



# A TIME TO REFLECT AND A TIME TO ACT

PROF. INGRID SHIKOVA

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Asked by a young journalist what could ruin the government's program, British Prime Minister Harold Macmillan (1957-1963) replied shortly: "Events, dear boy, events!" Indeed, unforeseen events create the most serious problems. According to the calendar, 2020 was to be a festive year for Europe - 75 years since the defeat of the Nazis in World War II, 70 years since the Declaration of Robert Schuman, which marked the beginning of the current European Union, 35 years since the signing of the Schengen Agreement on Free Movement and Europe without borders. Hoping not to repeat the word 'crisis' often, 2020 surprised us with enough unforeseen events to

shake and confuse even the most determined leaders.

The crisis caused by the Covid-19 virus marked 2020. Along with this unknown virus, there were others that we already considered extinct in the European Union. The viruses of nationalism, selfishness and division are no less dangerous than Covid-19 "The virus is coming back. The climate that seems to prevail between the heads of state and government has shown the divisions between the 27, especially between the countries of the North and the South, and the lack of European solidarity is a mortal danger for the European Union. " warned Jacques Delors, one of the greatest defenders of European unification.



In this complex environment, when Europe is experiencing severe health, social and economic problems, it is logical to ask whether something will change after the crisis caused by Covid-19. What will our lives look like? Will the European Union change? Will the world change? After all, what will the next years be like? Probably not as we imagined them in early 2020. How to rethink them?

Although the economy has been hit hardly by the crisis, what has happened during the recent months could lead to a number of positive changes, as long as we can learn from this pandemic. The post-crisis world and the European Union depend to a large extent on this. For now, the only certain circumstance is that in the near future we will have to live in a world with COVID-19.

**Rethinking the competences of the European Union in the field of health** - The initial reactions of the European Union and, more precisely, of its institutions to the spreading pandemic seemed chaotic. Member States reacted largely uncoordinated when closing borders and banning the export of protective masks, protective clothing and medicines. Criticism has been leveled against the European Union for insufficient action on the health crisis. However, anyone who is informed about how the European Union works, how and who makes decisions in different areas, is aware that the competences of the European institutions

in the field of public health are only supportive, as opposed to exclusive competences, for example in the field of trade policy. The lesson of the health crisis inevitably leads to the conclusion that the European Union must have greater competences in public health. In this regard, there is a need to make healthcare a shared competence, enabling the European Union to have the power to act in the protection of public health. This change would require a change in the Treaties, which is a serious task, but another operational solution could be found if all countries agree to this option. In this direction is the speech of French President Emmanuel Macron in March this year. "What this pandemic is already revealing is that free health care...is not a cost or a burden to our social system, but a precious commodity, a basic asset when fate strikes us ... There are goods and services which must be placed outside the laws of the market. "

**Ensuring the strategic autonomy of the European Union** - The European Union's dependence on imports of certain goods important for tackling the pandemic, mainly from China, has necessitated a rethinking of the EU's strategic independence. This became clear in March this year., when EU leaders in a joint declaration stressed the need for "strategic autonomy of the bloc". The conclusion about the need for greater economic independence of the EU from external market participants is increasingly necessary with the growing economic problems. In practice, this

strategic autonomy has several directions: first, the return of some productions, mainly relocated in China, to the EU Member States. This would be the chance for the countries of Central and Eastern Europe, including Bulgaria, to take over some of these productions. The other direction is the careful screening of foreign investments - the probability of economic difficulties of strategic European companies to lead to their purchase by foreign investors and mainly from China is high and the EU Member States should be especially careful in this regard.

**Strengthening the European Union's food security and reducing dependence on imported food.** According to the European Commissioner for Agriculture Janusz Wojciechowski one of the main lessons of the crisis is that Europe must grow its own crops: "We must have our own food, produced on our fields by our own farmers and we must take better care of it." This also implies an improvement in functioning of the common agricultural policy.

