

Hajnalka Vincze:  
**The Risks of Europelessness**

It is a truism to say that the Western-type liberal order is not in a particularly great shape today, some (defenders and opponents alike) would even go as far as to refer to as being “in decay”. There is no doubt about Western liberalism as we know it undergoing a two-front attack: challenged from the outside, through the rise of authoritarian regimes, as well as from the inside due to the spread of so-called populism. It would certainly be comfortable to think of these as objective developments, mostly out of our control – evil forces at play. The only thing we can and need to do, in this vision, is to come together, join our forces and reassert our values, as a response. Nothing could be farther from the true. No adequate response is possible, or even imaginable, without first acknowledging our own responsibility in the current state of affairs. Especially in Europe, where we consistently have made ourselves weak and thereby put our Union, our countries and our citizens at the mercy of these “evil forces”.

*The original sin*

Thirty years after the fall of the Berlin Wall, Europeans still let the West to be as imbalanced as it was during the Cold War. Most European governments hope to continue to free-ride, as much as possible, on the U.S. for their defence – at the cost of what former American and British high officials called “an unhealthy mix of complacency and excessive deference towards the United States”. The problem is that, from this overly dependent position, Europeans have been unable/unwilling to carry through (both on their own and as equal transatlantic partners) their diplomatic priorities, based on a well-dosed mix of multilateralism and Realpolitik, the key to move towards sustainable stability. They have also been unable/unwilling to sufficiently defend, with protective regulations, their own economic-social model from the adverse effects of globalization.

As a result, on the world stage, Europe looks like an easy target, always ready to yield. Be it on the Eastern Mediterranean, on Libya, on the INF treaty, on Middle East policy, on Russia and energy, on digital tax, on NATO, on armaments policy, Europeans seem always ready to surrender, the only question left is whether overtly or with some semblance of dignity. Hubert Védrine, former French foreign minister, a sort of grey eminence of French diplomacy from Mitterrand to Macron), described Europe as “the idiot of the global village”. It walks around claiming that history, power, Realpolitik are outdated, a thing of the past, whereas the world around is still, and more and more clearly, a Hobbesian world of “war of all against all” – or, in Védrine’s words, Jurassic Park.

The picture is hardly more joyful inside European borders, where a kind of Euro-gloominess is spreading among citizens. For the large majority, it is not about outright Euro-skepticism or anti-Europeanism (in the sense of hoping to end the EU and/or the euro), but a clear and present dissatisfaction with “Europe as it works today”. Tellingly enough, these critics see Europe as too powerless and too powerful at the same time. Powerless in that it is not sufficiently protecting European citizens’ interests in relation to outside powers, but also too powerful in that it

prevents Member States from doing exactly that (due to the delegations of national competences). In sum, European citizens' sovereignty is seen as lost in no man's land.

### *Awakening (sort of)*

Over the past couple of years there is a growing number of signals that point to at least some degree of acknowledgment of the above-mentioned problems. Just to mention a few: the EU's Global Strategy, in 2016, was articulated around the long-time taboo idea of strategic autonomy; Commission President Juncker's "State of the European Union" speech of 2018 was entitled "the Hour of European Sovereignty" and mentioned no less than 11 times the need for, precisely, sovereignty. Due to the coronavirus crisis, and the blatant revelation of our deficiencies, there has lately been more talk about re-localization, re-industrialization, protective barriers etc. than any time since General de Gaulle. The new EU Commission, headed by Ursula von der Leyen, touts itself from the start on being "geopolitical". The French Commissioner Thierry Breton's portfolio sounds promising in this regard: it encompasses internal market, digital, space and industrial policies, with the explicit mention of "technological sovereignty".

