

Discussing Attila Àgh: Awakening Europe in the triple global crisis. The birth pangs of the emerging Europe (2021)*

Abstract

This review article looks at Attila Àgh's *Awakening Europe in the triple global crisis*, published in 2021. Àgh cites the triple crisis facing Europe – the socioeconomic crisis, the climate crisis and the Covid-19 crisis – to which Christophe Solioz adds a fourth: the security crisis with reference to the war in Ukraine. These add up, in sum, to a systemic crisis which Solioz argues points to an impending Age of Transition affecting not just south-eastern Europe, whose countries are particularly vulnerable, but leading to the establishment of a new world order in which Europe will need to reconceptualise itself. In the background of current events, Àgh sees Europe as 'awaking', and thus beginning to rise to the challenges; Solioz is a little less optimistic as a result of the processes of fragmentation that have affected the EU in the last fifteen years, while the autocracies in the region present their own challenges. It also remains true that actual action is awaited. Nevertheless, he is clear that, as Europe's centre of gravity shifts to the east, largely as a result of the geopolitical impact of the invasion of Ukraine, it matters that it listens to a clear voice from the region.

Keywords: crisis, European politics, transition, EU integration, central Europe, democratisation, autocratisation

Back in 1936, Stefan Zweig delivered an uncompromising analysis of the permanent, instead of the momentary, crisis that Europe had been facing since 1914 (Zweig 1936; Koselleck 1972-97; Wieviorka 2002). At the other end of the century, Attila Àgh (2021: 34-36) insists on three different crisis cycles within the early years of the twenty-first century: the immobility crisis (2004-09); the crisis of global crisis management (2009-14); and the transformation crisis (2014-19).

Accordingly, the successive Maastricht Treaty (1993) and the Lisbon Treaty (2009), the efforts of the Junker Commission (2014-19) to develop the European Pillar of Social Rights intended to build a stronger and fairer Social Europe (Grossi et al. 2022; Vanhercke et al. 2020; Corti 2020), EU cohesion policy and regional strategies such as the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) and, last but not least, the new approach to geopolitics formulated in 2020 can all be viewed as a return

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to power politics (Lehne 2020). The Union can thus be viewed as a series of crisis management instruments improving over time. Nevertheless, the overall result, at the point of the end of the 2010s, was a more vulnerable and fragmented Union as illustrated by the increasing core-periphery divide in both the south and the east and by the widened gap between, on the one hand, Economic and Social Europe and, on the other, Economic and Political Europe.

Against the background of world-systems theory formulated by Immanuel Wallerstein (1976), Agh rightly insists on the necessity of distinguishing between the above-mentioned short crises and the ‘systemic crisis’ of the world system – the latter corresponding to a systematic change in the world, the shift from an old world order to an emerging new world order shaped by an Age of Transition. Agh views as a ‘systemic crisis’ the triple crisis emerging in the early 2020s: the socioeconomic crisis, the climate crisis and the Covid-19 crisis – additionally, I may add, a security crisis with reference to the war in Ukraine.

As for the coronavirus crisis, we might remember that Wallerstein predicted back in 1994 ‘a new Black Death’ among the phenomena contributing to a period characterised by little peace, little stability and little legitimacy resulting in chaos (Wallerstein [1994] 2000). I would reframe the Covid-19 crisis – as Agh also does – not only as a health crisis but, more broadly, as ‘a *care* crisis’ (Tronto 1994, 2013, 2020) and an ‘immunology crisis’.

Thus, four interwoven crises, each one demanding radical changes of paradigms, shaping together a global crisis seen as a ‘creative crisis’ that requires systemic change and a ‘radical reconceptualization’ of the EU in the framework of a new world system. Agh refers to Jürgen Habermas who also views the post-Wall period as coming to an end and who highlights the coronavirus crisis, and the unprecedented European response to it, as an opportunity to accelerate historical awareness of the need to deepen European construction and its solidarity mechanisms.

