Calm before the Storm? 2019 in Perspective

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At the end of our 2018 Annual Review editorial we reflected on a tough year for the EU, arguing that it was sailing through troubled waters into an unknown direction (Exadaktylos *et al.,* 2019). The waves of populism and right-wing extremism were sweeping across Europe, the negotiations around Brexit were a political drama not only at the European but also at the British level, and EU leaders were looking to re-infuse trust in the euro, EU institutions and community processes and breathe new life into the vision of integration.

It now feels as if 2019 was a fairly calm and stable year, given that we are reflecting on it in the middle of 2020 and in the context of a global pandemic. This is an interesting observation, as it was not the overwhelming sense we had as we lived through the events or even looked back on some of the challenges facing the EU and its Member States at the end of 2019. The appointment of a new European Commission, following the election of a new European Parliament (EP) presented themselves as opportunities for institutional renewal. However, even though political, social and economic turbulence endured in some Member States, the EP elections seemed to put a break on what had previously felt like an inevitable populist and eurosceptic advance. The return to relevance of the European Greens is also reflected in a shift in the priorities of the European public towards substantial issues, namely, climate change. Even this turn was not enough to block or reverse the nationalist and ethnocentric tendencies emerging in 2018. The tensions between parties pushing for European reform and those seeking to dismantle the European project has become a marker for a deeper culture war between progressive and conservative forces. At the time, this conflict felt it was simply entrenching trends we have covered in previous issues of the Annual Review, especially in the past two years, not least the fact that Brexit had normalized the rhetoric of disintegration. Looking at 2019 from the vantage point of 2020, we know now that 2019 was the year in which the EU was actually able to take a breath before the large storm on the horizon arrived. As EU institutions looked at 2020 with some optimism about the potential for a renewed Union a public health crisis was looming. The question is whether 2019 provided sufficient breathing space to tackle head on the economic and societal challenges brought about by Covid-19. In this context, had the foundations of integration and cooperation been sufficiently strengthened last year to allow the EU to endure the new crisis emerging in the horizon already by January 2020, and therefore safeguard the future of European integration?

In 2019 the EU was afforded a year of reflection and coming together in search for its unitary voice and sufficient time (much needed, as it turns out) to consider its position, identity and vision not only among its own citizens and member state governments but also internationally. We did not know in 2019 how important these reflections were going to be, given the health, social, political and economic challenges that would be facing the

Union and is Member States in 2020. This issue of the Annual Review assesses and critically reflects on how effective the EU was in using the breathing space it had been afforded in 2019.

It is tempting just to look forward to what we know now was on the horizon. However, it is equally important to understand the impact of historical trends and trajectories. It is worth remembering a number of key anniversaries of events that shaped the outlook of the EU and its Member States. In 2019 we marked 30 years from the end of the Cold War and the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989. This critical moment was not just geo-strategically significant in tearing down artificial barriers to European cooperation, it also marked the beginning of the Eastern Enlargement of the EU. It was the beginning of a process through which the Eastern Bloc reconnected with its Western counterparts away from the Russian sphere of influence. In addition, this last year also marked 20 years of the euro (1999) and 15 years of the largest enlargement in the history of the EU (2004) with ten new Member States, the majority of them from Eastern Europe. Each of these anniversaries provides scholars, politicians and practitioners an opportunity to reflect on how the EU faced those challenges and, in so doing, reshaped and reaffirmed the direction of European integration.

It is worth starting our review of 2019 by revisiting some of the key developments at the European level. The influx of new personalities in the European Commission and EP is probably one of the defining institutional moments of the year. A pragmatic and identity-focused European Commission was faced with a EP that was politically more fragmented than before with an increased presence of populist anti-European political formations. This juxtaposition between and demographic composition of two of the pivotal EU decision-making bodies thus set up a new set of dynamics that will unfold in future years. The appointment of the first woman as President of the European Commission is symbolically important, as the EU has historically sought to position itself as a gender actor in internal and external affairs. Perhaps more significantly, Ursula von der Leyen came in with a vision to revive the Commission, put European identity at its core, create an environment of inclusion, and a common direction.

It is against the backdrop of institutional renewal that in June 2019 the European Council adopted the new Strategic Agenda 2019–24 (Blockmans *et al.,* 2019). The focus of the agenda is on future-proofing the Union by addressing some of its most urgent priorities: (1) closing the gap between European institutions and the citizens of Europe; (2) building economic resilience; (3) taking action on climate change; (4) redefining the role and position of the EU in world (European Council, 2019). In a note of optimism, Maurice and Menneteau (2019) see this as the moment in which the EU moved from crisis management to addressing key challenges. More cautiously, Thieme and Galariotis (2020) do not see this strategy as providing the necessary foundations for the EU and its Member States to confront the many crises it continues to face.

