



Why Politics? The crisis of political leadership in Europe and its consequences

Kai Enno Lehmann¹ Maio de 2014

Resumo:

O presente trabalho tem como objetivo compreender qual tipo de crise esta sendo enfrentada na Europa. O argumento central é que a crise europeia tem motivações mais profundas e estas podem ser mais bem interpretadas por duas linhas de pensamento. Este artigo será dividido em três segmentos: na primeira parte será feito um panorama da corrente situação e sua adaptação no contexto histórico; na segunda parte, o corrente cenário será analisado e será demonstrado a crise de liderança política; por fim, serão feitas sugestões para auxiliar a emergência da Europa desta crise.

Palavras-chave: *Europa, Crise, União Europeia*

Abstract:

This study aims to understand the kind of crisis is being faced in Europe. The central argument is that the European crisis has deeper motivations and these can be better interpreted by two lines of thought. This article will be divided into three segments: the first part will be an overview of the current situation and its adaptation in historical context; in the second part, the current scenario will be analyzed and demonstrated the crisis of political leadership; Finally, suggestions to assist the emergence of the crisis in Europe will be made.

Key words: *Europe, Crisis, European Union*

¹ Possui Graduação (BA) em Política - The University of Liverpool (1998), Mestrado (MA) em Política da União Européia - The University of Liverpool (1999) e Doutorado (PhD) em Relações Internacionais - The University of Liverpool (2010). Atualmente é Professor de Relações Internacionais na Universidade de São Paulo (USP)

As Cini and Borragan (2013, 367) have argued, that the European Union is passing through a severe crisis, especially in the economic sphere, is beyond doubt and it is not the intention of this article to challenge this assumption. Rather, the intention of the present work is to look into the question of what type of crisis is being confronted and, based on this discussion, make suggestion about possible actions to be taken.

The argument to be advanced in this work will be that the crisis that one is currently seeing in Europe is much more profound than is often portrayed in two ways: First, the problems besetting the EU are the consequences of a much deeper crisis which afflicts all European countries, irrespective of their position within or towards the EU, and which has taken on global dimensions, showing itself also in countries like the United States or Brazil. This crisis is, secondly, a political crisis rather than merely an economic one. In basic terms, there is, both at international, as well as at national level, a severe crisis of leadership. Political leaders, it will be shown, are not simply incapable of solving the problems they are confronting, they are not even capable of properly defining these problems, stuck, as they are, in outdated models of thinking which make the current crisis worse, not better.

The article will proceed in three steps.

First, a panorama of the current situation will be sketched and put into a historical context. Second, the current scenario will be analyzed and reframed so as to clearly show the crisis of leadership mentioned above. This will be shown by looking in a little more detail at the expression of this crisis in Germany and the United Kingdom, two countries with very contrasting attitudes towards the EU, but who share several elements of the crisis of leadership. Having done so, suggestions for action will be made in order to allow Europe to emerge from its current crisis. Areas of further research will also be identified.

The context: Europe during the last 10 years: Expanding and declining at the same time

It seems hard to believe today, but 10 years ago the economy of the European Union grew by 2.6%, according to Eurostat figures. Even more astonishingly, in 2004 Greece's economy grew by 4.4%, following on from 5.9% in 2003. At the same time, the EU was close to completing perhaps its most complicated – and important – enlargement process, with the addition of 10 new member states at the beginning of 2004 – 8 of which were former Communist states from Eastern Europe. These were to be followed by Bulgaria and Romania in 2007 and recently Croatia, making the EU an organization of 28 member states which stretched the length and breadth of the continent, creating not only the largest single economic market of its

type in the world but also proving beyond any reasonable doubt the enduring popularity of the EU as a symbol of economic prosperity and political stability, a fact recognized by the Committee which awarded the EU the Nobel Peace Prize in 2012, ironically at the height of the current EU crisis, as Lehmann (2012, 24) has pointed out. In short, the future seemed bright. The contrast to today could hardly be greater. Currently, the very same Greece which was growing at between 4 and 5% a year 10 years ago is in its sixth consecutive year of recession. Unemployment in some of Europe's biggest and economically most-important countries, such as Spain, is above 25%. In Greece youth unemployment stands at above 50%. Between 2007 and 2010, property prices in Ireland dropped 35%.

Bearing these numbers in mind, it seems hardly surprising that much of the literature about the EU crisis, such as Lane (2012), focuses its attention on what has commonly been termed the 'European sovereign debt crisis.' Within this context, commentators have addressed themselves to a number of points. Mihalakas (2012), for instance, analyzed the specific causes of the Greek crisis. Böll et al. (2012) looked at the history and future of the European Single Currency whilst Copsey and Haughton (2012), amongst others, analyzed the consequences for the European integration process in political terms. Finally, some, such as Krugman

(2012) talked about the economic consequences for the global economy.

