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Waiting for an answer that won't come

Explaining Europe's self-destructive behaviour is challenging, and still, one thing is certain — destruction unfolds gradually and often in disguise

Europe faces an explosive cocktail of crises, to which it applies ill-suited treatments. Consider the responses to external security threats following Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Despite declarations that a courageous Ukraine is defending European freedom, investment prioritises national border protection over its own. Furthermore, there is growing discrimination against Ukrainians residing in European nations, obstruction of Ukrainian agricultural exports and increased barriers to European Union enlargement. Although the reliability of American security protection is diminishing, Europe continues to acquire American armaments, which could be rendered unusable by a capricious US President.

Responses to internal security threats are equally peculiar. States exhibit leniency towards the excesses of far-right movements but not towards their victims: migrants, feminists, LGBT+ communities and environmentalists. Racist and nationalist rhetoric is gradually being adopted by nominally liberal parties, implicitly condoning violence against minorities despite legal safeguards. International rights, such as asylum, are being suspended, and constitutional provisions on human rights are ignored.

Regarding migration, which Europe purportedly seeks to curb, counterproductive measures are prevalent. It is well understood that wars, poverty and climate change drive migration. Yet, instead of preventing conflicts in Africa and the Middle East, redoubling efforts to alleviate poverty and halting climate change, Europe constructs walls that often impede entrepreneurs and tourists more than undocumented migrants and smugglers.

Despite the knowledge that an integrated Europe could effectively address American tariffs, Russian expansionism, migration or climate change, the European Union is held hostage to national sovereign whims. Efforts are underway to dismantle pivotal EU initiatives such as the rule

of law protections, the pact on migration and the Green Deal.

Many problems with no solutions

Explaining Europe's self-destructive, almost sado-masochistic, behaviour is challenging. While there is a general consensus on the causes of the current predicament, credible solutions remain elusive. Mainstream parties, which have governed Europe for decades, have compromised or betrayed their liberal ideals by tolerating increasing inequalities, engaging in international disputes and disregarding the social costs of technological advancements.

Consequently, they have lost their grip on power across ideological, electoral and administrative domains. This atmosphere of political instability and ideological vacuum has fostered public fears. These fears have been exacerbated by terrorism, pandemics, financial instability, climate change and wars on Europe's periphery. Cultural anxieties stemming from increasing migration, female emancipation, demographic decline and uneven digital skills have also played a role. Fear provides fertile ground for political demagogues aspiring to regime change, and the liberal establishment has proven too complacent and unimaginative to offer a convincing response. This brings us to the remedies applied thus far.

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Some self-proclaimed liberals have begun to emulate populists, with Mark Rutte, Donald Tusk and Mette Frederiksen serving as notable examples. Others have opted for technocratic solutions to Europe's social, psychological and political problems, as seen in the policies of Mario Draghi, Dick Schoof and even Keir Starmer. There are also politicians, such as Giuseppe Conte and Emmanuel Macron, who have blended these opposing stances into what Christopher Bickerton and Carlo Invernizzi Accetti term 'techno-populism.' While Tusk, Frederiksen, Macron and Starmer remain in power, it is difficult to conclude that any of these strategies have been truly successful. At best, they have merely slowed the ascent of far-right nativists and prevented escalating problems from exploding. Unfortunately, uncertainty, fear and anger persist in most European democracies, benefiting far-right politicians.

Before solely blaming politicians, it must be acknowledged that intellectuals have offered little assistance in devising credible remedies. Modern equivalents of Adam Smith, Jean-Jacques Rousseau or Immanuel Kant have not emerged. Even Karl Marx, Hannah Arendt and Carl Popper no longer serve as inspiring thinkers, resulting in a lack of comprehensive visions for desired change. The few intellectuals who still attempt to advise politicians promote abstract and often nebulous concepts such as creative destruction, dynamic efficiency, progressive conservatism or common-sense revolution.

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A prime example of rather unhelpful intellectual prescriptions was recently offered by the acclaimed academic pundit Mariana Mazzucato: 'Too many policy programs are built on assumptions from a bygone era: that a consensus can be built gradually, that behavioural change (like the shift to preventive health systems) will be politically rewarded, that evidence-based policymaking can overcome "alternative facts".' This raises questions about whether consensus must be imposed rather than negotiated by governments, whether gradual improvements in health or social systems should be abandoned, and whether misinformation should guide policymaking. Surely, there must be a misunderstanding.

The title of this essay draws inspiration from the 'Post//Future' exhibition organised by the Delphian and Saatchi Galleries in London. Europe appears to be rushing headlong towards an anticipated crash, without a compass, a map or even a clear destination. Despite the transnational nature of most current problems, politicians are busy dismantling international institutions in pursuit of national pride and sovereignty. While rampant nationalism prevails, each nation is helplessly divided, with opposing factions unwilling or unable to reach a compromise or consensus.

Destruction unfolds gradually

Although curbing public debts, migratory flows or climate change demands long-term, consistent engagement, governments rely on flashy, quick fixes guided by periodic elections and erratic opinion polls. Despite Russia posing a formidable threat, states randomly acquire weapons without a convincing military doctrine, sound budgetary provisions, minimal public oversight or well-defined strategic objectives. While

climate change scientists issue desperate warnings, states abandon environmental regulations under the alluring slogan of deregulation. As public services collapse and public debts rise, politicians promise ever more tax cuts. Such examples are abundant.

Thus far, Europe has managed to muddle through successive crises without addressing their root causes. A few basic rhetorical questions suffice to expose the limited scope of seemingly successful efforts: Will Greece ever repay its debts after three bailouts and draconian welfare cuts? Will refugee camps in Turkey or repatriation camps in Albania alleviate public anxieties related to migration? Will envisaged military spending leave public schools and hospitals unaffected? Will reassuring words from the last NATO summit make Europe safe? Will the EU survive without its liberal agenda of human rights and the rule of law?

National and international institutions engage in numerous projects and issue reassuring declarations, yet the erosion of public health, legal standards, economic competitiveness and administrative capacity progresses unchecked.

The current situation evokes the final stages of communism in Poland, vividly depicted by Tadeusz Konwicki in his satirical book *A Minor Apocalypse*: 'Our epoch is that of noble doubts, blessed uncertainty, sacred hypersensitivity, divine wishy-washiness.' Ukrainian novels portraying their country, particularly Donbas, before the 2022 Russian invasion, are similarly ironic. These books warn that destruction unfolds gradually, by default, and often in disguise. Politicians are preoccupied with generating *Ersatz* solutions, while citizens are cynical, atomised and incapable of forming a united front for constructive action.

National and international institutions engage in numerous projects and issue reassuring declarations, yet the erosion of public health, legal standards, economic competitiveness and administrative capacity progresses unchecked. Employers feign offering decent pay, and employees feign working efficiently. Soldiers receive increasing armaments but remain uncertain of their prospective missions. Democracy formally exists, but it barely generates legitimacy for political leaders. After a period of confusion bordering on despair, a crash, caused by a cocktail of accumulated crises, seems inevitable. Is there a way to avert this scenario? Perhaps, but it is difficult to imagine, even for an optimist.

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