This new strategy seeks to mitigate citizens' concerns about the migration crisis. Strengthening external borders and Schengen thus take priority, and are positioned alongside protection of democratic systems, EU values and the rule of law. Migration policy thus becomes a vehicle for centring discussions about European identity. This has significant implications in relation to social inclusion and social justice that are discussed in some detail by Solanke's contribution to this issue. The second priority is securing the position of the European economy, in which 'economic and social convergence between

Member States is underlined, no longer as a means by which to get lastingly out of the crisis, but as an instrument to ensure Europe's in the global stage' (Maurice and Menneteau, 2019, p. 3). These are also some of the issues touched on by Crespy and, Katsanidou and Lefkofridi in their contributions in this issue. What is now clear is just how important this work was going to be for preparing the EU for the storm of 2020.

The third priority focuses on climate change and action. Linking the impact of climate change to socioeconomic inequalities, the strategy sets out an ambition for a socially and economic inclusive model. Perhaps what is missing from the strategy is a detailed plan of action. Allwood's contribution in this issue examines the EU's approach to climate change and social justice as a platform for both gender and climate mainstreaming. Finally, the strategy document reasserts the EU's ambition to be a world leader. In a way this document seeks to confirm the EU's role in the global politics, thus preparing to be a strong bloc without the UK. This is something to which we will return, thanks to the analysis by Schumacher reflecting on the European Neighbourhood in the context of EU external affairs.

Reflecting on the impact of 2019 on the EU's future, the Annual Review lecture by Thomas Christiansen (2020) examines the ability of the EU to manage the various crises it has had to face over the last ten years. For Christiansen the ability of European institutions to adapt has been the key to their success in managing the various crises. Beyond the rise of euroscepticism and the challenge posed by populism, Christiansen urges us to think about shifting from the pursuit of a liberal approach to trade to one that favours geo-strategic considerations. Europe's economic power thus becomes more important than ever, particularly as von der Leyen is looking to develop the Commission's geopolitical role.

Looking at the defining topics for 2019, we identify three broad themes. The first, as noted earlier, is the change in institutional politics initiated by the appointment of a new European Commission and the outcome of the EP elections. The second is the political trends and trajectories, including the continued challenge posed by the ascendency of populist parties following austerity policies in Member States and the return of nationalism. Finally, the third theme encompasses Europe's place in the world: 2019 is the year when Europe started to face up to some of the challenges arising from climate change and social inequalities, as well as the model it provided to the near abroad for democracy.

Looking at the renewal of European institutions, the contribution by Abels and Mushaben examines the appointment of the first woman President of the European Commission as a potentially key moment for the development of a more inclusive Europe. Their analysis points to ongoing discussions about leadership at the European and member-state level as a way to bridge the gap between citizens and institutions. Gattermann's analysis of the media coverage of the EP election also notes the absence of a European public sphere. The introduction of the *Spitzenkandidaten* procedure in 2014 was supposed to herald a new era in which the Commission would become more closely connected to citizens. Its suspension for the election of Ursula von der Leyen is thus significant. Gattermann points to the failure of the media to engage with the candidates and thus 'bring the election' closer to the citizens of Europe. The continued focus on domestic issues in media coverage of EU news further undermined the development of a European public sphere and concentrated political identities at the national level. Moreover, we could also add that failing to underscore the importance of von den Leyen's

election in terms of symbolic representation also serves to downplay her focus on gender-sensitive representation in her new Commission.

The restructuring of the Commission's portfolio that von der Leyen undertook points to an increased awareness of the need to acknowledge the limitations of European integration to capture the citizens' imagination and speak to the politics of identity (Duff, 2019; von der Leyen, 2019). This gap is all the more evident in the results of the EP election. Gattermann's analysis of the personalization of European politics in the EP election over the last 20 years is particularly important in this context. Her analysis finds that this process has not successfully created a European imaginary or augmented the development of a European public sphere. Rather, it is interesting that where there has been coverage of European-level issues, it has focused on anti-European and anti-establishment parties and candidates. This analysis thus raises important questions for how pathways for the activation and mobilization of the European polity, which will have increasing resonance for the future of the Union in years to come. The 2019 EP elections thus take on a significance that perhaps no observer could have been entirely aware of at the time.

Ahead of the May 2019 EP elections, many pundits predicted that right-wing populist parties would come to dominate the EP with significant repercussions for inter- and intra-institutional politics. It is this challenge from the right, and where the results matched the predictions, that Stockemer and Amengay's contribution focuses on. Their detailed overview of the rise of right-wing populism from the fringes into mainstream political movements provides important insights about the consolidation of nationalism across Europe. The absence of a meaningful European public sphere allows national populists to frame key messages on the relationship between Member States and the EU, and in so doing they can undermine what is already a thin identity (Medrano, 2009).