Bearing in mind the severity of the economic crisis – as illustrated by the numbers above – it is not the intention here to downplay the importance of these analyses. These debates are clearly relevant and important in the context of today's economic and political scenario. However, what will be argued now is that these debates are not sufficient and will not lead to new and innovative policies if they do not go deeper and take into account the complex nature of the problems encountered, problems that go far beyond the European Union or the European economy. What will be shown now is that the problems the EU is confronting are, in many ways, the logical consequences of deep political problems that are also present in its member states (and, indeed, in many other countries across the world). Without addressing these problems, it seems to me, it would almost be impossible for the EU to resolve its own crisis.

The 'other' European crisis

The political crisis of the EU has been recognized by several authors. Perhaps Bittner (2010) summed it up best when he argued that the EU 'does small things too big and big things too small.' In other words, the EU is incapable of taking the big strategic decisions necessary to move the organization forward. In fact, the current 'debt crisis can be traced back to the glaring failure of creating a robust system of checks and

balances for the management of the single currency during the negotiations leading to the Maastricht Treaty and since, as Böll et al. (2012) have shown vividly. Instead, it focusses on small items, such as recently on the botanical name of tomatoes, which are seen by many as ‘interfering’ in the lives of ordinary citizens, leading to a potentially catastrophic loss of political legitimacy amongst Europeans, a fact amply illustrated by the EU’s own polling.

Yet, it would be wrong to simply blame the EU and/or its often cumbersome decision-making processes and political procedures for this loss of legitimacy. Rather, what is happening at EU level merely reflects what one might call the ‘crisis of politics’ which is afflicting many of the EU’s member states.

This ‘crisis of politics’ can be illustrated in many ways: In Italy, for instance, the ‘5-star movement’, led by a well-known TV comedian, received 25% of the votes in the 2013 elections. The movement’s only programmatic points seems to have been that it hated all members, in fact all parts, of the current political establishment. In the words of Foot (2012), the program was ‘almost entirely negative’. In Greece, the fascist ‘Golden Dawn’ party achieved 7% in the last general elections, some of its leaders have been implicated in apparently politically motivated murders, whilst two of its own members were recently killed outside the party’s offices. In the United Kingdom, the membership of the

traditional political parties has collapsed dramatically, as McGuinness (2012) demonstrates in a report to the very parliament where these parties are supposed to represent their voters.

What all this indicates, then, is a deep disconnect between politicians and those who they claim to – and ought to – represent. Critically, this disconnect and distrust is not the result of the economic crisis but has merely been accelerated by it, just like the unpopularity of the European Union amongst Europeans has been accelerated – but not been caused – by the economic crisis, as Serricchio et al (2013) have amply demonstrated. There is, hence, no linear causality between crisis and political unpopularity. Rather, deeper forces seem to be at work that are ‘hollowing out’ the political process and the space within which it occurs.

One can illustrate this point more clearly by looking at two countries a little more closely: Germany and the United Kingdom.

At first glance, Germany would seem to be an odd example to start discussing the European political crisis since the country’s economy is still going (relatively) strong. but even in relative strength, Germany shows considerable weakness. It is striking, for example, that after 8 years as chancellor, there are still debates as to why Angela Merkel wanted to be chancellor and what her chancellorship is for. Just like her political Godfather, Helmut Kohl, Merkel’s key domestic priority seems to be to ‘keep things going

as they are' whilst, unlike Kohl, she seems to have no vision about why the European Union should still exist other than to impose austerity on 'thrifty' states and facilitate trade. There certainly seems to be no overarching 'vision' about what 'Europe' is for, as Nye (2011) pointed out, though, to be fair, he also clearly articulated the difficulties in developing such a vision. In the EU's case, the key objective is to 'solve' the current crisis, with the 'vision-thing' left for afterwards. In fact, in terms of foreign policy, Germany has continuously been criticized over the years for not adjusting to its new-found strength and power post-reunification, other than to throw that power about to impose austerity on other countries. Unlike Kohl, Merkel does not seem to see the EU as a club in which 'solidarity' is a key trait, as Schmitter (2012) has argued.

With the probable formation of a grand coalition between the Christian Democrats and the Social Democrats as a result of the general election held in September there will continue to be very little debate about ideas, very little thinking about possible scenarios in case things worsen either in Europe or domestically, very little opportunity for a minimal opposition (made up of the Green Party and the Democratic Socialists) to hold government to account, to instigate debates and - in general terms - to probe and test government policy. In other words, there will be a continuation of the status quo and very

little uncertainty, something so important for creative change. Big, strategic questions - about Germany's role in the world, her vision for Europe and her adjustment to a possible solo leadership role within the EU or indeed her position on the balance between liberty and control in view of the recent US spying allegation - may well remain unanswered.

