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Reflections on the Future and the Reforms of the EU Integration – Some Conclusive Remarks

Need for new and complex theoretical approaches

The integration theory, following the war, was born in relation to emerging European integration. The suggested basic forms of trade integration (free trade area, customs union, common market or economic union) were applied only later on other continents (LAFTA or South African community). The process changed to full steam only in the last decades. Besides the “European Studies”, the “Comparative Regional Integration Studies” became a new discipline. But integration theory remained rather as a discipline on regional issues.

The concept of integration as certain community formation goes beyond the mainstream schools, and extends the analysis into structural and historical dimensions. Occasionally, we can meet with the phrase of “global” or “national integration”, but there are no comprehensive theories behind them. There is a tremendous literature on cities or companies, but it is hardly indicated that they can be formed or can become a component of a certain sort of integration. It is evident that there are urban or corporate dimensions of the European integration processes, but they are analysed without contextual approaches. Structurally, these communities exist next to each other, and they are in close interactions and interdependence. The performance of the EU or any nation largely determines the state and performance of their composing communities and vice versa. Those views, for example, that due to globalisation, families or nations disappear are basically mistaken, and they can put on the wrong track all of the reform thinking and proposals. The extension of the integration process into historical dimensions is equally important.

Mainstream integration theories are institution and policy centred. The “integration profiles” extend these theories to the real integration. They open up new

dimensions of research. The fact, that the U.K. in real economic terms is highly integrated with the EU gives explanation on the absurdity of the Brexit, namely there is no alternative to full integration. Any break is much worse, than the present situation. Such conclusions do not follow from any institutional or policy analyses. It is not by chance that dimensions of real economic integrations are so much neglected by the ultra-nationalist political forces.

The recent crisis proves that the defects and deficits of integration and its governance should be analysed on all its levels.

The serious consequences of the global crisis have been already indicated, and the role of global financial crisis in the Euro crisis is also well known. About the global regulatory deficits (lack of institutions and policy) huge literature could be quoted.

We should not forget about the local dimensions either. While, for example, from integration on the macro-level everybody gains, some marginal or particular circles (political or business) may get in a losing position. The “Polish plumber”, if working legally, can improve the market stability, can be beneficial for the consumer, in general it can increase the GDP and the revenues of the budget. On the whole, there is no conflict with the general national interest. In relation to this, the bankruptcy of some local plumbers can be seen a marginal issue.

In local terms, however, the competition of foreign entrepreneurs or workers can be a source of social or political conflicts. Some businesses may go bankrupt or the unemployment of local peoples may increase. And on the whole, it can amount to a “critical mass”, which politically can already significantly count (bringing votes for populists). This was typical in case of the referendum on Brexit. This proves that beyond the national or community dimensions, regulation at the local level should not have been neglected.

It is often claimed that the single market project is fine and that the reforms should tackle primarily the sphere of monetary integration. However, this is hardly the case. The single labour market was created as part of the large-scale opening and liberalisation of the markets among only 12 members. Due to the given circumstances, the community-level social frameworks (dimensions of employment and income policies, or social partnership) were largely forgotten and the possibilities of corrections on local levels were excluded. Later, the Union was enlarged to 27 members with highly diverging levels of development and structures. These changes, however, were neglected, and in the spirit of ultra-liberalism, insisting on defending “community achievements”, correction mechanisms were rejected. If the EU had such frameworks, Brexit and many other conflicts might have been avoided. Reactions to claims of Cameron were contradictory, not enough convincing and too late.

We refrain from analysing the mezzo levels of international integration. We know that the main holders and promoters of real integration processes are the *Transnational Company Networks* (controlling about 70% of world trade and more than 90% of R&D expenditures). The main spatial or organisational frameworks of international integration are the major cities, in particular the *Global City Networks*, which give about two thirds of global GDP. They are the major locations of the production, trade and finances, company headquarters, major service providers, actors of transmission of regulatory conditions, or centres of infrastructure (airport, naval ports or railway junctions). Although, all of these have far reaching implications on any reform, they are largely beyond the reform considerations.

