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THE (NOT SO) ROARING TWENTIES?



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CAN WE FORECAST THE 2020s...

OR ARE WE JUST GOOD AT PREDICTING THE PAST?

Gordan Grlić Radman

THEORETICIANS in the field of international relations often commiserate that their discipline is only good at predicting the past. This paradoxical notion has been prevalent especially since the unexpected collapse of the Soviet Union, leaving many to wonder if an international event of *that* magnitude cannot be predicted, then what can be?

The daily grind of activities, a never-ending news cycle, and a constant stream of unexpected events constrict the abilities of world leaders, ministers, diplomats, and foreign policy experts alike. Looking beyond the horizon of daily events has always been challenging, and our predictions, even the most imaginative ones, often fail to capture the true shape of future events. Still, the fact that international relations are complex and uncertain

does not mean we should not try to gauge its future state; when doing so, we simply need to couch our ambition with a dose of humility.

HISTORY IS BACK

To reaffirm this general sense of unpredictability, one simply needs to summarize the current moment in which we find ourselves. We are in a midst of a prolonged lockdown due to a global pandemic; democracy stared into the abyss at the U.S. Capitol; the UK formally left the European Union roundtable; the annexation of Crimea has threatened Europe's security order, and the rise of China has been upending the international system as we have known it. In other words, the global pandemic has locked us down, the insurrection in the United States has shocked us, the British

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withdrawal from the EU has exhausted us, the Crimea annexation has distressed us, and China's rise has challenged us. Taken together, the state of world affairs today could not be more different than what past predictions about the "end of history" used to suggest.

The question we need to ask ourselves is this: have we indeed come full-circle from the lulling notion of the unstoppable march of democracy and free market capitalism, to the point of confronting the internal vulnerability of free societies and a rising tide of authoritarianism?

Beyond all the aforementioned unexpected events, the COVID-19 pandemic is now coming to be seen as the ultimate stress test of our times. The entire short-term effects of the spread of this virus on our societies are still unknown—let alone its long-term consequences; but there is already a clear impression that the pandemic has exacerbated a number of previously visible negative trends. The increasing role of state interventionism and growing market protectionism, anti-globalization impulses, disinformation and fake news campaigns, and sharpening competition between governing models of free

and controlled societies have all been amplified by the pandemic.

While temporary measures restricting our daily lives and distorting free markets are indeed necessary from the standpoint of both public health and economic logic, the world's democracies should start to back away from the gravitational pull of permanent protectionism. The hard-won and patiently-built freedoms that have fueled post-World War II prosperity need reaffirmation, restoration, and strengthening in the post-pandemic period to come. We should not necessarily rush this effort, as we continue to balance between public health and other priorities, but the intent and trajectory of our political commitment to fully restore and reinvigorate our freedoms should be clearly stated.

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The present pandemic will, hopefully, be brought under control soon, but it has already ushered in a new normal, and our efforts should be geared toward making this new reality more, not less, free and prosperous. An uneasy and at the same time somewhat paradoxically soothing lesson of history is that connections within and between societies tend to become stronger in the aftermath of

major catastrophes such as wars, violent revolutions, or previous pandemics. We should not make this one an exception to the rule.

The 2020s will be a defining one for the trends we witness playing out today, but it would serve us well to remember that the ultimate result is far from certain and remains within our ability to influence. The lessons of the three post-Cold War decades have taught us of the need to reexamine the accuracy of the models we have used, readjust approaches we have pursued, and improve policies we have enacted. While most of us were under the impression that we were leaving history in the rearview mirror, we have slammed into its new and evermore confusing version. Clearly, auto-pilot is not an option in world affairs. It is high time we switch out of it.

