

SCTCMG 2021**International Scientific Conference «Social and Cultural Transformations in the Context of
Modern Globalism»****EUROPEAN UNION IN THE CONTEXT OF “NEW NORMALITY”:
INTEGRATION AS A RESPONSE**

Anton P. Shmelev (a)*, Dmitry A. Belachenko (b), Mikhail I. Rykhtik (c),
Vitaly V. Tolkachev (d), Imomidin F. Shodzhonov (e)

*Corresponding author

- (a) Institute of the International Relations and World History of N.I. Lobachevsky State University of Nizhni Novgorod, 2, Ulyanov St., N. Novgorod, Russia, a.shmelev1975@gmail.com
(b) Institute of the International Relations and World History of N.I. Lobachevsky State University of Nizhni Novgorod, 2, Ulyanov St., N. Novgorod, Russia,
(c) Institute of the International Relations and World History of N.I. Lobachevsky State University of Nizhni Novgorod, 2, Ulyanov St., N. Novgorod, Russia,
(d) Institute of the International Relations and World History of N.I. Lobachevsky State University of Nizhni Novgorod, 2, Ulyanov St., N. Novgorod, Russia,
(e) Institute of the International Relations and World History of N.I. Lobachevsky State University of Nizhni Novgorod, 2, Ulyanov St., N. Novgorod, Russia

Abstract

The development of the treaty base of the European Union, phased introduction of a common currency, the process of EU expansion in the late 20th – early 21st centuries was perceived as the triumph of the idea of a united Europe with democratic values and a market economy. A stable economic and monetary union, a single domestic market, a freedom of movement of people, the implementation of a common foreign and security policy were to become a logical development of European integration and an example of international cooperation. However, in the first decades of the 21st century, the European Union faced certain problems caused by internal and external factors. The response to these problems in the context of the “New Normal” significantly influenced the development of this integration association. The first in a series of significant crises that had a considerable impact on the EU development was the global economic crisis of 2008. The crises and conflicts of the first decades of the 21st century caused a migration influx in the EU, which exacerbated the problem of unity in the organization and forced to rethink the relations with Russia. The accumulation of various political, economic and migration problems led to the withdrawal of Great Britain from the EU. Finally, the current situation with the pandemic encourages the search for new mechanisms of interaction to deal with its consequences both within and outside the community. The use of these mechanisms differs from the usual interstate interaction and implies more results.

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Keywords: European Union, New Normality, integration processes, migration, pandemic



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1. Introduction

The global economic crisis of 2008 was the basis for the emergence and active use of the New Normal definition, which was originally used mainly to analyze the socio-economic consequences of the global recession (Miller & Benjamin, 2008). The term used in the communiqué of G-20 leaders at the Pittsburgh Summit in September 2009 quickly began to apply to other crisis events of a global scale.

The definition of the “New Normal” is also used in the analysis of processes in the field of international relations, for example, the relationship between the Russian Federation and the European Union at the present stage. In this case it is noted that it is impossible to interact in a normal mode, when joint economic interests serve the driver of this interaction, and international political factors have minimal impact.

Events related to the COVID-19 pandemic filled this concept with a new meaning. The very definition of the “New Normal” has become widespread in the works on the impact of the pandemic on the world community (Kasai, 2020).

In fact, at the present stage of its use the concept of the “New Normal” includes the definition of the “new state of economy, society, international relations after radical changes (post-crisis)” both related to the implementation (in a broad sense) of new instruments, principles and approaches, and the implementation (in a narrow sense) of new international legal norms in relation to the world community as a whole, and individual actors of the system of international relations, in particular.

2. Problem Statement

The first decades of the 21st century are characterized by a series of crises, which created certain risks for the European Union as a quite successful integration community. World financial and economic crisis of 2008 interrupted progressive development of the European integration which did not begin to be perceived as unambiguously stable process any more. The European Union entered the worst recession in the history, which left a deep imprint on the economy of member states, which it was leaving long enough: steady annual GDP growth of the European Union began nearly five years later (in 2013), apart from complexity of a situation in some certain countries, for example, in Greece.

The processes connected with the events of “The Arab Spring” had a great influence on the European Union as on the integration association and the actor in the system of the international relations. Destabilization of an internal political situation in a number of countries, strengthening of radical Islamic ideas, growth of terrorist attacks, mass inflow of migrants – all this affected the European structure considering the expansion of the scales of external programs of the military-political and financial-economic plan concerning the “third world” countries and disagreements in the EU by the migration legislation, and distribution of the far right ideas in the EU countries, growth of a number of members of the right movements, organizations and parties (Araźna, 2015; Kaminski, 2015).