Increased and active role of the “new members” in the reforms

So far the integration project was largely shaped along the lines of interests and the will of old member countries. This applied to all major integration projects such as the single market and monetary integration. The Eastern enlargements, however, have brought substantial differences among the 27 members, which even later on in the decisions were largely not taken into account. These differences cut North and South, and East and West.

We refrain from commenting on the relevance of the Maastricht criteria for the old member countries. They are more questionable for the new members; let it be the inflation targets, the budget deficit or ERMII requirements. The most striking example is the demand for balanced budget (Fiscal Compound), which is totally irrelevant for a group of emerging economies. According to the economic history experiences, the catching up usually was accompanied with substantial and lasting imbalances. They mean normal “prices” for convergence, which is “payed back” later by higher level of development and competitiveness. Of course, if the debts are consequences of wasteful allocation and exploitation of resources, that is a different question. But they should be avoided and not the deficits in themselves. The list of special requirements and solutions is, of course, much longer.

The differences are not only economic, such as gaps in levels of development, competitiveness or incomes. They are historical, cultural, religious, social, political and geographical or many others; and they are even more decisive.

One important difference, which particularly counts from the point of view of our analysis, is in the characteristics and the trajectory of nation building and consolidation. In the East compared to West, there were about one hundred years

of belatedness. The process in the East was less organic, and in many cases nations were born in the fire of fight for independence. In many cases the state frameworks were missing, and they were achieved only after 1990.

Due to belated social development (emergence of capitalism and bourgeois society), the missing of the critical number of politically self-conscious and independent-minded citizens (“citoyen”) was a crucial hindering factor of development of modern political nations. The traditions of democracy are weaker, democratic political culture is underdeveloped.

Almost without exception, the states of East Europe are multi-ethnic, and the ethnic conflicts destabilised their national integration. The lack of a “European” solution to these conflicts is still a democratic deficit of the region.

In some countries religion (churches) played a positive role in fighting for national independence (Poland), in many others religious-political conflicts historically had self-destructing consequences for their nations (Protestant–Catholic war fares or antisemitism–holocaust). Traditions played an important role both in terms of social and political mentalities or behaviours. In many countries of the East, corruption is deeply embedded into the social and political life, the public rejection of corruption is weaker.

Many of the Western countries were colonial powers, while most of the Eastern countries historically for a long time were practically in semi-colonial or dependent status. That brings differences in tolerance to multi-cultural society and in understanding its advantages and problems. As a result, migration poses different problems. It is easier to accept others if they can speak the language and are schooled from similar education systems. The crisis, particularly the migration crisis brought these differences into the surface, and it proved to be highly divisive. The neglect of the heterogeneity of the enlarged union has led to social and political tensions, and they have to be addressed.

The European integration has its antecedents in cultural, economic or political cooperation through many centuries, which survived even the bloodiest wars among European nations. We can speak about European culture (literature, music or painting), which transcends East or West divisions. The intensification of economic and political relations now tends to integrate, and surmounting the differences is a basic interest of all nations.

A multi-speed Europe or a variable geometry Europe are models of integration that are not alien even from classic federations (e.g. institutional differences between Alberta and Ontario, in Canada). These models are already realities of EU development. Only 19 countries are members of the Eurozone, and its enlargement is not

probable in the near future. There are 26 countries in Schengen. The UK opted out; Bulgaria, Romania and Croatia are candidates for membership. At the same time, Iceland, Lichtenstein, Norway (EEA) and Switzerland are associated members of the project. The White Paper of March 2017 refers to this as Scenario 3, “where certain Member States want to do more in common, one or several ‘coalition of the willing’ emerge to work together in specific policy areas”.¹ It fits into the concept of “enhanced cooperation”, and should mean nothing more than some of the countries taking “the role of the engine” in integration processes.