A LOOK AHEAD

In forecasting the landscape of 2020s, some major themes can help us navigate our thinking. These are not all new items on the agenda, but their shaping in the current decade will take place under changed circumstances. These major themes interlink domestic, regional, and global aspects of future foreign policymaking; they are, however, only indicative and far

from constituting an exhaustive list of forces that will ultimately shape future events. How successfully we navigate these problem-sets will not only determine the overall dynamics of this decade in many ways; they will also provide insight into those that follow. To that end, each of these major indicative themes will be briefly discussed in what follows.

First, *strengthening democracy*. To put it simply, what happens inside our respective democratic societies matters. A diverse set of political, economic, and security risks continue to undermine democracy, which depends on a steadfast political commitment to the nurturing of democratic institutions and the development of a democratic political culture. The rising trends of populism, radicalization, inequality, and ever-present disinformation cannot serve as a solid basis for democratic societies. The urban-rural divide is deepening, further expanding the gap between the city-dwelling elite and the rest of society. The old destructive patterns are now further intensified by new technologies, fueling division, mistrust, and spectacle in our politics. These trends will not be easily reversed; but as a starting point, there must be an acceptance by all political actors that

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None of our democracies are perfect, but what is more important is that we recommit ourselves to a patient and continuous effort of making them ever more so. The 2020s need to be a decade of democratic reconstruction in free societies, if these societies are ultimately to thrive. Safeguarding and strengthening our own democracy at home is also clear and necessary prerequisite for promoting it abroad.

Second, *defending democracy*. The European Union, as a community of nations built on joint values, has a fundamental interest in strengthening democracy, upholding international law, and promoting human rights around the world. Democratic backsliding continued in 2020, which was a bad year for democracy worldwide. According to the well-respected Economist Intelligence Unit Democracy Index, almost 70 percent of countries included in the study recorded a decline in their overall score, and the global average score fell to its lowest level since the index was launched in 2006. Clearly, the negative effects of the pandemic are partially to blame, but evidence of

broader negative trends toward democratic backsliding preceded the pandemic by over a decade.

If we have learned any lessons about the limits of liberal interventionism, it is that we should be more modest in expecting overnight changes in countries that have been developing for decades under different societal, political, and economic models. Still, there are past positive examples that remind us there is no predetermined outcome for any given country. Setbacks and negative trends will be recurrent: we see them in our own societies, but we should not allow for them to become a norm or a trend in the upcoming decade. In this sense, we look forward to the May 2021 launch of the Conference on the Future of Europe and the new U.S. administration's proposal to hold an international Summit for Democracy during President Joe Biden's first year in office. Both of these initiatives will contribute to gaining momentum for democracies worldwide to renew the consensus within and between their respective societies, and also to recommit to the shared goal of a more democratic world.

Third, *the future is green and digital*. Just as the pandemic was emerging in our societies, the European

Union made a momentous pronouncement through the announcement of a European Green Deal: a commitment to make Europe the first climate-neutral continent. With it, the European Union has made a first and necessary step of turning climate and environmental challenges into opportunities, charting a clear way for a just and inclusive green transition.

Mainstreaming the green economy has an important foreign policy element. European gas emissions do not stop at our external borders, and the same applies to those of all other countries. It should also apply to solidarity, both within and beyond the Union. The Western Balkans, as the EU's closest neighboring region, stands to benefit from its own Green Agenda. Correspondingly, the overall accession process of the countries of the Western Balkans will now have an even more pronounced green transition component. As one of the continent's more ecologically-preserved and tourist-oriented countries, Croatia has an existential interest in Europe's successful green energy transition as well as in helping its neighbors along the way.

Understandably, the current pandemic has taken away some of the focus from the European Green Deal; but there is little doubt that the 2020s will

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be a decade in which this monumental task is enshrined as one of the major domestic and foreign policy priorities for our continent and the world.

Similarly, as we spend ever more time communicating in a virtual world, the importance of digital infrastructure and the rules regulating it have become increasingly evident. Business opportunities, cyberattacks, disinformation campaigns, freedom of expression, private data protection, and numerous other aspects and values, all clash and coexist as part of our now increasingly digital lives. As with the green transition, the EU's aim in the digital sphere is to lead the way and to become a global role model for the digital economy. Developing digital standards and promoting them internationally has been, and will continue to be, intertwined in foreign policy actions of the EU and its member states.

