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Nation-States and the European Union Amidst a Global Crisis

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Abstract:

The paper analyses the links between the global crisis of civilisation and the development of the European Union and European nation-states. It specifies the substantive content of the polycrisis and the inadequate capacity of politics at the global, European, and national levels to respond to it in a timely and effective manner. Considering how past civilisational formations have emerged, evolved, and collapsed raises questions and potential answers about how this crisis can be addressed by public policy and administration at both the European and national levels.

Keywords:

European Union, global crisis, nation-states, public administration, public policy

1. Introduction

The rising waves of change are sweeping across continents, prompting the question of whether humanity as a whole is prepared to face them. In particular, to cope with the negative impacts of economic globalisation and its consequences on the quality and sustainability of life on Earth. Paradoxically, the existential threats brought by these

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changes are linked to the unforeseen and unintended consequences of seemingly reasonable economic and political decision-making aimed at solving the everyday problems of various social groups, communities, individual nations, and transnational groups.

The implementation of the global market at the national and European Union levels, along with a reduction in public regulation tools and a weakening of resource redistribution through public budgets, further widens the gaps between the rich and the poor both within and between countries. Social media and, more recently, artificial intelligence tools are eroding the credibility of the information that people and institutions rely on to make decisions. Political and media powers are merging, undermining the effectiveness of state authority and public governance. As a result, legal and illegal migration from countries plagued by violent conflict is increasing, which, along with unemployment and poverty, exacerbates internal political tensions in destination countries. Disoriented citizens no longer trust democratic forms of interest representation and seek salvation in strongman rule.

While previously tried-and-tested policies have been applied with varying success to address individual crises, humankind has not been able to manage the toxic mix of several parallel crises simultaneously.

In the area of public policy and administration, despite all the integration efforts of transnational and international institutions, European nation-states have retained a decisive role. This paper addresses the question of whether and to what extent they can anticipate, respond to, and possibly resist this global crisis of civilisation within the European Union, either collectively or individually.

2. Global crisis of civilisation

The term 'global crisis of civilisation' is becoming increasingly common in the academic literature. Along with it, the term polycrisis, suggesting the parallel impact of several partial crises that may have unforeseen synergistic adverse effects on all of humanity, has been introduced at the initiative of Adam Tooze. Although crises associated with the development of human civilisation have appeared in the literature in the past - for example, Spengler (1998), Gasset (1994), and Krejčí (2002), the notion of polycrisis emerged only with the advent of the ideology and practice of neoliberalism, the collapse of the former Soviet Union, and the abandonment of the security architecture built around U.S. military dominance that shielded NATO members under this American protective umbrella after World War II.

2.1 Partial manifestations of the crisis

Since the 1980s, many scientists have warned of irreversible environmental changes caused by human activity, such as the widespread extinction of plant and animal species,

global warming, and the associated increase in the frequency and severity of natural disasters. We are potentially threatened by genetic manipulation or the unregulated development of artificial intelligence. At the beginning of the twenty-first century, we witnessed turmoil in the financial markets, including the collapse of major banks whose creditors had to be bailed out willy-nilly from the public budgets of the affected countries. The availability of weapons of mass destruction is growing. In Europe and the Middle East, chronic armed conflicts are erupting across national borders, with aggressors committing unprecedented violations of international law. The latest manifestation of the global interconnectedness in human existence was the outbreak of a pandemic caused by the COVID-19 virus in 2021, which remains unsuppressed (Tooze, 2021).

2.2 Early warnings: academics articulate them, politicians ignore them

Astute scientists could not have failed to notice these globally threatening trends. The book *Limits of Growth* (Meadows et al, 1972), promoted by the Italian entrepreneur Aurelio Peccei and the Club of Rome he founded, generated the largest resonance in the world. The authors simulated the unsustainability of continued growth by comparing the effects of unregulated economic and demographic development on the Earth's limited natural resources. The Club of Rome subsequently published tens of books by other authors on the given topic. Worthy of mention is the publication *The Capacity to Govern* by Dror (2001), where he highlighted the absence of strategic governance based on a long-term perspective and the failure of national governments and international institutions to ask and, most importantly, address fundamental questions about the structures and methods of governance. Dror concluded at the end of the 20th century that while governance at the global level indeed requires a fundamental reassessment, neither governments of individual countries nor the institutions of transnational governance are prepared to do it.