As could be expected, the various dimensions of the (uncharted) transition, including the core-periphery divide, de-convergence, de-consolidation and de-democratisation, have augmented the impact of 2020’s systemic crisis in the particularly vulnerable central and eastern European countries:

All in all, in the weaker EU member states the triple crisis has taken place in an extreme form, where the neoliberal type of EU integration has led to further social disintegration and accelerated political decline as the ‘death’ of democracy, moreover it has become an increasing obstacle of the innovation-driven, knowledge-based society. The divergence of the NMS [New Member States] regional development from the main line of mankind’s progress has rather characteristically cumulated the negative features of these global processes because in these countries both the socio-economic structure and the health system have been much more vulnerable than in the developed member states. (Agh 2021: 139)

Obviously, the Ukrainian war has added a dramatic fourth layer to the triple crisis Agh discusses. And here again, central and eastern European countries are particularly vulnerable because these countries are geographically closest to the conflict. While the renewal of the Union might open new promising perspectives, in the short run central and eastern European countries are the losers in the ongoing systemic

crisis – other than, of course, those autocratic leaders who abused the coronavirus emergency situation by introducing excessive measures and keeping these provisions in place after the situation had improved (Lührmann and Rooney 2020; Ágh 2022a).

Nevertheless, 2020 marks the beginning of an era of redefinition of the EU. Avoiding a naïve positioning, as Ágh underlines, the:

... systemic change in the EU has not created some kind of ‘perfect’ or ‘ideal’ formation, but the breakthrough to a higher level of EU federalization has taken place. (Ágh 2021: 23)

The Annual Report on Employment and Social Development in Europe (ESDE 2020) illustrates a change in the mindset, aware of the necessity to combine the social, economic and political dimensions of Europe and thus view socioeconomic reforms within new frames:

The pandemic has given new impetus to the EU’s long-term goal of environmentally and socially sustainable growth through greening and digitalisation. To repair the damage done by COVID-19 and prepare Europe’s economy and society for a future of faster structural changes, the EU and Member States will need to embrace fully the opportunities offered by the transition to a greener and more digitalised economy and build inclusiveness, solidarity and resilience into the design of all policies. (ESDE 2020: 20)

While acknowledging the possibility of a wave of reversal, Ágh nevertheless concludes optimistically:

In this historical moment Political Europe has defeated Economic Europe that basically rearranged Social Europe too. (Ágh 2021: 23)

Accordingly, he presents two key terms characterising the reconceptualisation:

Awaking Europe as a new *quality* of the ‘internal’ EU by ‘deepening’, and the *Emerging Europe* as the new *size* or *quantity* of the ‘external’ EU as the global actor with a multi-layered international structure by ‘widening’. (Ágh 2021: 2 [emphasis in original])

But we might question if the bar is not set too high: an awaking Union will have to overcome a Europe that has been fragmented by the events of the past fifteen years, as well as the above-mentioned quadruple crisis – this involves thus a post-crisis recovery of unprecedented magnitude. Yet the multiple Union documents to which Ágh refers and analyses testify, at most, to an awareness of the problem; we are awaiting their implementation.

Nevertheless, Ágh is right when, in comparison to the failed management of the previous crises, he highlights a Union engaged in radical changes the better to equip it to tackle the triple crisis and pave the way for systemic change for further federalisation as well as for a new geopolitical investment, especially in ‘wider Europe’ – meanwhile among the most conflict-ridden regions in the world (European Commission 2003). The latter has become, against the background of the war in Ukraine, an absolute priority.

Three main positive achievements are highlighted by Àgh as a significant breakthrough:

(1) Economic Europe changed drastically with the federalization of the budget, (2) Social Europe with the widening of social and civic security with the transformation of labour market and public health regulations, and (3) Political Europe with a basic democratization due to the tough legislation on the rule of law violations pushed forward by the [European Parliament]. (Àgh 2021: 82)

Alas, the Union's resources have, nevertheless, been feeding the sustainability of autocratic elites in central and eastern European countries – more specifically, in Hungary and Poland – to cement their hold on power and finance their patronage networks. The same 'strategy' can be recognised in former Yugoslavia, especially Croatia (an EU member country since 2013) as well as in Serbia (an EU candidate country since 2012), at the expense of stability in Kosovo and in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Against this background, Àgh notices, rightly (2021: 82):