Taken together, the green transition and the digital revolution present clear pointers for progress in the next decade. Both will require robust intra-European and broader multilateral cooperation in setting regulatory standards and practices that will benefit our citizens, societies, and the global community.

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Fourth, *everything is geopolitical (again)*. These days, the almost naive expectation that unimpeded globalization will result in unifying conditions for international trade and cooperation has given way to ruptures due to a resurgence of geopolitical consideration. The prominent example of 5G technology or contested energy projects like Nord Stream 2 serve as foreshadowing to the upcoming "battle of standards." This is far from the first time that geopolitics is inserting itself in economic affairs. However, today's stakes are even higher, as some of the new technologies that guide our domestic affairs are now part of these wider geopolitical battles. In essence, our daily lives have become a matter of geopolitics.

As a regulatory superpower, the EU has a clear role to play in setting the rules that will preserve working, security, ecological, and other standards of free societies. Crafting these rules and norms will require a broadening scope of foreign policy expertise which goes beyond traditional and narrow notions of foreign affairs. As a member state of the European Union, Croatia will seek to strengthen this effort as well as work to create a level playing field and good practices for all international investments. Our guiding line in this effort

should be, as much as possible, to aim for win-win solutions.

Fifth, *no alternative to EU enlargement*. The current decade also needs to be an enlargement decade for the EU

and the Western Balkans. The European Union's enlargement policy has suffered from a multitude of internal and external crises, but the strategic notion that the Western Balkans has a clear European integration perspective has been maintained.

As protracted as it may sometimes seem, the fact is that the accession process has not ground to a halt. A European perspective still anchors the region, but there is a clear need for an even stronger recommitment to enlargement on the part of the EU and its member states, on the one hand, and the candidate and aspirant countries, on the other.

Such a recommitment should start by clearly dispelling certain myths surrounding the EU enlargement process. It is an indisputable fact that EU enlargement has benefited the entire continent immensely in security, economic, and social terms. After the fall of the Soviet Union, the vision of a unified Europe was one amongst many other possible options, and more sinister scenarios could have just as easily prevailed. Slobodan Milošević's wars for Greater

Serbia offer a stark reminder in that respect. Today's Europe is more prosperous, stable, and at peace because of the EU's enlargement policy, and it should not be made a victim of its own success.

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Moreover, the European Union's own global ambitions should be underpinned by its ability to stabilize and integrate an integral part of the European continent, namely the Western Balkans. The EU needs to be able to honor its com-

mitment when the region delivers on needed reforms, both during the accession process as well as with respect to the admission of Western Balkan countries as full EU member states. Croatia's example—whose own integration process lasted more than a decade and took place against the background of an increasingly complex environment—can serve as encouragement to those that follow to persist with necessary reforms.

During its recent EU Presidency, Croatia kept the enlargement perspective high on the European agenda and we will continue to be a voice for inclusion in the time ahead. Croatia's own, the region's, and wider European interests should guide us during the 2020s towards a finalization of the successful integration of the Western Balkans for the benefit of all.

Sixth, *diplomacy matters*. The current pandemic has reminded us again of the value of diplomacy and we have learned the hard way that direct human interaction cannot be supplanted through Zoom or Webex calls and meetings. We have learned to adapt, and these new methods of diplomatic work still allow us to improve further, but the fact remains that the ancient art of diplomacy simply requires direct human interaction if it is to fully develop and deliver. Properly staffing and budgeting our external services should be one of the takeaways of the pandemic as we embark on a decade rife with challenges and opportunities alike.

CROATIA'S TRAJECTORY

As we enter the new decade, even the partial list of tasks presented above is far from simple. Our success will require nothing less than political determination, economic mastery, new ways of thinking about public policy, finding better ways to connect with our fellow citizens, increasing levels of international cooperation and, as always, a bit of luck and determination.