In light of the substantial differences among the nation states, a multi-speed Europe is a realistic option, even in the longer run. This model can be supported only on the following conditions:

- it remains open by retaining the possibility for other countries to join any time (i.e. it should not mean a “new Iron Curtain”)
- it should not mean any isolation among the members, it should seek new forms and channels of transmission
- it does not threaten the cohesion of the Union
- it preserves the integrity of the *acquis communautaire*, particularly the basic rights, and decision making process
- it maintains the normativity of all major policies

Multi-speed Europe means that we are all heading towards the same destination, but with a later train, or on a different track. In light of the substantial differences, this can be a viable option. Variable geometry versions carry more danger. If we follow different aims then we can easily find ourselves on a train that is going nowhere.

“Assuming that the future will be a multi-speed Europe, it is evident that for us the only relevant and exemplary objective could be to belong to the core at all costs as soon as possible. We should do everything to stick on this core, and to use its gravitational power for our rising.”²

All parties agree, that the European Union is a uniquely special and complex entity without precedent in the past. As far as the future is concerned, “the Union remains an integrative venture whose final destination is yet to become discernible”.³ It is still a sort of halfway house between federal and confederal structures, a “partial polity” or “part-formed political system”, a “betweenness” which is still in a “grey area” between the national and the supranational state. “The Union remains an

¹ European Commission 2017: 20.

² ÖSZI 2005: 177.

³ CHRYSSOCHOOU 2001: 16.

unresolved social scientific puzzle with an ‘open *finalité politique*’.”⁴ It is a “baffling mixture” of federal and intergovernmental properties⁵ and “the most complex polity that human agency has ever devised”.⁶

Even if we do not know the ending of the story, it can be reasonably presumed that the EU’s future lies in a federal configuration. But, about the question, in what concrete forms and when could it be realised, the opinions are deeply divided. Should it be just a loser confederation or even just nothing more than “ever closer Union”, remain open.

It seems, at the moment, that a centralised form of federation in Europe is out of the question, but various forms of multinational federal structures can be acceptable. “It presumed the protection, preservation and promotion of distinct sub-state nations that would be able to determine themselves as nations within the larger federal state.”⁷ This federation or confederation should seek to preserve the culturally and nationally heterogeneous character of the continent, and at the same time it should consider “sub-state nations” as the basic resource of its development. Nevertheless, such a scenario should not entail the elimination of nations; it could rather support their development, along with adjusted national structures.

A solid federation should be based on organic and democratic development. The main stages in the federation of the American states are the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution and the conclusion of the Civil War. Nevertheless, the federation itself emerged very gradually, and consolidated by developments such as the emergence of the American industry, the internal market, the construction of railways across the Continent, the harmonisation of banking and financial markets, or the creation of a national highway network. This evolutionary path of development will hopefully apply to the EU as well. Only a fully democratic federation can have a solid future.

The enforced surrender of national identities and interests is an unacceptable option. Europe, in terms of its diversity, is a “deeply divided continent”. “Its own geographical, political, economic, cultural and national multi-colourity, is one of the most characteristic distinctive mark of Europe. As result, in spite of already seventy years of integration efforts, the common European identity, the unified European society and European public opinion could not be born, and the European political community could not be formed. Without this to speak about federal Europe, and to

⁴ WESSELS 1997: 12.

⁵ BELLAMY–CASTIGLIONE 1999: 11.

⁶ SCHMITTER 1996: 25–40.

⁷ BURGESS 2012: 24.

create it, is nothing else than an adventurous, dangerous venture, even more a sheer illusion.”⁸ We had impressive progress, but the recent crisis proved the vulnerability of EU cohesion. In fact, for nations coming out of an oppressive federation is not easy to join immediately an evolving new one, even if it offers to guarantee all of its democratic aspirations.

National adjustment (re-integration) as a strategic issue

The national adjustment (internal re-integration) is a basic component of the new stage of integrational integration. This means a strategic upgrading of the importance of the nations in the international integration processes. This is the main point and the conclusion of this paper.