Hirst and Thompson (2002), in their groundbreaking article on the future of globalisation, argue that threats to global stability will multiply throughout the twenty-first century. To deal effectively with the consequences of climate warming or global inequality, transnational institutions would need coercive power over nation-states and the authority to decide about the redistribution of resources; this would be possible mainly at the expense of twenty percent of the world's population represented by the countries of the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD). However, these countries can resist such 'coercion' and reject such redistribution. In the meantime, global trends are paralysing political will and delaying the achievement of a new international order and the legitimacy of global public governance. The norms of international law and legal standards for respecting human rights and preventing emerging conflicts and wars will come under severe pressure. The authors conclude that crises stemming from climate change, mass poverty and instability in the Third World, and intense migration pressures will postpone the establishment of global institutions

of governance and cooperation to the second half of the twenty-first century.

In both the Czech and international contexts, Vavroušek (1994) contributed with his original analysis of human values in relation to a sustainable way of life. He identified the ten most important values of European civilisation leading to unsustainable development trends. He assigned them ten alternative value attitudes that are compatible with a sustainable way of life but inconsistent with the prevailing current behavioural patterns.

Table 1:
In search of human values compatible with a sustainable way of life

	European civilisation's fundamental values related to unsustainable development trends (values A)	Alternative value positions compatible with a sustainable way of life (values B)
1. Man's relationship with nature	Exploitative relationship with nature	Awareness of belonging to nature
2. Relationship between the individual and society	Extreme attitudes: a. one-sided emphasis on individualism and competition (typical of "real capitalism"), b. one-sided emphasis on collectivism (typical of "real socialism")	Balanced emphasis on the individual and collective, competition supplemented by cooperation
3. Relation to the flow of time and the meaning of history	Obsession with the notion of quantitative growth	Emphasis on the qualitative development of human society
4. Relation to the meaning of one's own life	Hedonistic orientation and consumerist way of life	Quality of life, voluntary modesty, and avoidance of nonessential goods
5. Relation to freedom and responsibility	One-sided emphasis on human rights and freedoms, eroded awareness of shared responsibility for the course of events	Respect for the symmetry of human rights and freedoms with responsibility
6. Relation to a level of our knowledge	"Arrogance of reason"	Carefulness in all interactions with nature and society
7. Relation to one's own life	Alienation from one's own life, weakened self-preservation instinct and feedback for correcting wrong or unsuccessful actions	Restored the self-preservation instinct in people
8. Relation to future generations	Preference for short-term interests over long-term and permanent ones	Respect for the long-term results of human activity
9. Relation to alternative opinions and other civilisations	Intolerance of others' opinions	Mutual tolerance
10. Relation to public affairs	Giving up on shared decision-making in public affairs	Development of participative democracy

Source: Potůček (2018, p. 33); Czech original Vavroušek (1994).

The future largely depends on how high we place 'sustainable' type B values on the ladder of individual and collective value systems, and to what extent we suppress 'unsustainable' type A values within ourselves. It is a race against time: the whole human civilisation is threatened, for the first time in history.

However, the Slovak environmentalist and ethnologist Dubnička (2007) concluded that the global environmental crisis cannot be solved at the level of individual morality. It is a consequence of the evolutionary capacity of *Homo sapiens* to produce and consume overproduction, which he described as malignant. He argues that only the potentially devastating and irreversible consequences of this crisis, which has been occurring for decades and perhaps threatens the survival of civilisation in its current moral and cultural forms, could lead to more radical political action. In a period of looming climate wars, however, it may already be too late. The necessary decisions must be enforced at the supranational political level. Dubnička's successor, Fačkovec (2022), however, concludes that in the system of democracies and the current international political constellation, reaching a consensus to avert the global environmental crisis—and subsequently implementing it—is impossible.

2.3 Future prospects of human civilisation: dystopia and a glimmer of hope

Ord's *The Precipice* (2020) offers a profound analysis of past developments, existential threats, and the long-term prospects of human civilisation. The British philosopher draws on insights from numerous scientific disciplines and concludes that humanity's greatest future threats are those we create ourselves. "The unprecedented power from technological progress requires unprecedented responsibility: both for the practitioners and for those overseeing them" (Ord, 2020, p. 207). He asserts that protecting humanity from anthropogenic existential risks must be understood as a global public good. He concludes that existing institutions are unable to guarantee it.

