

THE VALUES DEFICIT IN THE EUROPEAN UNION AND THE COVID-19 CRISIS AS ITS CONSEQUENCE

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Abstract:

When we deliberate about the EU's deficits some common problems come in mind – deficit of democracy, deficit of legitimacy, deficit of accountability, deficit of leadership, etc. The ongoing Covid-19 crisis, however, revealed the harsh truth that there is another crucial problem the EU citizens are facing – the deficit of values.

The aim of the paper is to focus upon the non-material values of the Union. Despite being the milestone of the EU at the very beginning, nowadays we, the EU citizens, tend to forget this important fact. What can be done in order to overcome this dangerous tendency? The author cannot offer a single solution, but believes that this is a question that shall be continuously discussed and highlighted.

Keywords: European Union, deficit, values, Covid-19, democracy

„Strive not to be a success, but rather to be of value.“

Albert Einstein

The outbreak of COVID-19 over the last year and a half has brought immense suffering and death to millions of people around the world. It has impacted profoundly the functioning of the countries, the balance in their democratic institutions and legal systems, shaking up the foundations of civil society. It is understandable that the majority of governments have and are continuing to stick to exceptional measures in seeking to get control over the spread of the virus.

These exceptional measures inevitably restrict the fundamental rights of citizens in ways that can be justified only in these extraordinary circumstances. It is in the greatest interest of society that the measures against the spread of COVID-19 are imposed within the framework of the key democratic principles, the international legal order and the rule of law.

There can be no doubt that this global hardship changed the EU and probably all of its citizens. But COVID-19 turned out to be much more than that, for all of us. It upraised many delicate questions – such as:

What happened to the real European values? Are they safe? How do we „read“ and understand them? Did we manage to keep them in this period of difficulty, that has not ended yet? Is the COVID-19 the reason for the crisis of values in the EU or it is actually vice versa – its consequence?

I. The European Values – the definitions

According to the Cambridge dictionary the word „value“ stands for:

- the amount of money that can be received for something;
- the importance or worth of something for someone;
- how useful or important something is;
- the beliefs people have, especially about what is right and wrong and what is most important in life, that control their behaviour.¹

Sticking to the last definition, we must remember that the real and the most important values of the European Union, since the very beginning, are the non-material ones.

The EU values are common to the EU countries in a society in which inclusion, tolerance, justice, solidarity and non-discrimination are a must. These values are an integral part of our European way of life.

The European Charter of Human Rights, integrated in the Lisbon Treaty, defines clearly the main values and goal of United Europe:

- **Human dignity.** It is inviolable. It must be respected, protected and constitutes the real basis of fundamental rights.
- **Freedom.** Freedom of movement gives citizens the right to move and reside freely within the Union. Individual freedoms such as respect for private life, freedom of thought, religion, assembly, expression and information are protected by the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights.
- **Democracy.** The functioning of the EU is founded on representative democracy. Being a European citizen also means having political rights, similar to these on national level – to elect and to get elected. Every adult EU citizen has the right to stand as a candidate and to vote in

¹ Cambridge Online Dictionary - <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/value>.

elections to the European Parliament. EU citizens have the right to stand as candidate and to vote in their country of residence, or in their country of origin.

- **Equality.** It is about equal rights for all citizens before the law. The principle of equality between women and men underpins all European policies and is the basis for European integration.
- **Rule of Law.** The EU is based on the rule of law. Everything the EU does is founded on treaties, voluntarily and democratically agreed by its EU member states. Law and justice are upheld by an independent judiciary. The EU countries gave final jurisdiction to the European Court of Justice which judgements have to be respected by all.
- **Human rights.** They are protected by the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights. These cover the right to be free from discrimination on the basis of sex, racial or ethnic origin, religion or belief, disability, age or sexual orientation, the right to the protection of your personal data and the right to get access to justice.²

II. European citizens – divided by the pandemic

As we see, the legal framework concerning European values is quite a clear set. But what really matters is how people understand and translate these words in their minds and everyday life. This becomes quite evident, especially in times of crisis.