In structural terms, this adjustment is based on market forces, but it can be supported by several policy factors. These national policy adjustments assume appropriate “policy mixes”. The following areas are strategically particularly important:

- structural or innovation policies
- development of infrastructure and the quality of human capital (education, training and health)
- social and employment policies (the single market has already called for this)
- income and social partnership policies (supporting price stability)
- social, regional and welfare policies (for coping with social and regional inequities)

As the experience of the last two decades showed, the failure of internal transformation and restructuring, the deficiency of national policy adjustments played a prominent role in the recent crisis of European integration. These deficiencies could be identified both in terms of setting policy priorities and choosing the proper new “policy mixes”.

In the last decades, the EU member countries in their adjustments showed quite mixed, and in general, disappointing performance. One of the typical examples of failures was the underestimation or negligence of the role and importance of development and structural policies. It became clear that neither strict common monetary policies, nor market mechanisms could automatically increase competitiveness. Economic development always depends on the interests and behaviours of the main actors, from entrepreneurs to governments. Cheaper money can be spent

⁸ GYURGYÁK 2018: 14.

on innovation, development or re-structuring of the economy (Germany). But it could also be used for increasing incomes, for buying votes (Greece) or investing in real estate speculation (Ireland).

Most governments neglected the importance of responsible income policy by breaking the link between incomes and productivity. This led to negative consequences from the point of view of competitiveness and contributed to budgetary problems. Theories in the optimal currency area assume that exchange rate correction mechanisms are replaced by flexible factor incomes, including wages and interest rates. No one recognised the importance of income policies neither at the national or EU level. At least not to the extent that it was the case formerly in Germany, where the Bundesbank could count on the well-established cooperation between the trade unions and business organisations.

Concerning the national adjustment, the so far largely negligent attitudes should be replaced by strategic thinking and more cooperative policies. Only conscious national transformation strategies and policies can align the nations with the challenges and opportunities of international integration.

From the point of view of successful adjustment, three main policy priorities are important: competitiveness, maximal exploitation of the benefits of integration and convergence.

The new stage of integration, based on a single market and monetary union means the full opening of markets, upgrades to the importance of competitiveness, and puts new adjustment constraints on individuals, companies and national policies as well.

All these increase the importance of innovation, education and training, care about health, development of infrastructure and their supporting policies. In international integration, competitiveness means not only globally competitive companies and sectors, but also a competitive national middle class and political elite. If it fails in adjustment, more precisely, if its political elite proves to be incompetent and unable to defend the interests of its country, that is a serious blow from the point of view of success of the nation. Innovative thinking and mentality should pervade the whole society.

From the point of view of individuals, the quality of education, and the possibilities of training or re-training are important. The same applies to the access to a high level of health service, and in general to all public services. Integration supposes changing the public mentalities, and such heritage as inward looking attitudes, suspicion toward change and otherness or intolerance should be overcome.

For the longer run, investment and entrepreneurship friendly atmosphere are needed for the company sector through eliminating bureaucracy and corruption with transparent and calculable policies.

While encouraging foreign investments, particular attention should be given to local small and medium sized companies. The success of SMEs, either as parts of transnational company networks (value chains) or taking transnational company attitudes in their own right, are basic indicators and factors of competitiveness of a country.

In terms of convergence, the performance of new members remained contradictory. In the last two decades, concerning per capita GDP, all the members were catching up substantially, although the individual performances were quite differing. This was, however, to a large extent, *re-convergence*. In the 1960s, Hungary's per capita GDP was around 60% of the developed West, a gap, which was similar at the end of the 19th century. By the 1990s, this share fell to around 40%, which was a spectacular failure of the bureaucratic central planning systems (lost war of "peaceful competition"). The present 67% level of the per capita Hungarian GDP of the EU average means about the same 60% of the developed centrum (Austria).

