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APPRAISING THE EUROPEAN UNION: VICTORIES, UNCERTAINTIES AND CHALLENGES

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ABSTRACT: The European Union is one of the major regional blocs in the world. Although it has acquired an overwhelming development, there are signs of discontent. It is not clear whether gains have been enough to countervail disappointment. This paper audits the most important achievements and the disruptive factors. The single market project and the global trade will be considered important successes. Security dilemmas and recurrent crises will be considered disruptive. The new strategic agenda for 2019-24 and the pandemic measures will exemplify the Union's responses. The following question triggers the research project: What does the future hold for the European Union? To answer to this question, a general review on the gains and losses will be undertaken. In the end, I shall argue that the world is entering a new phase. The European Union as well. The Union has always found solutions for crises and dilemmas. The history of the Union suggests that it holds intrinsic synergies to overcome crises.

Keywords: *challenges, crises, dilemmas, European Union, successes*

I. INTRODUCTION

"Europe will not be made at once", Schuman, 1950

"The EU is sometimes slow... sometimes frustrating" Ursula von der Leyen, 2019

The European Union is one of the most complex political systems in the world. In progress since 1951, it has gone through different experiences, prompting synergies to achieve the unachievable. It is a unique project. For many, it is a multilevel system of governance, configuring new federalism, eventually in need to evolve to new forms of governance. In its exceptional character, it has been providing new channels for democratic representation and a new character for institutional democracy. Its institutional outfit is founded on representative democracy by which citizens are represented in the European Parliament and states are represented in the European Council and in the Council of the European Union. Overall, it has become a laboratory for future integration processes. It has also been a reference for peace for which it won the Nobel prize in 2012.

The evolution of the process has been quick and stormy. Starting in 1951 with the European Coal and Steel Community (Paris Treaty), it has rapidly evolved to an Economic Community and a Single Market, becoming one of the most important economic partners and a most important political actor. But controversies and obstacles have come along the way. Citizens have been showing distrust and disenchantment. Many argue that the Union has not been able to give the right answers, institutions are not democratic enough and the economic development is insipid. The United Kingdom left the Union in 2020, and some argue that the project may implode.

In this paper, I propose to audit the European Union, pointing out gains and weaknesses, confronting advantages and fragilities. The gap between expectancies and delusions will be highlighted. In the end, I argue that the European Union holds synergies to move on. It has always exceeded crises and dilemmas and shows capacities to regain momentum. But obstacles are immense. However, the History of the European Union has always been made of small steps, and most of them have been taken in moments of crisis.

II. MAJOR ACHIEVEMENTS OF THE EUROPEAN UNION

The Single Market has been a reality in progress since the Treaty of Rome (1957). Programmed to be implemented until 1969, the deadline would be transferred to 1992. The single currency was introduced with the Maastricht Treaty. In 30 years, it has known an immense development in areas like services, network utilities, the recognition for professional qualifications, and the market for technology. From 2014 onwards, new

programs were put forward like intellectual property rights, a digital single market, a capital markets union, and a single EU VAT area. By 2018, this immense single market, comprised of 503 million citizens (with the United Kingdom), was worth 14 trillion GDP/year, holding around 24 million companies and producing 75% of intra-EU trade, accounting for 90% of job creation (European Commission 2018a). And, for 2019, (January to June), intra-euro trade recorded 1.001.4 billion, more 1.8% than the previous year for the same period (Eurostat 2019).