There is no surprise that COVID-19 divided Europe. Indeed, every previous major crisis in the near past has done so, but never that dramatically. For example, the euro crisis split Europeans north and south, marking the debtors and creditors of the continent. The refugee crisis created a different dividing mark, this time between the east and the west.

The pandemic, however, in its early stages, seemed to bring Europeans together. Although it started as a search for national solutions when the EU governments closed their borders overnight – but it quickly turned into an attempt to find common European solutions, when EU member states agreed to „fight together“, by approving together vaccines, ending up in the decisive step of the Next Generation EU recovery plan.

Yet, the management of the crisis at European level was rather chaotic and belated. This has left the people of Europe exhausted and in deepening distrust. From messing up the delivery of masks to the slow vaccination campaign, European leaders are facing a deep crisis of democratic legitimacy and deficit of trust. COVID-19 was a harsh test for one fundamental EU values - *solidarity*. Meanwhile Eurosceptic, anti-vaxxers, populists and so on destructive forces „bloomed“ in the growing distrust of European institutions.

² Lisbon Treaty, 2009. European Charter of Human Rights

Some countries, such as Hungary, or, more recently, Poland, have long made the erosion of the EU's founding principles an essential part of their political agenda. The pandemic has just fastened this process - disrupting the balance of powers, not respecting the independent civil society.

European citizens are divided over what they believe to be governments' motivations behind restrictions. First, we have the trustful ones - who have faith in governments. Then we see the suspicious - they are convinced that governors just try to cover up failings. Last but not least, the accusers think governments are lying, so as to impose their control over people.

According to a survey, made by the European Council on Foreign Relations in September 2021, three key dividing lines have been emerging. All of them are the result of the different meaning of what the phrase „EU values“ stands for.

The first is the *generation gap*. When COVID-19 first emerged, it seemed more likely to harm the oldest members in our societies. But young people feel like they have been the actual victims of the pandemic, because the pandemic was a threat to their *way of life*. And most say they have suffered a lot because of all the restrictions. There is a belief in many young people that their future has been sacrificed for the sake of their parents and their grandparents.

Worst of that, another consequence is the upcoming cynicism among young people about „*the real*“ governments' intentions. For example, younger people are less likely to believe that the main motivation of governments in introducing pandemic restrictions is to limit the spread of the virus. Again, according to the European Council on Foreign Relations research among respondents aged under 30, 43 per cent are sceptical of their governments' motives: 23 per cent think that their government mainly wishes to create the appearance of control, while a further 20 per cent say that governments are using the pandemic as an excuse to increase their control of the public.³

The second dividing line is between the two conceptions - is the COVID-19 a public health crisis or an economic catastrophe. Citizens who have been affected by the illness (42%) and those who feel they have not been economically affected (64%), trust that lockdowns were mainly meant to help limit the spread of the virus⁴.

However, it is to change every day ahead - because the economic consequences are yet to come all over Europe and the world and it is very naive to reckon that anyone will stay unaffected to a certain extent.

Third comes the division, based on the idea of freedom. Across Europe, 22 per cent of respondents say they feel free in their everyday life, compared

³ European Council on Foreign Relations. 2021. Europe's Invisible Divides. How COVID-19 is polarizing European Politics. September 2021.

⁴ Ibid.

to 64 per cent who say they felt free two years ago, before the pandemic struck. The share of people who do not feel free now is 27 per cent, compared to 7 per cent who did not feel free two years ago. The biggest share of people who currently feel free can be found in Hungary (41 per cent) and Spain (38 per cent). Interestingly, we find by far the largest share of people who do not feel free in Germany (49 per cent) – which did not have a complete lockdown in the way that many other countries did – and in Austria (42 per cent).⁵

European citizens are also strongly divided over *whom to blame* for the COVID-19 crisis. Older European citizens, aged over 60, are more likely to blame individuals, rather than institutions and governments. Younger Europeans, aged under 30, are more tend to blame governments and other institutions, rather than individuals. Surprisingly, very few tend to seek how their personal attitude and everyday life affects the spread of the pandemic. In other words, just like in so many other cases, the blame stays somewhere far from ourselves.