While this roughly corresponds to the differences in productivity (70%), in several relations those differences are more substantial. Compared to the 70% level of Hungarian average productivity of the German or the French ones, differences in the level of minimum wages are three times higher in the two countries than in Hungary. We find the same differences in terms of general levels of wages or pensions. The differences proved to be annoying in relation to Greece and the Greek crisis as well. While the level of productivity is roughly the same in Greece, Hungary or the Czech Republic, even after the austerity measure in Greece, the level of minimal wages or pensions remained above the level of the two Central European countries. These have very negative impacts on the cohesion of the Union. Convergence in terms of regional or social terms is highly controversial.

From the point of view of social stability and cohesion, it is assumed that the benefits of integration are socially fairly distributed. Namely, overwhelming parts of the society should feel beneficiaries on integration. We are far from that, and it is clear that the process should not only affect the market.

Global integration and global capitalism co-exists, in their functioning they cannot be separated. Their co-habitation, nevertheless, proved to be the source of serious conflicts. Many of the negative developments (increase of extreme inequalities) are the results of global capitalism, rather than that of integration processes. The roots of the present cohesion and solidarity crisis are rather global than coming from the deficiencies of European integration.

There is an agreement that for addressing the cohesion crisis and the restoration of the social stability, broad social reforms are needed. That assumes the reform and upgrading of existing social models, both in national and community dimensions.

In the 1950s and 1960s, the welfare state proved to be successful in dealing with inter-class conflicts. Strong tax progressiveness effectively moderated the harsh income inequalities and created a relative social peace. It should not be forgotten, however, that this happened in a bipolar world.

In the past decades, with the emergence of knowledge- and competition-based societies, the classic welfare state, based on paternalistic distributions, became largely unattainable and obsolete. The progressiveness of taxation penalises performance and hits particularly those middle classes that carry the whole of society on their shoulders, while they are most exposed to the uncertainties of globally competing societies. It was not without a reason that countries chose moderation of the progressiveness of their tax systems, sometimes adopting single rate taxation.

The Lisbon Treaty pledged itself to a “competitive social market economy”, as a desirable model of an integrated European economy. In a study published not long ago, I agreed with this aim, but I proposed to add the adjectives of “democratic” and “eco-social” ones.⁹ The “democratic” adjective refers to the need striving for fair competition (anti-monopoly legislation) and fighting against corruption. Meantime, we should remind the Göteborg decisions on environmental protection. So far the pledge remained a declaration without further elaboration. The redefinition of the notion of social state according to the challenges of the 21st century would be highly desirable.

The concept of social market economy gives priority to market mechanisms, places emphasis on private responsibility and individual efforts to increase the welfare of society. It aims to improve the competitiveness of the broadest section of society, and instead of income guarantees and redistribution, it supports services, which bare the preconditions of improving the economic and social positions of individuals. It assumes high-quality education, training and health care, desirably adjusted to personal needs and abilities. The redistribution is thus limited to a smaller section of society only, particularly to those in need and the handicapped.

Social policies still belong to the competences of national authorities, but community dimensions should not be neglected either. Clearly, a “European” social market economy would be largely the question of harmonisation and coordination; and due to differences in development levels or in social and cultural circumstances, nationally the substantial differences would remain. Social convergence is a basic prerequisite of overcoming cohesion crisis. Well-functioning and efficient social systems are required on both the national and the Union levels.

⁹ PALÁNKAI 2017: 34–43.

This new European social model can be a certain combination of a reformed welfare state and social market economy. Thus, they should form an integral part of any discussion on the future of Europe and EU integration.

It is becoming more and more evident that the role, the position and the stability of nations (that is, national integrations) are crucial from the perspective of the normal development of the international system as a whole. The stability of international systems, inclusive of international integration, assumes the existence of strong and democratic nations that are ready to accept cultural and ethnic diversity. The EU in this respect should play the role of a catalyst, both within the Union and also among its neighbours. Understanding the organic character and coherence of integration processes is in fact vital from the point of view of any serious reform program.