Referring to Fukuyama's (2012) illusionary dreams of a peacefully integrated world, the Italian economist Sergio Mariotti confronts it with "...a reality of nation-states employing a vast armamentarium of policies to capture markets and contain the expansionism of rival states" (Mariotti, 2024, p. 17). He envisages potential future development: "Anarchy in the international system means not only the absence of an authority capable of enforcing agreements but also the absence of an authority capable of protecting states. As a result, states will be forced to prioritise their own security and survival, which dramatises what is at stake in international relations" (Mariotti, 2024, p. 17-18).

According to Zeihan, the current form of globalisation, which is based on the post-World War II Bretton Woods agreements on free trade and relies on the convertibility of the US dollar as a global currency, is breaking down. "The environment that allows capitalism to exist is part of that era 'more and more' to which we have all become accustomed, and the big question remains whether capitalism can work without ongoing economic growth" (Zeihan, 2022, p. 217). "The core precept of the postwar order is that the United States would sacrifice economic dynamism in order to achieve security control" (Zeihan, 2022, p. 360). He argues that an extreme transformation will occur, accompanied by demographic and geopolitical collapse. It will be necessary to learn to live with deglobalisation, which will affect different regions of the Earth

unevenly. The world will likely experience a major economic collapse accompanied by a significant increase in carbon emissions. Most of the world will regress to the 1850s, when most governments did not even provide public services. “This will generate not the sort of heavy American involvement most countries would find distasteful, but instead large-scale American disengagement that most countries will find terrifying” (Zeihan, 2022, p. 320). While the US will escape the devastation, famine will break out elsewhere. In Europe, which is more dependent on energy imports and the export of goods and services, and which suffers from inequality between countries, the Euro will collapse, and the previously stifled conflicts will flare up again.

Compared to Zeihan, Bregman (2020) is more optimistic about the future. Drawing on numerous empirical studies, he challenges the deeply rooted concept in Western thought of humans pursuing only their own interests, which reinforces the worst in politics and economics. He introduces the concept of trust in a kind and altruistic man as the basis for transforming and correcting the current civilisation, which aligns with Vavroušek’s ‘sustainable’ type B values. However, Dubnička certainly does not share this view. He is considerably more sceptical about possible futures and, at the same time, more convincing in his arguments.

At the planetary level, the absence of institutions capable of identifying existential threats and finding ways to cope with them is evident. Albert Einstein called for the creation of a world government in 1948. In the same year, the United Nations was created, but in a form that was far from his vision. Ord (2020, p. 202-205) believes that a constitution for humanity with a stronger role for international law might be a more viable path. He also points to the non-binding Declaration on the Responsibilities of Present Generations Towards Future Generations, adopted by UNESCO in 1997.

With the reinstallation of Donald Trump as US president in January 2025 and his ‘America First’ policy, the developments in the international situation validate the views of Peter Zeihan and Ivan Dubnička. A significant shift in US foreign policy orientation suggests a weakening of US security commitments within NATO and a move away from reliance on economic globalisation, marked by a considerable increase in tariff barriers in international trade. The above represents the most significant change in the international world order since 1945. Predictable yet unclear security, economic, and political upheavals can be expected, leading to negative consequences for the current and future living conditions of people and entire states. In the configuration of the world’s most powerful military, economic, and political players, the USA’s unilateral position is strengthening considerably, while the position of the European countries and their institutional framework—the European Union—is weakening. In light of these developments, Rutger Bregman may appear to be a romantic dreamer.

3. Main challenges and an opportunity at the level of the European Union

The EU's current unpreparedness to meet the challenges of the day is linked to several chronic weaknesses in its institutional design, especially:

