DISINTEGRATING SOCIETY AND THE ROLE OF GOVERNANCE IN AVOIDING CRISIS

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EDITORIAL

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In recent years, the disintegration of social cohesion and the rise of polarisation have become increasingly evident in Western societies. Peter Turchin's work on what he calls *cliodynamics* provides a lens through which we can understand these phenomena. Drawing on historical cycles and statistical models, he identifies two key drivers of societal crises: *immiseration* (the economic and social decline of the lower and middle classes) and *overproduction of elites* (the proliferation of individuals and groups vying for elite status, leading to intense competition and eventual fragmentation within the elite itself).[1] These forces, he argues, inevitably lead to fragmentation, polarisation, and, ultimately, social disintegration. However, Turchin's grim prognosis is tempered with hope. Wise governance can mitigate these trends and steer societies away from the brink of collapse. In this context, we will look at how the European Union can and must help European societies cope with the challenges raised by Turchin.

Turchin focuses primarily on the situation in the United States (U.S.). Since the 1970s, economic inequality has grown significantly, with real wages stagnating for most workers even as the cost of living, particularly in areas like housing, education, and healthcare, has soared. Simultaneously, the U.S. has experienced a significant expansion of its elite class. This includes not only the wealthy but also those who hold power through bureaucratic control, ideological influence, or social capital. The result has been a "game of aspirants' chairs," where competition for elite status has become increasingly fierce. Those who fail to secure their place within the elite often become counter-elites, challenging the existing system and exploiting the anger of the impoverished masses.

This pattern is less pronounced in most European societies, but they, too, struggle with rising populism fuelled by the frustrations of those who feel left behind by the current economic and political order. Brexit was an extreme example in this respect, with a populist backlash against the perceived elitism of the traditional political and economic establishment. Growing polarisation makes it difficult to achieve the compromises necessary for effective governance, further deepening the crisis.

According to Turchin, history offers examples of how wise governance can prevent or mitigate societal crises. One of the most notable examples is the New Deal in the U.S. during the 1930s. Faced with the Great Depression and the threat of social upheaval, President Franklin D. Roosevelt implemented a series of reforms aimed at reducing inequality, providing social safety nets, and strengthening the role of the state in the economy. These measures not only alleviated the immediate economic crisis but also laid the foundation for a period of relative social cohesion and economic growth that lasted for decades.

The post-World War II era in Western Europe provides another and mores sustained model for successful governance in the face of potential disintegration. The policies adopted by European countries, particularly Germany, the Benelux countries, and the Nordic region, helped to create more egalitarian societies with strong social safety nets and a high degree of social cohesion. These policies benefitted from a consensus-based approach to politics, which emphasised collaboration between different social groups and the importance of maintaining a balance between the interests of labour and capital. The European integration movement based on

[1] See Peter Turchin, End Times (Elites, Counter-Elites, and the Path of Political Disintegration), Penguin Books.

cooperation, institutions and the rule of laws provided a framework for spreading these values.

But in Europe too the effects of the Reagan/Thatcher revolution with corporate-driven globalisation and its excessive reliance on market forces created more inequalities, weakened social structures[2] and diminished the role of the state in ensuring fairness and balance. It also functioned as a massive wealth pump making the rich richer. At the same time poorly managed immigration policies led to accusations of using cheap labour to undermine the interests of local workers. The fact that the European treaties were much more forceful in imposing economic, monetary and competition rules than in promoting social measures reinforced the impression that Europe was defending the interests of big business and the elites.

The subprime crisis starting in 2008 seemed to confirm the fears that the EU was more interested in bailing out the banks than holding them to account for reckless policies. The loss of control of the external EU borders in 2015 resulting in a massive inflow of migrants stunned Europeans and fuelled recriminations. Calls for a “Europe that protects” grew louder and louder, and the political leaders of Europe heeded them. Over the past 15 years, we have seen a return of the state, massive injections of public money (European and national) to save industries (including banks!) but also to protect workers and fight unemployment. The migration and asylum policy underwent major changes in an admittedly painful process. When COVID-19 struck, the EU reacted quickly and forcefully, and it did likewise after the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Today we can say that the crisis management of the EU has strengthened integration and resilience.

However, reacting to crises and staving off disaster is not enough. If we want to exit the state of perma-crisis we have faced over the past years, we need to develop a more pro-active and structural policy. The underlying disintegration factors described by Turchin have not gone away, and the international situation is highly flammable. As Western societies face the challenges of the 21st century, including rising inequality, polarisation, and the threat of populism, it is imperative that political leaders prioritise policies that promote social justice, reduce inequality, and strengthen the social fabric[3]. The EU must lead by example in addressing these issues. The Strategic Agenda 2024-29 adopted by the July European Council before the summer recess provides a useful framework in this respect.

To implement these political orientations, efficient and effective governance is key. This will require continuous attention over the whole next institutional cycle, including in the framework of negotiations on the 2029-2034 MFF and in the preparation for future enlargements. The challenges faced by modern democracies are even more difficult for a union of States and peoples, with diverse levels of integration and a wide web of institutions, agencies and national administrations. The EU needs to rethink its governance structures to improve efficiency and thus gain greater credibility and popular support. This includes streamlining decision-making processes, enhancing cooperation between EU institutions and member states, and looking at financing, administration, and communication. These reforms are necessary

[2] I remember a talk between Helmut Kohl and Jacques Santer in 1995 when the German chancellor expressed deep worry about the weakening of social institutions like political parties, trade unions, and churches.

[3] To be fair, Jacques Delors attached high importance to social cohesion and initiated regular meetings with the social partners already in the 1980s. Jean-Claude Juncker followed the same logic when he initiated the Pillar of Social Rights in 2016.

not only to address the immediate challenges facing the EU but also to prepare for future crises and ensure the long-term stability of the European project[4].

The disintegration of society, as described by Turchin, is not an inevitable outcome. While the forces of immiseration and elite overproduction are powerful drivers of crisis, history shows that wise governance can mitigate these trends and prevent the worst outcomes. With the right leadership and a commitment to the principles of equity and inclusion, it is possible to steer society away from the brink and toward a more just and cohesive future. The lessons of history, as illuminated by Turchin and others, provide a roadmap for navigating the challenges ahead. It is up to today's leaders to take these lessons to heart and act with wisdom and foresight. The resounding success of the Paris Olympic games shows that what looks impossible can become possible with the right dose of leadership and popular involvement.

[4] See Jim Cloos and Giles Merritt, Thoughts on Improving EU Governance (EGMONT/TEPSA)

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