In a nutshell, the 2019 EP election demonstrated the reach of anti-establishment parties across Europe. The results also highlighted the crystallization of socio-political cleavages among the European electorate. The 2019 Annual Review examines in detail three stories of the European elections in key Member States, each with its own set of peculiarities and dynamics, showing the diverse and fractured nature of the European electorate. In the case of Italy the story of the European elections revolves around the almost inevitable rise of populist right-wing parties. Jones and Matthijs examine Lega's recipe for success in this election and the impact of the results on national politics. Although Italy's trajectory towards euroscepticism has been widely noted (Maggini and Chiaramonte, 2019), the results of this election demonstrates the Italian electorate's lack of trust in traditional political institutions and its shift to the radical right. Jones and Matthijs examine the tenor and focus of the campaign. Primarily concerned with national issues, it essentially provided a platform for Lega to channel growing dissatisfaction amongst the electorate.

Conversely, in France the prospect of significant populist gains led to a public discussion about the very nature of European integration as a political and economic project. Looking at the EP elections from a French perspective, Goodliffe's contribution finds that although this opened up a space for public debate, it also polarized the polity. The 2019 EP elections are therefore likely to have a significant impact at both the national and European level, particularly in relation to Macron's ambition for a renewed European agreement on the future of the Union.

Finally, the story in Germany is interesting as it stands apart from France and Italy in so far as the EP elections resulted in the return to relevance of the Green party and the

displacement of traditional support for both the Christian Democratic Party (CDU/CSU) and the Social Democratic Party (SPD). Berning and Ziller in their contribution examine the social and political implications of this result for Germany. Specifically, 2019 marked a shift in political salience from issues relating to migration and security to that of climate change. Their analysis, however, points to a divided electorate in Germany where gains were recorded at the polar opposites of the political spectrum. What is clear from this brief overview is that despite the rise of the Greens in Germany, the defining trend of this election comes from the radical right.

Many of the right-wing populist and nativist parties have been emboldened by the 2019 EP election, becoming a sizeable bloc within the EP. Therefore, the likelihood of the Parliament becoming a theatre for political posturing is high. Given the economic and social crisis emerging from the current pandemic, European institutions and Member States cannot predict the impact of political populism coming from the populist right. Nonetheless, we should note that so far, the pandemic has favoured mainstream political parties across Europe and has uncovered the emptiness of populist promises as people look up to the EU for solutions (also in the form of the EU recovery fund from the impact of the pandemic) (see for example, comments by Exadaktylos [2020] and De Vries [2020]).

Finally, we should note that the 2019 EP elections were the last ones for British Members of the European Parliament. The UK had to postpone its departure from the EU, and as still a Member State, it had to hold an EP election by default. In her contribution, Vasilopoulou notes that this unexpected election was the result of a stalemate over the EU Withdrawal Bill in the UK parliament. The 2019 EP election in Britain was largely focused on British issues and residual fault-lines from unresolved Brexit debates. Hence, unsurprisingly Brexit dominated public discourse. Leading the Leave campaign, Nigel Farage created a new short-lived political group, the Brexit Party, which took the largest share of seats by a single party in the EP, although the pro-European parties in Britain achieved the largest combined share of the votes by a small margin. Vasilopoulou suggests that this EP election in Britain showed the impact of ongoing cleavages in the country and the growing dissatisfaction with traditional parties (namely, Labour and the Conservatives).

It therefore seems an opportune moment to reflect on the EU's handling of some the key political trends and challenges that it faced during 2019. As outlined above, the broad trends we identify highlight some of the challenges faced by the Union and its Members into 2020. They point to the undercurrent of 'crisis management' that has defined European politics for the last decade. What we know now is that 2019 was not going to resolve these crises, but instead it was going to lay the foundations for the EU to be able to handle its biggest crisis yet; a crisis which will come to define every aspect of social, political and economic relations in 2020: the impact of the global pandemic.

Understanding the steady advance of right-wing populism evident in the EP elections, although it was less offensive than predicted, requires a holistic assessment of the relationship between the EU and its Member States, as well as its citizens. The first port of call must be the impact of the financial crisis on the European psyche. As Crespy and, Katsanidou and Lefkofridi remind us in their contributions to the Annual Review, 2019 marks ten years of the onset of Greek crisis, which threatened to destabilise the whole of the European monetary and financial architecture. The causes and effects of this crisis

have also been widely discussed in previous annual reviews (De Grauwe and Ji, 2019; Verdun, 2018). Much of this body of work has centred on the functioning of economic and monetary union and the political economy of the euro (Hodson and Quaglia, 2009). The introduction of the troika and the imposition of the austerity measures on Greece highlighted some of the rising tensions in European institutions. Reflecting on these issues in the Annual Review of 2015, Featherstone (2016) pointed out that the European financial crisis exposed the tension between conditionality, instrumentalism and legitimacy. It is this tension between European institutions and public opinion, particularly in the worst affected by austerity countries, that has been seen as the trigger for a rise in populism across Europe (Vasilopoulou *et al.,* 2014; Halikiopoulou, 2018).