Having said that, Germany's position appears enviable compared to that of, for instance, the United Kingdom. The thesis of British decline is not new; in fact, it has been around for literally decades, as Turner (2010) has shown. However, it could be argued that this thesis should not just apply to Britain's role in the world (what is Britain for is a question which does not seem to have a coherent answer), but also to its domestic situation.

The country has some of the most expensive public services in the world without those services having the quality to match the price being charged for them. Nowhere is this clearer than in relation to the rail network which is amongst the most expensive in the world but which has no high-speed network to speak of and where many lines are still operated by old and decrepit diesel trains. In fact, there was a certain irony in the government announcing a couple of years ago that one of the key infrastructure investments of the coming years would be the electrification of the railway line between

Derby and Sheffield, two old powerhouses of the industrial revolution barely 50km apart.

Just like on the railways, the UK's torturous relationship with the European Union continues without a resolution in sight even if there was a definitive referendum on continued membership in 2015, as promised by Prime Minister David Cameron. If the referendum occurred and resulted in the UK's exit from the block it would still not answer the question of what then, bearing in mind the close political relationship between the UK and many other EU member states, as well the vital economic importance of the European Single Market to the British economy, as Huhne (2013), no less than a former government minister, has pointed out. In other words, there seems to be very little in terms of a positive agenda as to what the UK stands for, very similar to the German case outlined above.

This does not even begin to touch on the seeming inability of successive British governments to resolve other key strategic questions. For instance, the UK has been unable to 'rebalance' its economy, being excessively dependent on the service sector which accounts for roughly three quarters of the economy, according to the Office for National Statistics (ONS). This imbalance in terms of what it does is compounded by an imbalance of where – geographically - economic activity takes place, with the South East - and London in particular – totally dominating the rest of the country, with severe consequences, for

instance, for the British housing market, where the north-south divide is ever widening, as Reuters (2013) only recently re-confirmed. Yet, despite long-lasting and stable governments (18 years of Conservative rule were followed in 1997 by 13 years of Labour rule), none of them have been able to address these strategic challenges.

Taken together, then, these cases show that individual countries in Europe suffer from similar problems to those of the European Union: an inability to address strategically important questions in order to prepare for the future. As such, one can now bring these issues back together.

Europe and the EU: a crisis of leadership and strategic thinking

Taking into account the crisis of strategic leadership in some key European countries and the collapse of legitimacy of some political systems both outlined above, it should be no surprise that the European Union is suffering from a similar crisis, bearing in mind the crucial role the member-states have in determining and executing the political agenda of the organization, as Nugent (2010) has shown in one of the most comprehensive textbooks on the EU.

In some ways, such a crisis is the price of success. Europe, and Western Europe in particular, has been extraordinarily successful in creating both stability and prosperity over the last several decades. It successfully withstood the Cold War and successfully integrated its former Cold War adversaries into the 'Western' block.

This, if one pauses to think of it, is an extraordinary achievement. Yet, it brings with it challenges which have not been particularly well managed, chiefly the need to adapt to changing circumstances and to always renew oneself in light of these new circumstances. Post-Cold War, post-incorporation of the former Communist states and (eventually) post-economic crisis what is the role of the EU and what is the role of its member states? Looking back, historically speaking, what Europe has passed through over the last 60 years or so is ahistorical, but it seems to be seen by many of Europe's leaders as normal. As such, the economic crisis has come as a shock for which no one was prepared. There seems to have been no 'forward reasoning', as Bernstein et al. (2000) have called it, no 'scenario thinking' in case things go wrong and, in the absence of an overarching vision, no chance, therefore, to keep some kind of project on course in spite of the crisis. As a result, Europe's political leaders are constantly re-acting to shocks, the political agenda is being shaped for them and they are in constant crisis mode.

Crucially, therefore, a debate needs to be initiated about what kind of Europe one wants to create, what it is for. This debate needs to happen now and not wait until the economic crisis has been 'resolved' since, without, an overall objective there is really no incentive to solve the crisis within a European/EU setting.

In even broader terms, there needs to be an urgent debate about the role of the state and the relationship it should have with its citizens. In other words, there needs to be a debate about how the state and those who represent it can recover or renew legitimacy. Such a debate needs to be continuous. There are no definitive 'end-points' to the evolution of states or the European Union. Rather, there is a constant process of adaptation and renewal, based on always questioning what one is doing and on learning from experiences. European leaders desperately need to adapt a posture of inquiry rather than thinking that they know what works in any circumstance and imposing this 'what works' across time and space.

In short, the EU and Europe's political leaders have to re-define their role and become more humble which may well have the added side-effect of recovering some of the legitimacy lost with their populations over the last few years. In this undertaking, there is no time to lose.

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