- **Lack of capacities for strategic governance** at the level of the European Commission, the European Parliament, and the European Council that would be able to identify future challenges (threats and ways to counter them, but also opportunities and paths to seize them).
- **The EU's limited budgetary resources amount to only about 1% of the wealth generated each year by member states.**
- **A joint monetary policy manages the common currency but lacks a joint fiscal policy**, exposing member states to the erosive effects of their diverse economic and monetary situations. Efforts to curb the rising debt levels of most countries have been unsuccessful, which could lead to crisis scenarios (the case of Greece).
- **Problematic application of the policy of gradual unification.** Jacques Delors, the long-serving President of the European Communities, succeeded in implementing the idea of economic integration, which was to be followed by political integration. (This policy was compared to riding a bicycle: once you get going, you have to keep pedalling to avoid falling off). However, the expected political integration did not happen. A serious consequence and manifestation of this deficit was Brexit - the withdrawal of the United Kingdom.
- **The cultural-civilisational divide between member states** that never experienced communism and those that did. Two, sometimes even three generations spent under a totalitarian regime have shaped the behaviour of institutions and the mindset of people to such an extent that rational integration efforts coming from the political and administrative elites in Brussels - and implicitly assuming the internal identification of actors with the norms of a democratically governed country - are met with misunderstanding, opportunism, or even active resistance in post-communist countries. A textbook example is the lasting differences in political preferences between the former East and West Germany, even 35 years after the country's reunification.
- **Economic globalisation infiltrates the common European market and leads to the favouritism of powerful multinational corporations.** This results in a drain on financial and other resources, exceeding the competencies of both member states and the European Union itself. The latter has not found an effective instrument to counterbalance the market in the social sphere, as was the case during the golden age of Western European welfare states from the 1950s to the 1970s. The ineffectiveness of the existing institutional architecture of the European Union was demonstrated during the period of reforms of social security systems in the post-communist countries, when the EU left the operational space to institutions such as the World Bank or the International

Monetary Fund. These institutions undermined the very foundations of what was vaguely referred to as the European Social Model. The European Union allowed a foreign element to sneak in undetected through the back door. As a consequence, there has been a gradual but steady weakening of this welfare state model, leading to a widening gap between the rich and the poor, the weakening of public social services, and the consequential increase in social tensions. Moreover, this creates a breeding ground for politically explosive authoritarianism and extremism, affecting both old and new member states.

- **A leaky Schengen Area** that fails to prevent illegal immigration. Its scale, together with an incomplete common asylum policy, creates a breeding ground for rising internal political tensions, authoritarianism, and extremism.
- European security is based on transatlantic ties, with the U.S. playing a leading role within NATO. **There were lengthy discussions on the creation of common European military structures with no clear outcome.** These discussions have been going on since the 1960s. To this day, there are no clearly defined common and effective defence capabilities that can be called *de jure et de facto* 'European'.

All of this has led to a gradual but steady decline in the legitimacy of the European integration process in the eyes of European citizens and a growing risk of the European Union's disintegration. However, with the continuing military occupation of Ukraine, the ongoing bloody military conflict between Israel and Palestinian Hamas, and the arrival of the new U.S. administration in January 2025, the fundamentally changed security situation in Europe may create massive external pressure to strengthen cooperation among European countries in many areas, including defence and economy. Thanks to existing institutional structures and institutional memory, the European Union will inevitably find itself at the gravitational core of this process.

4. Main challenges and opportunities at the level of the member states of the European Union

What are the options for EU member states to counter the effects of polycrisis? A vital challenge will be to actively participate in the work of the European institutions and their transformations, ensuring that changing European policies and institutions respond adequately to the changes in the external environment.

The primary task, however, will be to take on the exceptionally challenging task of adapting to these changes within national structures. On a general level, this means breaking the persistent fixed idea – prevalent in the public space, the media, and the minds of politicians – expressed in blanket slogans such as “Our goal: de-bureaucratisation” or “The less state, the better”. Such calls for state transformation, driven for decades by neoliberal ideologues, have little to do with the necessary functional response of states to the growing, changing, and anticipated future demands

placed on them. Although a democratically governed state still retains the role of the exclusive executor of public power, it must also be recognised that “while modern states are becoming increasingly and more intricately intertwined with society, their ability - and the ability of their bureaucratic apparatuses - to act autonomously and on their own initiative is diminishing. These connections can strengthen democracy, but they can also limit the capacity of governments to decisively and swiftly adopt and implement necessary measures” (Peters et al., 2006, p. 5). This reality naturally further complicates decision-making at all levels of state administration and local governance.

Weak institutional frameworks and control mechanisms allow parasitic actors to exploit existing loopholes, unlawfully appropriating portions of public resources. The most pressing societal challenges arising from the poorly regulated interplay between the state and the market include pathological forms of regulation, such as clientelism and corruption. The extent of their penetration into the activities of the governance apparatus at all its levels diminishes its effectiveness and legitimacy in the eyes of the public. As a result of these circumstances, along with the shortcomings in the functioning of the political system (including the institutions of representative democracy), there is a dangerous alienation of the political and administrative representation from the citizens and a growing influence of extremist political parties and movements on the national political scene.

