through material pressures.“¹³

The way revealed by the „superdemocracy“ to which J. Gasset referred is today, it seems, more valid than ever. However, this paper tried to offer a potential cause of the weight, the contemporary consistency of the phenomenon, starting from the premise that the last almost 20 years of the EU's history have been marked by successive crises that have left deep traces in the European collective mind. And here we can also state the main conclusion of our work: **Through its effects, each crisis has eroded the confidence of European citizens in its ability to deliver and maintain objectives, values and goals such as well-being, peace or unity and solidarity.** From here, at the national level, nationalist, sovereigntist, anti-European configurations appear, somewhat natural in times of such density. „Many countries are looking for a form of civilization that would succeed in the tour de force that would consist of bringing together their own tradition and the deeply rooted values of life forms with economic progress directed in the European manner“¹⁴

Referring also to the general European atmosphere, we preferred to follow the profound effects produced by the aforementioned crises, going beyond the simple quantification of material losses or temporary suffering. Because, it seems obvious to us, over the past few years, trust in the EU seems to be weakening although the assessment of the capacities of the European institutions in the face of crises is at least acceptable, in our own opinion. However, inherently, at the level of trust, respectively, of the share capital, as Fukuyama calls it, there are obvious losses. „Share capital is a capacity given, in a certain company or in some parts of it, by the predominance of trust (...). Created and transmitted through cultural mechanisms – religion, tradition, historical custom – social capital differs in this way from other forms of human capital.“¹⁵ In line with the well-known author, we appreciate that the term „trust“ as share capital is fundamental to any company and at the EU level it is affected as a result of successive crises.

The result, theorized by another great contemporary thinker, Habermas, materializes in „the crisis of legitimacy, consisting in the difficulty of preserving the legitimacy through the classical methods of liberal democracy, taken as a normative basis, of functioning in the state, given that technically motivated

¹³ J.O. Gasset, *Revolta maselor*, Humanitas Publishing House, Bucharest 1994, p. 47.

¹⁴ Hans Georg Gadamer, *Moștenirea Europei*, Polirom Publishing House, 1999, p. 144.

¹⁵ Francis Fukuyama, *Trust*, Ed. Antet, Prahova, 1996, p. 17.

measures are promoted^{“16} and the references to the contestation of immigration policy, or to the measures adopted during the pandemic speak to us precisely about this.

Clearly, Europe is in a period of necessary transformations. It is time for new models and solutions to emerge, especially from those who run it. „Today, the descendants of those who invented sovereignty, and the nation state are being asked to devise new reforms of supranational democracy to encompass the new type of political integration already achieved.“¹⁷ Because, otherwise, the risks are obvious and the effects are visible: legitimacy, trust are lost. „A political class that is no longer moved by a project or a set of ideas is reduced to a simple management machine that makes strange laws and governs in some way. How many politicians are driven by bigger projects, by a certain fluidity of thought, anger or vocation?“¹⁸

It is already mentioned this aspect: we do not doubt the EU’s capacity to manage crises, but its power to return to consistent levels of confidence, through bold projects in times of crisis. Europe will not get lost in the tumult of damage, figures or goods, but it must demonstrate to its citizens that it can formulate new projects that reconfirm its identity, its objectives and values, its history and its future.

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¹⁶ apud Andrei Marga, *Criza și după criză (Schimbarea lumii)*, Editura Eikon, Cluj-Napoca, 2012, p. 34.

¹⁷ Loukas Tsoukalis, *Ce fel de Europă?*, Bric All, Bucharest, 2005, p. 257.

¹⁸ Wilfred Martens, *Europa: lupt și inving*, Ed. All, Bucuresti, 2011, p. 86.

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