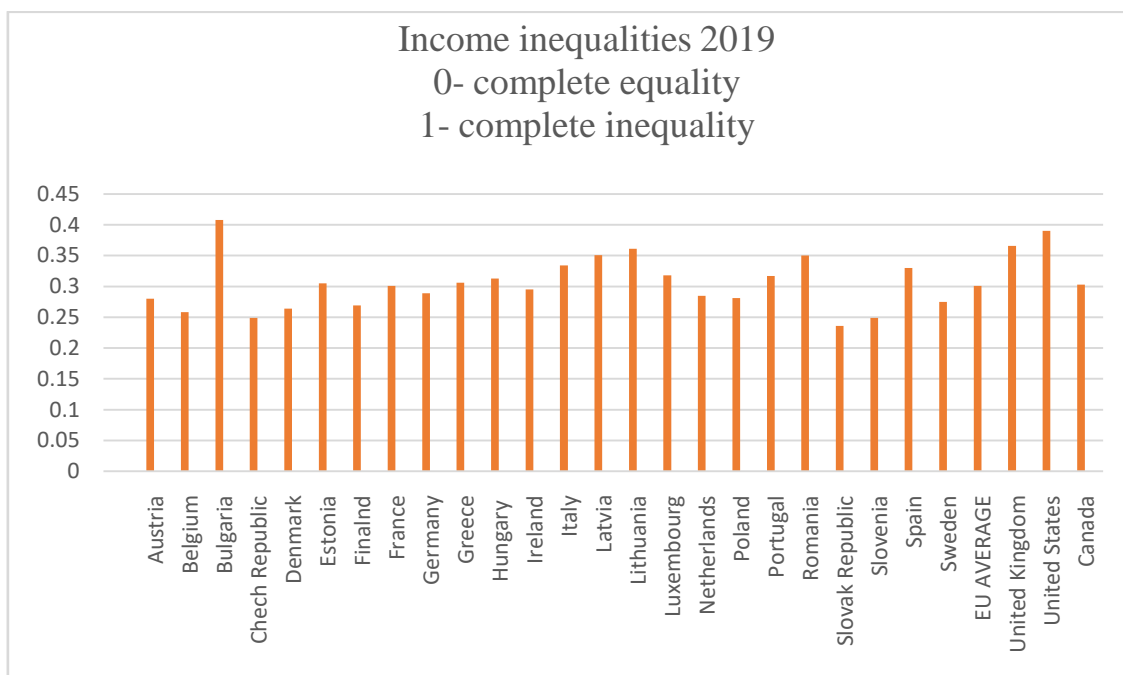
Global Trade has been very significant. The European Union is the world's largest trading bloc. It is the most important trading partner for 80 countries whereas the United States is only the top trading partner for about 20 countries. It is also the most open market for developing countries. It represents 22% of the world GDP and the Euro is the second most used coin. It is a very open economy. Around 70% of imports do not pay tariffs when they enter the EU or pay reduced tariffs. In 2016 the commerce with the rest of the world accounted for 2.738 billion of Euros. For 2019, from January to June, euro area exports rose to 1.163.3 billion, increasing 3.2% when compared with the same period of the previous year. Exports with the rest of the world have been increasing, particularly with the United States (10.9%), Japan (8.7%) and China (8.2%) (Eurostat 2019).

But the European Union has also been intervening as a facilitator actor in almost every corner of the world where conflicts exist. It has been the most important humanitarian donor and its developing policies are very important. Overall, it contributes 56% of the total amount (around 74 million USD), whereas the United States of America provides with 24% (32 million USD), Japan donates 7%, Canada 3% and Norway 3%. For the period between 2021-27, it has been dealing with financial instruments of about 132.6 billion for the next Multiannual Financial Framework, including €15.5 billion under the Next Generation EU program (European Commission, 2020a).

Development policies have also been playing an important role. 95 billion Euros are spent with them. It has comprised programs like the Generalized System of Preferences, All but Guns, food and help emergency programs, the Cotonou agreement, a European development fund, association agreements, and the neighbourhood partnership policy. The European Union has also adopted the Millennium development criteria, and, in collaboration with the United Nations, it has been a source for peace, democracy settlement, and development.

Social and economic policies have granted the European Union a very good place, considering inequality of income, consumption, and wealth. Looking at Figure 1 which shows most of the EU countries, it is possible to suggest that the European Union can be considered one of the most equal societies as far as distribution of income is concerned. It got a total Gini index of 0.30 in 2019. The United States got 0.390. China got 0.465 and Brazil 0.539 (OECD, 2020).

Figure 1 - Income Inequality in the European Union - 2019



Organized by the author. Source: Inequality-Income inequality-OECD Data

Enlargement has also been on the agenda, allowing new countries to be part of the European Union. In the beginning, there were six countries- France, Germany, Italy, Belgium, Holland, and Luxembourg (1951). In 1972, United Kingdom, Denmark and Ireland joined the group. Greece came in 1981, and Portugal and Spain in 1986. Austria and Finland joined in 1997, and, in 2004, ten new countries - Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Slovakia, Malta and Cyprus. In 2007, Romania and Bulgaria also joined, and Croatia did the same in 2013. But Albania, the Republic of North Macedonia, Montenegro, Serbia, Bosnia-Herzegovina and Kosovo have also applied. In 2018, the European Commission adopted a strategy for the new applicants, increasing aid packages to 1,07 billion Euros for 2018, having spent 9 billion between 2007 and 2017 (European Commission 2018b).