However, there is the obvious risk of this entire momentum ending up in what former External Relations Commissioner Chris Patten described as "strong nouns, weak verbs". Granted, the challenge ahead is unprecedented. It would take nothing less than a complete overhaul of the EU's DNA over the past five decades, to seriously tackle the issue of sovereignty in both aspects: autonomy outside, and protection within. Needless to say that this raises strong opposition from allies and partners, as well as deep divergences between Member States. It remains to be seen whether the rapid pace of evolutions both on the world stage and inside European societies will give enough push for actual implementation of policies. In order to achieve the twin goal of autonomy and protection, policy-makers would need to come to terms with some long-standing confusions. The first about what to understand by "European" interests, the second about how to address citizens' legitimate worries without stirring up accusations of "populism".

A common misperception stems from the fact that the term "European" has two quite distinct meanings: one, bureaucratic and institutional, refers to the European level as opposed to, and above, the national echelon. The second distinguishes us from the rest of the world and refers, this time in a political-strategic sense, to our continent's specific interests and priorities. These two meanings do not necessarily overlap. Rather than focusing on institutional arrangements, such as majority voting and common competences, it would be time to focus on content. As Chris Patten rather imaginatively put it: the question is not whether we sing with a single voice, but whether we do it from the same song sheet... Of course, not all Member States might want to send the same message, on sensitive autonomy-related issues. However, once there are a few who actually are ready to, they should just finally forge ahead without waiting for the others to join.

Secondly, in order to deal with the internal, "protection" aspect of sovereignty, some common misconceptions need to be dispelled. As French Socialist former minister Védrine warns: if the "elites" want to prevent the people from completely "dropping out" of the European project,

they need to stop to demonize legitimate concerns and grievances. He cautions against the negative use of the term “populist.” It suggests, according to him, “the people voting wrong,” that is, “against the wishes of the elites.” Védrine explains that citizens’ legitimate demands in terms of identity, sovereignty, and security have been ignored far too long by European leaders. Addressing them in a responsible manner – instead of dismissing such concerns as fearful, backward, sometimes even racist – would be the best way to pull the rug from under those who want to push their own agenda building on grievances left untreated.

### *Re-inventing European “liberalism”?*

In an interesting twist, French President Emmanuel Macron, the EU’s liberal-progressive posterboy, is arguably the most vocal, of all European politicians, on concepts such as sovereignty, geopolitical power and protection. He states that without asserting and protecting itself, Europe “will only have the choice between two submissions”, i.e. under China or under the United States. He is also one of those who warn that the fundamental imbalance of the West – European dependence on the U.S. and the objective American interest to prevent Europe from emancipating and ending this tutelage – will not change no matter who is in the White House. As German foreign minister Heiko Maas stated: “The fact that the Atlantic has widened politically is by no means solely due to Donald Trump. The US and Europe have been drifting apart for years. The overlapping of values and interests that shaped our relationship for two generations is decreasing. The binding force of the East-West conflict is history. These changes began well before Trump's election — and will survive his presidency well into the future.”

The rebalancing of the asymmetrical transatlantic partnership can only come from Europe. And it must unavoidably be built around the assertion of sovereignty, understood both as internal protection and external autonomy. For that to happen, it must be acknowledged that – contrary to widespread misconceptions – the imperative of autonomy does not come from some mythical Anti-Americanism. Either one preserves sovereignty in relation to any third country, or one does not. If the Europeans decide to give it up once, notably vis-à-vis the United States, the submission matrix it establishes will put them at the mercy of any other power in the future. A Europe that fails to assume its full autonomy becomes an easy prey for anybody. As Emmanuel Macron explains: “If it can’t think of itself as a global power, Europe will disappear.”

Finally, the same Macron – following on the path of all his French predecessors – masterfully displayed the often overlooked link between autonomy and democracy. Without independence from external pressures and from undue influences, the citizens’ vote carries little weight. Macron has emphatically underscored this linkage: “If we agree to other major powers – including allies, including friends – putting themselves in a position to decide for us, for our diplomacy, our security, then we are no longer sovereign and we can no longer credibly look at our public opinion, our people and say to them: we are going to decide for you, come and vote, and come and choose.” His liberal-sovereignist approach could be, at the very least, food for thought.