The set of political, economic, migration problems strengthened the positions of “eurosceptics” that, in turn, led to an unprecedented phenomenon of an exit of Great Britain from the European Union that induced to look for new ways of interaction between Brussels and London and new factors of power of the European idea, European unity.

The events of 2008 and 2014–2015 around Georgia and Ukraine forced to revise the policy of the EU for Russia. These key events for the Russia-EU relations (more widely – Russia-West) took place against the background of the transformation of the former Soviet Union into a peculiar competition territory of integration projects between Moscow and Brussels (Eurasian and European) (Belashchenko, et al., 2020). Besides, if earlier this referred to a classical “dilemma of integration” for the participants and implied the choice between options, then at the present stage the new concept – “dilemma of integration” reflecting a situation when “a state considers the integration of neighbors into the economic and/or military blocks and organizations closed for him as a threat of own safety and wellbeing” (Troitsky & Charap, 2013, p. 26).

The coronavirus pandemic became the next call of the EU as to the integration association and the actor of a system of international relations stimulating new rules, principles, methods and approaches of international and political activity both at the regional level and in the system of international relations in general. Strict restriction of the freedom of travel as a measure of fight against the spread of a disease is a shock for one of the values of the European integration community (Vieta, 2020). In spite of the fact that in the future this freedom will be somehow restored, the pandemic also gets pronounced ideological dimension finding reflection in the majority of documents, declarations, speeches and various information messages of the EU representatives and official structures.

These crisis processes and events either replaced each other or were imposed chronologically in certain cases promoting the cumulative effect in economic, social, and political spheres. As a result the European Union was forced to react to a set of challenges and risks to further existence and development of the integration.

3. Research Questions

This study focuses on integration processes in Europe, in particular EU policies. The paper aims to study the responses of the European Union as a special international institution to the challenges of the present time, which have become the “New Normal”. The object of the analysis was the impact of the global financial and economic crisis of 2008 on the integration within the EU; the process of shaping the EU foreign policy towards Russia in the context of events in the post-Soviet space in the first decades of the 2000s; the impact of the migration crisis, which maintained the issue of the depth of integration interaction, on the economies and policies of EU countries; the role of Britain’s withdrawal from the EU for further development of European integration; the EU’s response to the COVID-19, which not only struck the lives and health of the population, but also shocked one of the values of the integration society – freedom of movement.

4. Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the study is to identify ways to respond to modern challenges and threats from the European Union as the most developed integration association in the depth of the interaction spheres and the circle of participants, to analyze them in terms of recognizing their optimality in the EU itself, in the international political, economic and social context, including taking into account the Russian factor.

5. Research Methods

The institutional approach focusing on knowledge and interpretation of historical reality in terms of the activity of various institutes governing human relations in the society, as well as the social norms formed by these institutes and behavior models of the corresponding participants was chosen as the theoretical and methodical basis of the study. Hence, on the example of the European Union as an international institute we see actions going beyond standard interstate cooperation.

In this respect, the behavioral models of the integration association may fail to correspond to the national interests of certain member countries (for example, whether the preservation of Greece in the eurozone was favorable to Germany from the financial point of view?), be irrational (consequences of an exit of Great Britain from the EU taking into account problems which the country will face after Brexit: beginning from a new round of the movement for independence of Scotland to conditions of the presence of the British firms and financial structures in the continental market in the long term?), to stimulate developments of innovative solutions (more centralized credit and financial policy in the eurozone after the crisis of 2008, which is even more limiting sovereignty of the states) in some situations which this association is facing.

In terms of the theory of the international relations the study also corresponds to the concept of transnational relations and the theory of complex interdependence underlining the variety of actors and channels of interaction between them.

The study is based on the use of various methods, in particular:

- event analysis, which allowed qualitatively estimating the value of any given event concerning foreign policy planning within the EU;
- decision method, which allowed studying the features of the decision-making process in the EU in certain situations.

6. Findings

Analyzing the policy of the European Union in the “New Normal” period it is worth noting the options of reaction, and the general vector of reactions directed not only on the preservation of integration association, but also on the continuation of integration processes.

The global economic crisis of 2008, which became one of the Brexit prerequisites, threatened with the withdrawal from the EU and Greece (Grexit). Having faced this adverse situation, the EU institutes and member states made resolute political decisions to constrain the crisis, to keep integrity of euro and to avoid the worst consequences. Thus, the package of measures for the regulation of the financial sector and the improvement of economic management was realized (Butorina, 2013).

In general, the recovery at the European level was quite sustainable, the number of the member states entering the eurozone increased from 12 to 19. From eight member states, which received financial aid, only Greece was within the aid program till 2018. By the same time only three member states were subject to “the procedure of excessive deficiency” of the Pact of stability and growth in comparison with 24 states in the middle of the crisis. In the context of the crisis there was an expression of “the budgetary federalism” as the decision allowing coordinating national budgetary policy and stabilizing business

cycles, achieving currency stability, becoming the tool of economic development and a symbol of the European unity (Lépine, 2010).