The foreign and security policy may be a fragile dimension of the Union but it has been in the making. The need to implement a security and defence strategy goes as far back as 1950 when the need to think about a European Defence came to the table after World War II, but it was after 2001 when the attacks on the Twin Towers in New York took place, that it really came to the top of the agenda. From then on, several strategies have been put forward like: conflict prevention, post-crisis solutions, and assistance programs. The idea of creating a European army has been gaining momentum. It is estimated that it would save from 130 to 260 billion Euros (Neutel, F. 2016). Two recent emerging structures deserve attention: Frontex (the coast guard) and PESCO (Permanent European Structured Cooperation). The former controls the external borders of the Union since 2005 and has been gaining momentum since the immigration crisis (2015). The latter is composed of military projects (2017). In November 2019, there were 47 projects, namely: *the European Union Training Mission Competence; the European Training Certification; the Helicopter Hot and High Training; the Joint EU Intelligence School; the Integrated European Joint Training and simulation; the EU Cyber Academia and Innovation Hub; and the Chemical, Biological, Radiological and Nuclear Defence Training Range*. Only Denmark is not part of the projects.

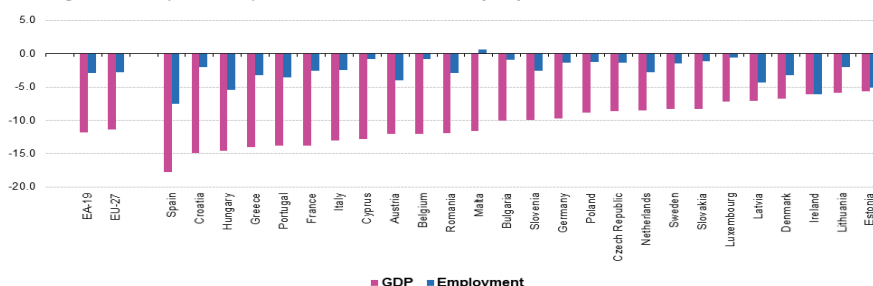
III. THREATS AND DILEMMAS

Notwithstanding, the European Union has been facing dilemmas. Challenges come from everywhere, and nobody has a clear answer for them. The political model is showing weaknesses, people feel disenchanted, and the United Kingdom left the Union on 31 January 2020. Some other dysfunctional political trends are affecting the system. The 2011-13 financial crisis has been terribly disruptive. And the 2020 pandemic crisis cries out at the moment. Some indicators show the fragilities of the system.

Peoples' attachment towards the system can be one of them. The European citizens think their voices are unimportant, and that the political organization is somewhat failing. The 2019 Eurobarometer results show that only 44% trust the EU, and only 45% of the EU citizens have a positive image of the system. Only 42.37% consider that their voices count, growing to 49.18% before the 2019 European elections (Eurobarometer 2019). The consequences of the great 2011-13 crisis were, in fact, huge and may account for these results. Youth unemployment reached 23.7% (Neutel, F. 2017). However, in 2018, the GDP growth rate for the 28 countries went up to 2.0%. But, in 2020, numbers have again substantially diminished, going to -13.9 GDP for the Euro Zone, and unemployment to -3% (Figure 2 and Table 1). The new pandemic crisis has surely been responsible for them. Italy, Portugal, and Spain have been severely hit, as well as the whole continent. Public opinion has condemned crisis management. Only forty-three percent of people consider the EU is going in the right direction to exit the crisis (Eurobarometer 2020).

Figure 2- GDP and Employment Growth Rates in the European Union
GDP and employment growth rates

% change over the previous quarter, based on seasonally adjusted data, 2020Q02



Source: Eurostat (online data code: namq_10_gdp, namq_10_a10_e)

eurostat

Source: Eurostat Statistics Explained retrieved from File:GDP and employment growth rates % change over the previous quarter, based on seasonally adjusted data, 2020Q02.png - Statistics Explained (europa.eu)