Some agendas have tried to prevent these mischiefs for decades: fostering cooperation between politicians, civil servants, and academia; strengthening ties between central and regional levels of government; enhancing personnel management; involving citizens in decision-making; and digitalising services.

Referring to older concepts of network governance and public bureaucracy, Ansell et al. (2023) launched a new concept of robust governance, which should provide stable conditions vis-à-vis turbulent external shocks by a combination of flexible adaptation and proactive innovation. They specify five partial strategies for pursuing it:

- Scalability as the capacity to rapidly scale resource mobilisation and organisational response to align them with problems.
- Prototyping as the ability to iteratively fashion and refashion problem solutions through experimentation and rapid feedback.
- Bounded autonomy as the relative freedom that local actors enjoy to adjust national strategies to the conditions on the ground flexibly and to develop joint ownership of local solutions through collaboration.
- Bricolage as the ability to redirect and recombine existing resources and capacities designed for a particular use in response to emergent problems.
- Strategic polyvalence as the flexibility to use resources, institutions, and ideas for multiple purposes or for different agendas (Ansell, 2023, p. 12-14).

The concept of robust governance, developed as the generalisation of diverse national reactions to the COVID-19 pandemic, might serve as an inspiration and guideline to prepare public administration structures for potential future shocks well in

advance.

In a case study dedicated to the Czech Republic, the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development articulated its recommendations for addressing current and potential future crises to update state resilience (OECD, 2023). Below are those with broader applicability that may also serve as inspiration at the level of nation-states for other European countries:

- **Strengthening the decision-making powers and capacities of the executive.** As already mentioned, one of the drawbacks of democratic interest mediation is the lengthy decision-making process. Although constitutions in such governed countries contain mechanisms for making swift decisions in exceptional situations, their applicability in the context of a polycrisis is limited. It is, therefore, vital to strengthen the coordination, analytical, and strategic capacities at the central level of public administration (for example, at the Government Office). Based on well-founded projections, it is crucial to identify cross-cutting challenges, formulate responses, implement priorities, and incorporate them into long-term planning.
- **Strengthening knowledge-based decision-making by politicians and civil servants.** There are several interconnected approaches to achieving this: strengthening analytical capacities that decision-makers can rely on, encouraging them to demand such support, and enhancing the sharing of relevant data and knowledge across public administration, developing and utilising tools for interdepartmental and multi-level coordination, supporting the application of all stages of responsible decision-making, from problem identification through thus prepared decisions to monitor and control their implementation, evaluating results ex-ante, interim, and ex-post (Potůček, 2018, p. 152) and applying this approach to decision-making at government departments and in the regions. The Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development has devoted systematic attention to formulating proposals to strengthen public policy evaluation in general (OECD 2025).
- **Strengthening crisis management in public administration.** As demonstrated by the varying responses of politicians, public administrations, and citizens in different countries to the management of the COVID-19 pandemic, crisis management was often far from perfect. However, the era of polycrisis further increases the likelihood of unexpected crises that require competent and effective solutions. The resilience of public administration systems can be strengthened through a detailed framework for crisis planning and management. The above involves not only refining existing frameworks but also drafting new legislation, establishing clear protocols and standards for all public authorities during crises, and updating early communication channels between all relevant entities and the public.

5. Conclusion

Humanity is under increasing pressure from circumstances it has created through past decisions and actions. However, these challenges now seem to exceed its ability to anticipate and mitigate future negative impacts on its own existence. In Chinese, the word for crisis signifies both threat and opportunity. However, it is debatable whether this definition can also be applied to the emerging concept of polycrisis. This concept is associated with attributes such as the synergy of threats, uncertainty, unpredictability, and unmanageability. Humanity currently lacks effective institutions and comparable experience to handle or even prevent it. It also lacks the most crucial factor: the will to act together. The only option is to rely on tools that have proven effective in dealing with smaller but structurally similar decision-making challenges in the past - cross-cutting identification of future threats and opportunities, along with the coordination of strategies for managing them collectively across nations and even continents. As was the case with addressing the threat to the ozone layer in the stratosphere through the adoption of the Montreal Protocol in 1987 and its subsequent amendments, which led to the ban on the production and use of chlorinated and fluorinated hydrocarbons and freons. Relying on the European Union's ability to manage a diverse range of national economic and political interests and arrive at solutions that ultimately benefit all involved. On the competence of politicians and civil servants who successfully govern public affairs within national frameworks for the benefit of the present and future generations.

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