For the EU, the crisis is really existential, coming soon after other challenges to the Union. Fighting the pandemic was the EU's chance to prove to citizens that it could act quickly and decisively in their best interests. It was an opportunity for the EU to present itself as a strong, global actor, capable of guiding the international response.⁶

Unfortunately, the EU missed this opportunity to speak with a single voice, to present a credible narrative of strong European leadership. In addition, the slow and chaotic start of the vaccine process at the beginning of 2021 raised big questions about the EU's capacity to steer its member states through the crisis. The disappointment with EU institutions became mainstream.

Meanwhile the political turbulence emerging around different perceptions of freedom are influencing in different ways the EU member states. For example, Poland, Germany and France could be considered as new kinds of pandemic politics.

In Poland, the pandemic is spreading in a „polarised democracy“. The crisis has reinforced divisions between previously existing ideological groups in the society. Most of the citizens are distrustful of the government, they neglect COVID-19 restrictions and see the government actions as a big threat to their freedom. A large share of people think that the government is using pandemic-related restrictions to create the illusion of control or as an excuse to control the public.⁷ Most Poles think that the biggest threat to their freedom comes from the top – they blame their government and other major institutions for the pandemic's impact on their lives.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ European Council on Foreign Relations. 2021. Crisis of confidence. How Europeans see their place in the world. June 2021

⁷ Ibid.

In Germany there is no strong public opposition to the level of restrictions or the motivations for introducing them. However, this superficial consensus hides very high levels of discontent. Germany is the country where the biggest share of the population feels unfree (49 per cent, as noted above) – which is a significant change compared to how respondents say they felt two years ago, with only 9 per cent saying they did not feel free then.⁸

In France, the COVID-19 crisis has driven the liberal supporters of Emmanuel Macron's centrist political platform to support interventionist state action, believing that the restrictions were either right or not strict enough. Meanwhile, among the current supporters of Marine Le Pen, whose party has often claimed for a more authoritarian state, almost one-third (33 per cent) of those who expressed their opinion think that the restrictions were too strict and hence want their party to pose as a tribune of freedom against the repressive power of the pandemic state⁹.

In Bulgaria there is also little trust in advice from government institutions. Too many people are suspicious of the vaccines because they are new; some think the virus does not exist, and that measures against the pandemic are a worldwide conspiracy. The COVID-19 crisis mixed with serious political turbulence over the last 6 months. Two rounds of elections this year have failed to produce a government. COVID-sceptical doctors are regularly invited on talk shows in the TV. Some of them advise people with medical conditions (that place them in priority vaccination groups) against getting vaccinated. This perplexed situation is raising many questions and concerns of how to fight with the virus and the overall distrust.

III. Fake news and fake values

As Stephen Hawking brilliantly put it – „*The greatest enemy of knowledge is not ignorance, it is the illusion of knowledge*“. The ongoing COVID-19 crisis revealed how dangerous fake news can be and to what extent Europeans are tempted to analyse medical issues and specifics they know nothing about.

Among the themes observed, we can notice similar trends for the European countries:

- health fears;
- conspiracy theories;
- lockdown fears;
- false cures;
- identity, societal and political polarisation.¹⁰

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ International Federation for Human Rights. COVID-19 and democracy: what does the future hold for the post-pandemic Europe. Brussels. May, 2021.

¹⁰ EU Disinfo Lab. COVID-19 Disinformation: Narratives, Trends and Strategies in Europe. May 2021.

