
Essay

FORUM EU. CRISIS AS NARRATIVE? PERSPECTIVES ON THE HISTORY OF EUROPEAN UNIFICATION¹

Von Claudia Hiepel, Rüdiger Hohls, Claudia Prinz

Dear readers,

„Europe will be forged in crises, and will be the sum of the solutions adopted for those crises.“ Jean Monnet’s famous dictum comes to mind, as Europe’s nation-states and the European Union’s institutions seek their paths through the coronavirus pandemic. Many commentators perceive the current moment as an hour of the nation-state, with individual states in Europe taking very different (and often drastic) measures to control the pandemic. This is not surprising, since health policy is (still) a task of the nation-states and does not fall within the competence of the EU Commission. Entire countries have been put in „lockdown“, with people quarantined at home and public institutions and economies on hold; others are opting for a more „liberal“ approach; and yet others seem to use the threat of a deadly virus to execute political measures that have the potential to change their system of government for years to come. Borders that had been open for decades have been closed, migration both within Europe and its nations is being curtailed. At the same time, calls for the European Union to find European solutions for the coronavirus crisis are getting louder. The EU’s institutions themselves have announced multiple measures, such as a comprehensive recovery fund, and signalled that further policies are to be expected in the near future. Discussion about these means, the meaning of solidarity, of rights and duties in the European Union has begun and is likely to last for some time. The debate, at times, is charged with (often controversial, overdetermined and contradictory) meaning. It is no big surprise that commentators delve into bigger pictures, eager to discuss the future and the merits of European unification in principle. Many of them seem to suggest that we live in a state of emergency.

A rhetoric of crisis, of potential (medical, or economic) catastrophe and of unprecedentedness dominates the public debate at this point. There are certainly good reasons to perceive the current situation as critical. By no means do we wish to negate the hardships that the coronavirus has brought to nations and to individual people, and the situation is likely

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to remain difficult for some time to come. But Jean Monnet's dictum should remind us, as historians, that the perception of crisis accompanies the entire history of European unification. In hindsight, the feeling of living in extraordinary times may be put in more perspective. But how much do Monnet's words tell us today? If pandemics act as catalysts – might the COVID-19 pandemic reinforce a trend that has been diagnosed since the financial crisis of 2008/2009, the refugee influx of 2015, the 2016 Brexit vote etc: That the solutions to crises do no longer accelerate European unification, but rather deepen the fractures in this community? If pandemics act as prisms for what has already been there – do they actually distort our view by focussing on crises and relegating everything else to the shadows? What do we not notice when focussing on the interpretation of unification as a series of crises?

The aim of this H-Soz-Kult / *Themenportal Europäische Geschichte* discussion series is therefore twofold. One, we're asking what historians have to offer in the current public debate on the present and future of the European Union. We are convinced that, by analyzing the current situation with the knowledge about and background of the history of the European Union, we can provide important contexts and question some of the assertions of unpreparedness or unprecedentedness. This may help us understand and assess current and future problems in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. And second, we want to continue the historiographical debate on the history of European unification. (How) does the current pandemic with its political, economic and social consequences alter our narrative of the European Union?

We seek to present diverse positions and perspectives on these questions. We have, therefore, asked scholars of contemporary European history from a range of countries and thematic backgrounds to contribute to this series. Publication of these essays will continue into the fall. This discussion series is a cooperation between the editors of H-Soz-Kult and the thematic portal European History (*Themenportal Europäische Geschichte*, <https://www.europa.clio-online.de/>). Essays will be published continuously via H-Soz-Kult, and in a compiled version for the latter portal.

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