**Implementing the European Green Deal-** Overcoming the health crisis and the economic crisis are the most important tasks and challenges to be handled by the European Union. Although there are differing views among the Member States, there is a growing perception that economic recovery and growth are going through a "green transition" and that the European Green Deal is the

growth strategy that will lead to a better world. It is very important whether the aid, which will be granted at both European and national level, will focus on "saving" traditional sectors or will encourage environmental transformation. If Member States focus on restoring economic growth at all costs without caring for the environment, they are likely to have some short-term positive effects, such as reducing unemployment, avoiding corporate bankruptcies, but this would have very unfavorable long-term consequences.

**Rethinking the role of experts, increasing investment in education, science and innovation** - There is a worldwide trend among populist parties and politicians to underestimate the views of academics, researchers in various fields, especially in the field of climate change and environmental protection. The COVID-19 pandemic could change that and the society will require politicians to comply with the opinion of scientists. In this regard, the European Union is likely to make efforts to invest more in education, science and innovation, which is already confirmed by a number of actions taken during the pandemic.

**Digitization, the digital world and its rethinking** - The health crisis has forced a number of activities, including in the field of education, to be carried out remotely. Rethinking the funding, renewal and

equipment of schools and universities, the training of teachers and students can accelerate the introduction of innovative teaching methods to prepare professionals with the necessary knowledge and skills for the European economy. The crisis has made it clear that every member of society must have digital skills, as well as access to the Internet and a computer. The European Union should emerge from this crisis with an even greater focus on digitalization. Changes are also possible in the way the European Union itself functions. The online holding of some of the sittings of the European Parliament, as well as of other European institutions during the crisis, has shown that it is possible in the future some activities of the European Union institutions to be carried thereby.

**Rethinking social justice** - The successful implementation of digitalization and the European Green Deal are about addressing a number of important social issues and, above all, social justice. No one shall be neglected, abandoned or discriminated against. Unfortunately, the health crisis has highlighted social injustice, especially in the field of education. It is time to discuss in more depth throughout the European Union the idea of a universal basic income in the context of the unprecedented economic crisis caused by the pandemic.

**Rethinking decisions about the euro** - The desire for a stable European currency must encourage the European Union to take swift and effective measures to stabilize the economy and, consequently, the single currency. "But for that to happen, Europe will need strong economic growth. If we can choose the right growth strategy and issue bonds for joint debt....then the European Union can emerge stronger from the crisis," said Guntram Wolf, director of the Brussels-based think tank. "Bruegel". Given the devastating economic consequences of the coronavirus crisis, the future of the European Union cannot and should not be marked by a permanent division between the Nordic and Southern countries.

**Guiding Europe out of the crisis** – this will be the defining task of German Presidency July-December 2020. There is an incredible amount of work that extends into all dimensions of the European Union: stimulating the economy, strengthening internal cohesion, developing greater internal solidarity, becoming stronger and more sovereign toward the outside world. At the same time, topics of great importance for the future of Europe will also play a role: for example, the next multiannual financial framework, climate protection, digital transformation, the rule of law and Europe's role in the world. These topics will be particularly important in overcoming the current crisis. The negotiations to shape the EU's future relationship with the United Kingdom also

fall within this period. And these changes concentrate on two words that describe the entire programme of the German Presidency: **solidarity and sovereignty** as said the Federal minister for Foreign Affairs Heiko Maas.

In conclusion, I would like to remind another anniversary relevant to the European Union - 250 years since the birth of Ludwig van Beethoven. Influenced by the spirit of the French Revolution, Beethoven dreamed of "a society in which the free development of the people is the ultimate goal." Beethoven created his Symphony № 9, declared a UNESCO World Heritage Site, in self-isolation due to his deafness. This is eloquent proof that inspiration and creativity, as well as the call for unity from the Ode to Joy, must not stop even in the most difficult times.