[New Member States] autocracies will still be an obstacle in this longer and deeper crisis management,

as well as in the shift from a fragmented to a reunited Europe. This worries Àgh inasmuch as the Union has, since the 2010s, had to confront a third wave of autocratisation in east central Europe that is also affecting forthcoming new member states (even if on a virtual basis). Compared to previous traditional types of autocracies, the 'third-generation autocracy' – a notion coined by the V-Dem Institute in the late 2010s – has produced radical 'innovations' with the parallel development of formally democratic, but informally autocratic, forms of institution-building. Herein Àgh identifies three periods, respectively driven by de-democratisation, autocratisation and de-Europeanisation:

First, it will present the [East-Central Europe] failure in the management of the global fiscal crisis due to their missing competitiveness and the emergence of the hybrid regimes in the early 2010s as *De-Democratization*, since in the first period the constitutional foundations of democracy were attacked and weakened. Second, the rise of elected autocracies in the mid-2010s as *Autocratization* with a deepening process of oligarchization based on the politico-business networks in the formal and informal institutions with their efforts to complete the autocratization. Third, the shaky consolidation of these new autocracies in the late 2010s has deepened the Core-Periphery Divide as an open confrontation of the ECE countries with the EU in the recent period of *De-Europeanization*. (Àgh 2022b: 73 [emphasis in original])

There are of course various reasons why the EU turns a blind eye to the serious violations of EU rules and values in the new autocracies. Of many, here are some: the autocrats have proved to be loyal servants of the neoliberal economic Europe of the north; the short-sighted interests of multinationals (benefiting from the economic extension of the EU) became predominant; the 'international community' considered

autocracies as stabilising and adaptable rather than cronyist and corrupt; the EU wanted to secure support for Ukraine (including sanctions against Russia) that required unanimity; the Union intend to avoid a possible new exit and preserve Union integrity; the power of the status quo and therefore the pursuit of a ‘conciliatory approach’ in a predictable institutional and political environment, etc.

All in all, despite such shocking compromises, the Union seems on a better track and moving progressively closer to EU sovereignty. Ágh concludes therefore:

Altogether, EU leaders have had some kind of ‘night blindness’ for many years, which is the condition that makes it difficult or impossible to see the reality in relatively low light. A serious crisis comes as a cure for this ‘blindness’ to recognize the deep and vital processes in the EU for a long-term mechanism. This was the case for the systemic change in 2020 after 30 years, with its aftermath in the early 2020s that has led to the rise of Emerging and Awakening Europe. (Ágh 2021: 93-94)

Ágh is sanguine, albeit sometimes excessively, that the overview he considers as systemic change is ‘not fully completed’ (Ágh 2021: 109) and, accordingly, that he envisions – on the path of Wallerstein – a ‘long transition, which will take place through various periods and shorter crisis circles’ (Ágh 2021: 185). We are, furthermore, facing a long, painful and complex process (Ágh 2022a: 20). It will thus be a ‘long march to the Re-United Europe’ in terms of the EU completing its systemic change and turning its back on the existing world system that, so far, has shaped neoliberal economic Europe (Ágh 2021: 183).

On the road of the ongoing reorganisation of the Union, the confrontation between core and periphery may well be aggravated, bringing us definitively away from the easy dream about a ‘return to Europe’. As autocracies are still going in the opposite direction, the alternative may become unavoidable: ‘some new member states must re-democratize or leave the EU’ (Ágh 2022b: 81).

As Václav Havel stated, history is unpredictable, yet ‘We know nothing. But no one can deprive us of hope’ (Havel 2014: 4). As in the years of that easy dream, hope comes from the citizens that may raise their voices and, where they do so, drive a re-democratization process (Ágh 2022b: 82). Ágh sums it up:

As to the new member states, the first historical test was at their entry, and the second historical test for them is nowadays to take the opportunity offered by the management of the triple global crisis for the “re-entry” to the EU through their serious re-democratization. (Ágh 2022b: 83)

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