The crisis in relationship with the Russian Federation connected with the events of 2008 was expressed in the opening of the Eastern Partnership program in 2009 assuming an intensification of cooperation of the EU with Azerbaijan, Armenia, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine. The events of 2014 led to cardinal changes in the relations of Moscow and the EU, having become one of stages towards the “New Normal”. In fact, from cooperation and productive interaction the parties shifted to opposition (Alcaro, 2015; Ryzhkov, 2019). Permanently extending sanctions and countersanctions; “freezing” of official relations and formats of cooperation, for example, on the issues of development of the new basic agreement between Russia and the EU instead of the outdated Partnership and Co-operation Agreement (PCA); general global mistrust of the parties – these are the modern relations of the European Union with the Russian Federation (Relations with Russia: EU guidelines, 2016). At the same time it is necessary to notice that this crisis became not only the “New Normal” of modern world politics, but also peculiar “routine” or “daily occurrence” of the current agenda (Rác & Raik, 2018).

The “Arab spring” and migration crisis became the next challenge to the EU unity as the integration association, which appeared “between fragmentation and integration” (Estevens, 2018). The EU countries received an additional incentive for integration processes. The signed agreement with Turkey became the result of the German initiative supported by all participants of the integration. The result of the new adjusted strategy was the EU Global Strategy (EUGS) approved in 2016 issued in “The White Paper “Future Europe””. One of the key ideas of these documents is the idea of deeper integration as one of the priorities in respect of the solution of a wide range of crisis issues and the consolidation of positions of the European Union on the international arena.

Having imposed on some other crisis processes the “Arab spring” and the migration crisis promoted the prerequisites for Brexit. Undoubtedly, leading to economic losses for the European Union, Brexit, paradoxically, made the EU more homogeneous integration association. Besides, the rhetoric of new expansion (in particular, across the Western Balkans), which reflects the aspiration of a number of the countries of the continent to the united Europe, was amplified.

The proceeding pandemic of the COVID-19 became a new challenge not only to the economy of the EU countries, but also to the ideological component of the integration in the context of restriction of the freedom of travel. However, high level of integration interaction, financial-economic and technological potential of the EU participants give clear advantages in realizing actions for mobilization of resources against the pandemic. It is separately possible to note the information support of this direction of the EU activity. In January, 2020 the Directorate General for Health and Food Safety (DG SANTE) created the Early Warning and Response System (EWRS) where the majority of the member states communicate about response measures. The fight against the distribution of false news is actively conducted.

Thus, strong consequences of the pandemic for the economy and the population in general are perceived more painfully by the countries of the united Europe in terms of aggravation of disputes on values and efficiency of political systems, possible blow to the reputation and prestige of the countries in

general or ruling parties, ability to guarantee the social and economic rights. Most likely, this triggers bigger attention to various aspects of the coordinated fight against the virus.

7. Conclusion

The consequences of all crises of the “New Normal” period became serious challenges to the European Union as the integration association influencing almost all spheres of life of the association. The “New Normal” actualized some problems characteristic of the EU, such as: traditional problem of “old” and “new” Europe; appearance of outsiders of the eurozone; strengthening of positions of eurosceptics and the first in the history precedent with secession of the EU; criticism of the general migration policy; fight between the adherents of traditional values and the followers of new movements and currents in the field of the civil rights; relationship of the European Union with Russia.

The series of crisis processes stimulated both centrifugal and centripetal trends in the EU. To illustrate the first it is possible to give the example of the Brexit, local initiatives of the restriction of movement within the EU, statements of euroskeptics in national parliaments and the European Parliament concerning the EU policy. On the other hand, the crisis processes initiated the development of the new principles of the EU existence and behavior, which found their reflection in the EU Global Strategy meaning “revision of all fields of policy of the European Union” and, respectively, updating the existing conceptual and standard-legal documents. Besides, the discussion about the European army became more active, certain plans for potential expansion of the European Union, participation in safety in various regions of the world are implemented and accepted.

Thus, it is impossible to say that the crisis phenomena in the European Union testify to a certain deadlock of the European integration and inefficiency of integration mechanisms in general in new conditions. The search for joint decisions in combination with high financial and economic potential (which is confirmed by numerous development aid programs in different regions of the world) suggests that as the association, unique for international relations, the European Union will finally find an optimal solution of the exit from various crisis situations following the example of the situation at the end of the 20th century when the Euroskepticism in the European communities of the 1970s resulted in the Maastricht Treaty in 1992 on the creation of the European Union.

Acknowledgments

The reported study was funded by RFBR according to the research project No. 20-011-00666.

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