On the basis of these observations, Crespy's article this year outlines the impact of the EU's austeritarianism on socioeconomic cleavages in Europe. She explains the link between growing inequalities and the EU's slow response in moving away from the recipe of austerity and mitigating the mounting polarization of European politics. Mostly importantly, she discusses the longer term legacies of Europe's great recession in conjunction with the challenges poses towards the new European Commission. On a similar trajectory, but looking specifically at the evolution of the Greek crisis, Katsanidou and Lefkofridi in their contribution draw lessons from the ten years since the Greek crisis began, in terms of political tensions, the economic and social erosion and the overhauling of the Greek political system on the road to recovery. Given that the existing literature on the Greek crisis focuses on 2009 as a critical juncture for the rise of populism and far-right nationalism beyond Greece and across Europe, they ask if Greece has finally found a new balance and a new role to play in the EU. Their analysis follows an argument similar to that of Cavaghan and O'Dwyer (2018), whose contribution in the 2017 Annual Review provided a critical assessment of the EU's pathway out of the crisis and the way the EU ignored the deeply gendered and racialized effects of the austerity politics.

The contributions by Crespy and, Katsanidou and Lefkofridi remind us of the centrality of citizens in the process of integration. Failing to engage with the electorate had deep implications for European democracy, as is evident in the downgrading of the quality of democracy in central and eastern Europe. In her contribution in this year's Annual Review Solska investigates the claims that Poland and Hungary are undergoing a process of democratic backsliding and assesses the processes that have led to the consolidation of authoritarian-leaning regimes. This piece not only points to their difficult relationship with the EU institutions, namely the European Commission, but also the inability of the opposition to launch a sustained counter-argument against the ruling parties in Poland and Hungary in conjunction with tension regarding the lack of a common understanding of European values. The processes of inclusion and belonging within a common idea of Europe are significant in so far as they define the boundaries of the 'other' both within and on Europe's external borders. In her contribution, Solanke makes detailed assessment of the Zambrano case in the context of Brexit, driving home the issue of the racialized nature of European citizenship and its impact on minority ethnic groups across Europe. What is clear is that European institutions have yet to develop a European ideal that bridges socioeconomic cleavages. This contribution is an important prelude to understanding the European reaction to current transnational social movements, such as Black Lives Matter, and how the European public absorbs debates that originate abroad within their domestic contexts.

The question is thus starting to emerge is whether it is in its external affairs that the EU has been projecting a more cohesive than before identity. The two contributions to this year's Annual Review by Schumacher and Allwood, respectively, examine the EU's role as a global leader. In his overview of EU external relations however, Schumacher finds little optimism for the EU's relationship with its eastern and southern neighbours or for the coherence of the EU's approach towards the near abroad. Pointing to the new European strategy mentioned earlier in this editorial, Schumacher finds that the EU has yet to become effective in promoting norm diffusion across the European Neighbourhood. Similarly, in her analysis of EU climate action, Allwood identifies a number of missed opportunities amidst growing political pressure to deal with the challenge of climate change. Just as in the context of the European Neighbourhood, on the issue of climate change the EU seeks to project an image as a global actor and norm entrepreneur. However, these efforts are undermined by creating silos around European values and by the pursuit of economic priorities over social justice and inclusion.

The key question for us now is whether 2019 prepared the EU for 2020. In his Annual Review lecture, Christiansen (2020) reflects on the resilience of European institutions. The project of European integration will undoubtedly have to find new ways to deal with the challenges posed by populist parties and the growth in citizens' satisfaction or disengagement with the project. Christiansen finds optimism in EU institutions' response to the key trends and challenges of 2019. For him, what is clear is that, rather than being displaced, the EU is becoming more relevant than ever.

Looking back at our analysis of 2019 it is clear that the EU and its Members are preparing themselves for a potential no-deal Brexit. Positioning the EU as a global leader is intended to maximize the political and economic reach of the bloc, possibly at the expense of a newly 'independent' UK. It may well be the case that by keeping the EU's preparations for crisis response on the agenda, Brexit has provided a platform for the bloc to deal with the much bigger crisis that was looming at the end of 2019. We will be able to assess the true impact of this year only when we can look back at the achievements and missed opportunities of the EU through the lenses of the coronavirus pandemic.

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