In the future stability of integration and its effective governance, the nations play a strategic role. The magic word is adjustment and cooperation of the member states. This assumes constructive national attitudes and policies. An open, cooperative, inclusive and competitive assembly of nations form an integral part of a contemporary integrated system. Accordingly, what we need are transformed and adjusted nations, which are able to face the challenges of international integration in the 21st century. Through that, they can increase their importance. The success or failure of national adjustment (internal re-integration) equally determines the development and well-being of the given nation, and that of the whole Union. It assumes competent and responsible politicians with equal devotion to their nation and the whole union.

It became clear, that nations do not disappear in the foreseeable future, but they are fundamentally changed and different, both in their role and functioning as they were even just 50 years ago. What is eroding, that is the classical national state, and what needs to be rejected is archaic nationalism, which seems to be in the revival all over the world.

As a repercussion of the crisis, the spectre of ultra-nationalism is haunting Europe again. The ultra-nationalist, the extreme populist policies are not just a sort of negative sum games. They threaten with more; they can set back Europe for decades, and as Brexit indicates can impose damages which can be repaired only through tremendous sacrifices. Ultra-nationalism is self-destructive, it is against the basic interests of not only the others, but also the own nation. That is one of the main challenges for democratic political forces for the coming decades.

The prospects of reforms are not encouraging. "Looking at the growing cacophony, however, skepticism is likely to prevail in public expectations. For almost a decade, the behavior of Europe as a whole, including both its communitarian institutions and member states, has manifested mentally and politically an unpreparedness to

challenges of societal fusion and the new amalgamation in progress. Democracy, as a tool able to accommodate and represent the diversities and pluralities of social realities, might become a victim of the process of renationalization of territorial units and of partition. The result may be exposure to the risk of new wars, rather than enhanced guarantees for peaceful perspectives.”¹⁰

The reforms assume political and legal changes. These changes are so complex that it is hardly possible without reshaping the basic institutional and policy framework. We agree that we need a new treaty of the Union, which should bring fundamental changes in all its dimensions. New members should be active participants of these processes, which would need to assume the will and determination of all parties, and should conform to the common norms and values of Europe. Europe has all the political, professional or financial potentials to address all of these challenges.

The reform should not be an elite venture. It needs to be democratic, based on broad agreement and support of civil society and citizens. “Europe’s future depends not just on governments putting forward the right policies, but on the capacity of democracies to bring about peaceful change. If the burden gets too heavy, the political system collapses.”¹¹ Sustainable growth is needed for sustainable financial stability, but this assumes sustainable social and political stability as well.

The role of the media in supporting integration would be highly important and crucial. So far it proved to be controversial and it had played a rather negative role. In this respect, according to a study analysing the media’s role of euro adoption in Central Europe is very typical. In Poland, “the media is also not very interested in the euro accession process. Attention on this issue picks up when something happens with exchange rate of the zloty or the euro. Otherwise the euro accession policy is not attracting very much attention”.¹² The same applies to the Czech Republic and Hungary. The media follows the euro exchange rate fluctuation, but otherwise is not interested about the question. In one sense, we can state, that there is no media for euro in the three countries, promoting a real and professional discussion about the pros and cons. As politicians are afraid of losing votes, they refrain, particularly during the election campaign, even to mention the issue. In reality, reporting only about the crisis problems means practically a continuous negative campaign, which means that the public gets only negative information. This can be applied to the presentation of the whole integration process. Besides, the official national media tend to present all successes as that of their governments, while all bad things come

¹⁰ BIANCHINI 2017: 298.

¹¹ The Economist 2011.

¹² VERDUN 2010: 35.

from Brussels. These all apply not only to the euro, but to the attitudes and policies concerning the whole process of integration.

The EU has no agenda for any qualitative progress of its integration program, which would go beyond the present constructions of the Single Market and the EMU. Even the consolidating reform projects, like union budget or solution of debt crisis are uncertain. The popular support for any such program is just missing. Instead of neo-functionalism spill over, we face the possibility of a post-functionalism backlash. All these make constructive reforms more than urgent and important.

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