Conspiracy theories are literally „blooming“ over the last year. We can observe a phenomenon that concerns disinformation that knows no borders, which eventually makes its way to several countries in various forms. What is interesting is that, in some cases, conspiracy theories underwent a process of localisation to match the cultural context. Disinformation inflamed the divisions in European countries.

These theories are combined with a strong anti-vaccination movement. There have been concerns about the anti-vaccination even before the pandemic. But how could we imagine misinformation arsenal that appeared in the COVID-19 context. It turns out that too many of the Europeans live in the false reality of social media, where the expert advice and opinion of doctors is being neglected, argued, even mocked. The result is becoming something of a culture war on social media, with too many online commentators, tackling too many sensitive topics. But psychologists argue that the choice to get a vaccine or not is often the result of many complicating factors, that need to be addressed carefully and sensitively.

In my opinion the problem is deeply rooted in the deficit of real values and on how we understand them, apart from the legal framework, wishful thinking and kind talking. We probably need to rethink the values we believe we know.

- **Right to life.** This is actually the leading principle in the European Convention on Human Right. One of the biggest problems of our societies is the selfishness. We constantly talk about our personal choices, our right to choose, to decide and so on. But we tend to forget that our freedom ends where harm to others begin.
- **Empathy.** People who are anti „vaccine-choice“ are convinced that their decision whether or not to vaccinate affect them alone. Nothing could be far from the truth. The reality is that our vaccine choices totally affects people around us. If we remain unvaccinated and get sick, we can bring dangerous illness to others. If our child gets sick and exposes others at school, those exposed children will have to quarantine and their social and academic development suffers. The list of consequences is long.
- **Trust in science and experts.** Disinformation is nothing new but with the expanse of social media platforms, it has become easier and faster for it to spread. It can affect public opinion, create deep divisions in society and undermine trust in public institutions.

Fake news, information overload and the illusion of knowledge have put us in the absurd situation of not taking into account the advice and recommendations of doctors and medical experts – the only adequate and reliable source. Actually, the only people that could help us in this situation are an object of mistrust and disrespect. This is a serious deficit we need to realize and overcome.

- **Responsibility for the future.** On how we deal with this crisis depends what European Union will our children live in. The President of the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen, wisely stated: *This crisis exposed our fragility. The fragility of our health. The fragility of our livelihoods. But today, we emerge from this fragility with a new found purpose. We are reshaping our continent for decades ahead. Because while fighting this pandemic, our Union has started to do something it has never done before on this scale.*¹¹

We, the United Europeans, have a lot to learn from the current situation. This crisis can help to better understand one of the causes of our troubles. It's about the crisis of meanings. We all know that junk food makes us physically ill. But there is enough evidence that junk values make us mentally ill. For thousands of years, philosophers have argued that if you attach too much importance to material values you will inevitably be unhappy.

As a society we are often driven by junk values throughout our lives. We have replaced meaningful values with external materialistic purposes. Junk values attract us, they are part of us, but they teach us to seek happiness in the wrong places. One of the positive things about this crisis is that it gives us a chance to rethink our values.

Conclusion

The COVID-19 crisis is a big test for the EU and for each of its citizens as an individual - from healthcare systems to social safety nets. At this stage we didn't fail this last test, but we didn't exactly make the honour roll of it.

How we act in these situations is important, far beyond COVID-19. Our actions demonstrate our ability to place the greater good ahead of personal desires. Without that capacity, we'll never tackle other global problems.

A lack of lived experience in a pandemic situation doesn't relieve us of responsibility; it means we need to work harder at empathy. We need to work harder to understand how we might be connected to someone else's pain and to act accordingly.

The virus is testing our willingness to make small sacrifices, to prioritize the safety of others before our own comfort. COVID-19 assessed our ability to think about others before ourselves. We still have the opportunity to learn to live together, which is the essence of the United Europe.

¹¹ Speech by President von der Leyen at the State of the Union conference of the European University Institute.

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