Table 1- Published Growth Rates of GDP

	Percentage change compared with the same quarter of the previous year					
	2019Q4	2020Q1	2020Q2	2019Q4	2020Q1	2020Q2
Euro area	0.0	-3.7	-11.8	1.0	-3.3	-14.8
EU	0.1	-3.3	-11.4	1.2	-2.7	-13.9
Belgium	0.6	-3.4	-11.8	1.6	-2.0	-13.9
Czechia	0.4	-3.3	-8.7	2.0	-1.9	-10.9
Germany	0.0	-1.9	-9.8	0.4	-2.1	-11.2
Spain	0.4	-5.2	-17.8	1.7	-4.2	-21.5
France	-0.2	-5.9	-13.7	0.7	-5.8	-18.9
Italy	-0.2	-5.5	-13.0	0.1	-5.6	-17.9
Latvia	0.1	-2.3	-7.1	0.8	-1.0	-8.6
Lithuania	0.8	0.0	-5.9	3.9	2.2	-4.6
Austria	-0.5	-2.5	-12.1	0.2	-3.0	-14.5
Portugal	0.7	-4.0	-13.9	2.3	-2.4	-16.4

Source: Eurostat news release euroindicators94d48ceb-de52-fcf0-aa3d-313361b761c5(europa.eu)

Immigration has been damaging the European system as well. Turmoil in Africa has been urging people to move away from their homes and countries. In 2015, immigrants rose to 1.392.155 which means 2176 asylum seekers per million EU inhabitants (EASO, 2015). But the number of people crossing the border in 2017 fell ¼, and in 2018 it went down 92% in relation to 2015. Numbers for 2018 were 664.480, and for 2017, 735.005 (EASO, 2019; Neutel 2017). For this crisis management, some governments considered they had not logistical conditions, that the immigrants were a menace to national security and a threat to national identities. Measures were tough, going from border controls, closing borders, fence building, suspension of ferry links and rail travel, spot check on cars, and state emergency with soldiers' deployment. Although the problem was less salient in 2020, it still is a major issue, dividing the European society.

Demography in Europe is also problematic. The population is projected to become larger by 2060 (almost 4%), but it is also expected to become older. The 65-age group and over will rise from 18% to 28% and people above 80 and over will also rise from 5% to 12% by 2060. This aging pattern might imply moving from four working people for every person aged over 65 to two working people. Consequently, the labour force will shrink. European financial resources will face problems. Welfare systems might become unsustainable. Structural reforms will certainly be needed (European Commission 2015).

Terrorism has also been destructive, undermining confidence in the system. In 2016, 11 terrorist attacks occurred in the European Union- 6 in Germany, 4 in France, 1 in Belgium-, 138 people were murdered and 548 wounded. People feel insecure. The traditional political and social landscape has been altered. Safety measures are on display all over European cities. This has brought considerable changes to the social and political behaviour of citizens. New social and political movements have emerged (Neutel, F 2017).

The rise of the extreme right has brought novelties to the traditional political system. The extreme right has been joining the national parliaments and the regional assemblies in many emblematic countries. Numbers are worth mentioning. In Germany, there are 89 members of the AfD (Alternative for Germany) in the Bundestag in 2021. In Romania, the USR (Union for the Salvation of Romania), is part of the government in 2021. In Hungary, Fidesz, with Victor Orbán, won elections in 2018, holding government at the moment. In Italy, a center-right coalition was part of the government until 2019. In Poland, Law and Justice, a Christian democratic and right-wing populist political party has been in government for quite some time.

But there are other dilemmas. The traditional political tools seem obsolete. Many think the whole political system should be changed. President Macron (France) has been on the forefront of this debate. Very recently, he spoke about how NATO was suffering of 'brain death', and the need for Europe to review its security policies (BBC 2019). And in 2017, in the University of Paris, Sorbonne, he said: 'the Europe of today is too weak, too slow, too inefficient', and he also argued that nationalism, protectionism, and isolationism are concepts to avoid because they were the seeds triggering past wars (BBC 2017).

IV. CHALLENGES AND SOLUTIONS

The European Union has always tried to fill in the gap between expectancies and delusions. It happened in the seventies when the first economic crisis hit the European economy and, in the nineties, when a new political order was established. But the 2011-14 crisis was probably one of the most dangerous. Strategies to sort it out encompassed several dimensions. Dynamics for change have been on the agenda since then. With success.