In this context, the example of Croatia may be useful to keep in mind. As a rule, negative daily news cycles tend to overtake and overshadow the overall positive longer-term but perhaps less tangible trends. Croatia's own trajectory in modern times offers one example of long-term progress underpinned by

clear strategic choices, a commitment to democracy, the values of freedom, and faith in its own abilities.

Since the fall of communism in Europe, Croatia has had to fight an independence war that was in turn followed by a complex transition that spanned the whole of political, economic, and social life. In rebuilding and reforming, as the rest of Central and Eastern Europe, we were guided by a clear notion of belonging to the European family of nations. Along our EU integration path—and now as a full EU member state—we have greatly benefited from this vision of European integration and its main principle of European solidarity.

Three decades ago, Croatia's current position in the international community was far from preordained. We could have made other, less prudent choices, and Europe could have developed in other, less benevolent ways. It was a mutual commitment to pursue this particular version of the future that brought us to this point in time—one in which a country that had hosted foreign peacekeepers on its territory has now become a security provider in its neighborhood and elsewhere. Furthermore, Croatia's newly-built Krk LNG terminal is now adding to the EU's strategic autonomy through energy diversification. And finally, Croatia's open and technology-friendly environment has launched one of the fastest electric cars in the world.

Croatia's success is not mentioned here for its own sake, but rather as a reminder that the values we hold dear actually work when we commit ourselves to them. EU integration and solidarity works, human rights and freedoms matter, and strategic goals are achievable *if* we clearly set out and follow them. Our future choices are only ours to make.

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Croatia's example is also a reminder that in facing the challenges of the 2020s, we do not necessarily need to reinvent the foreign policy wheel: the clear principles that have guided Europe and the West since the disasters of World War II continue to be valid. There is no reason why democracy, freedom, and human rights should be less desirable in our times. The past generations have made many, and some have even made the ultimate sacrifice, to keep these in place for us and future generations. Today, all we are asked to do is to simply recommit to these same values that have guided us well so far.

WHAT LIES AHEAD

As the amount of interactions in our increasingly interconnected world dramatically increases, history accelerates too. We have not overcome history—quite the contrary, in fact: we produce too much history. The international

system is rearranging itself too fast for the existing institutional network to respond adequately. This is the challenge to which diplomats need to rise. The 2020s will undoubtedly solidify the already visible trends around us.

As always in the course of human affairs, the outcome is not, and need not be, a straightforward one. All members of the international community—governments, organizations, and enterprises alike—have a stake and a role to play. By adding all our voices to a whole that is greater than the sum of its parts, we will be able to build a more prosperous future for all.

In the coming decade, Croatia will continue to contribute to the Euro-Atlantic project, and will remain a steadfast voice in favor of the strategically important integration of the Western Balkans into the European Union. We will do so not only because it serves our interest, but as a way of passing along to our neighbors the promise of European integration and European solidarity which has been extended to us.

Jointly, we stand facing both challenges and opportunities stemming from the already ongoing green and digital transitions. Our most immediate task is to chart a path which develops and makes use of new technologies in ways

that do not infringe on our longstanding principles: green technologies ought to lift everyone up, not leave some behind; social media should be enriching, rather than tearing apart our social fabric; and digital technologies should be standardized in a way that would preserve our freedom of choice and establish a level playing field for all. All of these challenges require sustained and meaningful international cooperation: further multilateralizing our efforts (to coin a term) can only mean achieving better outcomes for everyone.

If it is indeed the case that at the beginning of the 2020s we are entering into a competition of systems between free and controlled societies, we should find comfort in the notion that the values we have defended in the past also equip us well for the future. We should not run away from what lies ahead. Instead, we should aspire to shape it to the best of our abilities, in order to not only avoid the known pitfalls of the 1920s, but more importantly, to fully harness the as-yet unknown opportunities of the 2020s. ●