

BOOK REVIEW

Europe Reinvented: How COVID-19 is Changing the European Union

By Peter Van Kemseke

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In the last days of 2019, foresight reports, which predict the emerging trends influencing international politics, would be interesting to revisit, as they contain not even a glimpse of an approaching pandemic. Peter Van Kemseke, in *Europe Reinvented*, starts by observing that no country leader or state representative was aware of what was going on in China when Chinese President Jinping gave assurances about the thriving motherland at his annual New Year's speech. Jinping praised his hard-working citizens and assured everyone that the country was doing fine thanks to their elevating works. Among those people still at work at the very last day of the year, however, were health department officials in the Chinese city of Wuhan.

Kemseke, a diplomat and politician, explains the Covid-19 crisis as a nightmare for the EU and the world, but stresses that every crisis presents a unique opportunity to wake up, and that this unprecedented challenge offers a way for EU to reinvent itself.

In the first part of the book, which consists of seven chapters, Kemseke depicts a rather pessimistic view of the first months of 2020. The picture is dark indeed, as neither the EU countries nor EU institutions were prepared to engage in the strict and rapid coordination required to address the onslaught of emergency health situations. Kemseke reminds readers that in the 2010 banking crisis, each country first tried to save their own banks—until they realized that their banks were closely intertwined with other European banks and concluded that a European-wide solution was the only real solution.

Kemseke's analysis of how (un)prepared the EU was in the first months of 2020 in the field of health is especially interesting. In the EU, the health sector is under the national domain rather than EU competency, and governments were reluctant to shift their power to the European level during the crisis. The EU cannot dictate how its members should handle such a situation; the national governments are the ones making such decisions, and the EU could only give advice in complement to national policies. Because of the lack of coordination, an already challenging situation only aggravated while national policies prioritized self-interest.

The diversity of national policies was also evident in the airport practices of EU states. Some EU countries created separate sections for passengers flying in from Chinese risk areas, or organized thermal screenings—whereas others did nothing at all. One possible reason for their inaction was the clear lack of sense of urgency, as Covid-19 was still unknown waters and disinformation was quick to spread. Kemseke dubs this period “confident inaction”.

The first period of the crisis revealed that solidarity among EU members was fragile. When EU health ministers convened in an extraordinary meeting on February 13, 2020, it was once more proved that emergency health response was national responsibility and that coordination was difficult to achieve. At the end of the same month, Northern Italy was hit hard with infected people and the virus spread immediately to the neighboring countries. The first reaction was to blame open borders instead of stressing the importance of solidarity; this call was especially taken up extreme right-wing politicians. Kemseke refers to this period as, “enlightened self-interest”. Although the EU is based mainly on solidarity in which everyone benefits from others' success, national reflexes among EU countries prevailed and the increasing number of infected people signaled a decreased level of European solidarity. Kemseke sees this failure to coordinate as a missing insight.

Despite these early issues, Kemseke presents readers with a reenergizing belief in the EU project, and depicts the ways in which EU solidarity finally emerged in the second and third parts of the book. Being united on several fronts, such as a single market and the Schengen area has been the *raison d'être* of being a part of the EU. For example, any restriction

on the free movement of people led to a host of practical problems with huge impact on the single market which was detrimental to the EU project. Kemseke considers that in every crisis, the Union first needs a meta-crisis, a clash of hurt feelings, before solidarity kicks in.

As Kemseke reiterates in the third section, the outbreak of Covid-19 caused a systemic shock in Europe, which eventually kicked into emergency mode. One of the reasons that the EU decided to wake up from its nightmare was recognition of the reality of the EU's dependence on China and the declining global leadership of the U.S. While the pandemic revealed the fragility of EU solidarity, it also highlighted the vulnerability of democracy and the rule of law. Thus, Covid-19 pushed the Union to draw a line for the sake of its founding values, even during an emergency health situation.

At the end of the book, Kemseke considers that the EU's journey is like a rollercoaster ride, starting with initial denial shifting to surprise and finally to resilience and solidarity. He is not sure whether Covid-19 will have a lasting effect on the EU's future.

It is quite understandable that Van Kemseke would strongly stress that every crisis provides an opportunity for the EU to strengthen itself in unexpected ways. He was in the cabinet of European Council President Herman Van Rompuy and worked for European Commission Vice-President Maroš Šefčovič. He experienced the most problematic days of the EU, starting with the banking crisis that transformed into the financial crisis of 2012. These crises following one another, in fact, pushed the Union to be more creative in terms of coping with blows to solidarity as national interests rise. Solidarity is at the very center of the Union; every challenge becomes another highlighting marker on the page of solidarity. First economic crisis, then migration crisis, Brexit, Covid-19 and now war in Ukraine... While Kemseke repeats the importance of the solidarity yet also complains of its occasional lack, it is hard to be certain that Union actually *does* reinvent itself with every crisis, as he argues, or whether this is just wishful thinking. The book starts with dark pessimism, then shifts its outlook to rising optimism. Maybe it makes more sense to wait for upcoming years, as Kemseke recommends, to see whether the Union will reinvent itself or not. Although this outcome remains to be seen, *Europe Reinvented*

is highly recommended for Social Sciences academics and EU experts who would like to learn more about how Brussels operates.

Almula Türedi

EU Affairs Expert

Ministry of Foreign Affairs

Directorate for EU Affairs

ORCID: 0009-0001-5440-9616