In 2015, Commission President Juncker, in the office during the post-great recession crisis period (2014-2019), put forward a comprehensive agenda, giving great importance to job creation, growth, and investment, the digital agenda, the economic and monetary union and the international trade dimension (European Parliament, 2014). International security policies were also considered important. Federica Mogherini- High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy (2014-19) published a comprehensive document entitled "*Shared Vision, Common Action*" (EEAS 2016), highlighting the main points for her external relations policies which basically focused on preventing disruptive weak states from becoming sources of violent conflict. Deter, respond and protect were the main guidelines. Post-crisis solutions and assistance programs were also considered very important.

In March 2017, the European Commission put forward 5 scenarios related to the European project's evolution (Table 2). Citizens were able to participate. Official organizations, local communities, and Universities were invited by the European Commission to discuss the document throughout the whole EU. The proposal resumed basic future designs and possibilities. Conclusions appeared important for the future political and economic choices. The proposal was significant not only for the debate, but for the concepts put forward (European Commission 2017).

Table 2- Commission's five scenarios for the Future of the European Union in 2017

1-	Carrying on as it is now – everything would remain the same, with the same problems.
2-	Focusing on nothing more but the Single market- fundamental dimensions would be left behind. It might be considered a setback.
3-	Doing less more efficiently - the problems are encompassing, there is a constant spillover. It might be considered a setback.
4-	Do more with only those who want to do more- not all countries are part of the same projects. There are the Schengen countries, the PESCO countries, the Euro countries. Some countries would be left behind.
5-	Doing much more together – the reinforcement of all policies, strengthened by the participation of all states. Deepening of the process.

Organized by the author; a similar table was drawn by the author in 2018 (Neutel, 2018); Source: [white paper on the future of europe en.pdf \(europa.eu\)](#);

Later on, in 2019, the European Council's New Strategic Agenda (2019-24) proclaimed the deepening of the European project, putting together all the 5 possibilities raised up by the European Commission in 2017. As they explained "*together, we will be.... building on our values and the strengths of our model*". The new document had four priorities: a) protecting citizens and freedoms; b) developing a strong and vibrant economic base; c) building a climate-neutral, green, fair and social Europe; d) promoting European interests and values on the global stage (Table 2). For that, a comprehensive approach, more cooperation, more coordination more technological capacities, and more resources were claimed necessary (point a). New technological and global market developments for the competition framework were considered relevant (point b). The improvement of Social Rights was measured as fundamental. Generational inequalities, both territorial and educational, were considered a threat, as well as inequality between men and women (point c). For the global agenda, the document highlighted the need to have a more robust trade policy, better use of resources, a clearer priority to the European economy, and a more united, effective, and assertive Union (European Council 2019).

Table 3- A New Strategic Agenda 2019-2024

<p>a) protecting citizens and freedoms: freedom and security, rule of law to protect values respected by all states; integrity of the territory- keeping control of the external borders, making sure that those who enter the European Union are allowed by law to guarantee security; migration policy; proper function of Schengen; fight against terrorism and cross-border crime.</p>
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b) developing a strong and vibrant economic base: deepening the Economic and Monetary Union, completing the Banking and Capital Markets; strengthening the international role of the euro; completion of the single market and a more assertive, comprehensive and coordinated industrial policy; a digital revolution and artificial intelligence (infrastructure, connectivity, services, data, regulation and investment; investment in people's skills and education);

c) building a climate-neutral, green, fair and social Europe: in-depth transformation of its own economy and society to achieve climate neutrality; an opportunity to modernise and to become a global leader in a green economy; policies consistent with the Paris Agreement; acceleration to renewables, increase energy efficiency, reduce dependence on outside sources, diversify its supplies, and invest in solutions for the mobility of the future (improve our cities and countryside, quality of air and waters, sustainable agriculture, food safety quality production);

c) promoting European interests and values on the global stage: promoting a unique model of cooperation as inspiration for others; to support the European perspective for European States willing to join; an ambitious neighbourhood policy, a comprehensive partnership with Africa; to work towards global peace and stability; promotion of democracy and human rights; to become more responsive and active to the other components of external relations; enhancing defence investment, capability development and operational readiness; to strengthen the relations with strategic partners; more synergies between the EU and the bilateral levels.

Organized by the author. Source: <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/39914/a-new-strategicagenda-2019-2024.pdf>

In December 2019, a new President for the European Commission brought in an ambitious and comprehensive agenda with the following priorities: a) to widen and deepen the European project internally and externally; b) to take the global lead; c) more democracy and unity; and d) more functionality and pragmatism. According to the Commission guidelines, the European Union should become one of the most important political and economic actors in the world. Several strategies were prompted out. There was a Green Deal to make Europe the first climate-neutral, zero-pollution, continent until 2030. There was a program for the digital era, fostering digital education in the whole space, highlighting the need to bring technological sovereignty so that the European Union might lead the next generation of scalable cloud computing systems. There was a comprehensive program to promote a stronger Europe in the world with an agenda to move towards a Defence Union in 5 years and a 30% reinforcement budget to invest in external actions, increasing the total amount to 120 billion Euros. There also was an encompassing social agenda to reconcile the social with the market, a new gender strategy, and a new pact on migration. To uphold European democracy, a Conference on the future of Europe was envisioned, and more powers of initiative in the European Parliament were predicted, among others (European Commission 2020b). But this program was never put in place. Just after its official presentation, the COVID-19 pandemic took the world by storm. The European Union was severely hit.

By then, most European countries closed their frontiers, airports were locked down, and 13 out of 27 countries declared a state of emergency. All development plans initially conceived by the Commission were reverted. The whole European Union went into recession, but some countries were more penalized than others. Eight eurozone countries shrunk more than 9.5 percent in the second quarter of 2020: Spain (17.8 percent), Greece (14 percent), Portugal (13.9 percent), France (13.8 percent), Italy (13 percent), Belgium (12.1 percent), Austria (12.1 percent), and Germany (9.7 percent). The United Kingdom had a 20.4 percent contraction. Just to give an idea, for the great 2000 recession, the contraction was only 4.5 percent in the Eurozone (Papademetriou 2020). Amidst great diplomatic negotiations, the European Commission prepared substantial aid. By July 2020, a 750 billion initial plan plus a long term 1.8 trillion budget was put forward. The NextGenerationEU project, the EU4Health program and SURE were some of the plans designed along with many others on specific issues. NextGenerationEU is a temporary economic and social recovery tool associated with green and digital aspects. The EU4Health program is conceived to help in the modernization and strengthening of the different European health systems. SURE program mitigates unemployment risks and intends to help states in need to respond with significant financial resources to the coronavirus epidemic (European Commission 2020c). And the Commission has also been programming and helping the vaccination schedule. Some more plans may be on the agenda.

However, the pandemic crisis resembles the worst challenge the Union has ever had. It is double risky. The IMF estimates the global economy to shrink by 4.9 in 2020, the Eurozone by 10.2 percent and 8.0 percent for the advanced economies. The Global GDP may fall by more than 12 trillion dollars over 2020 and 2021 (Papademetriou 2020). The World Bank predicts a global 5.2 percent economic reduction. Per capita incomes are expected to shrink by 3.6 percent, indicating that millions of people may fall into extreme poverty (World Bank 2020). The deepest depression since World War II is forecasted. Nobody knows how the World will be looking like next.

V. CONCLUSION

This article examines the relationship between threats and gains in the European Union. It argues that the European Union has always responded to menaces and intimidations with adequate programs. In fact, the European Union has been an audacious experience. Beginning with a tiny group of countries, it became one of the most daring blocs in the world. From an extensive single market to a global market in continuous expansion, from an internal political system to a defence and security policy on the making, the European Union has been a reference. Its capacity to respond to crises and dilemmas has been enduring. Answers for dilemmas have been prompt, and successful. Crises have been opportunities. But there are hindrances. Threats like terrorism, people's disenchantment, the emergence of the extreme-right, demography, and the eclectic economic configuration of the Union's states are some of them. And today, the European Union faces a pandemic crisis whose consequences are unimaginable. The European Union put forward a package of audacious proposals. Whether they will meet the general needs remains to be seen. But all indicators and past experiences suggest they will provide adequate answers. The bloc has always transformed obstacles into opportunities. But it certainly is a mystery. The world is facing a most audacious and unique chapter.

Today, the European Union is a huge bloc with 447.7 million inhabitants and deep internal divides (South/North, East/West). Whether it holds synergies to continue its initial goal remains unclear. Crises can always be a challenge and an opportunity. The European Union has always shown imagination and resilience. It has always responded to menaces and intimidations with adequate programs. However, the future looks obscure. One thing is undeniable: nothing is for sure; nothing is forever. And either the political systems have synergies to survive or they will succumb.

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