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Improvisation — The New Politics of Europe
Contemporary History and Institutions of the Mediterranean Series
and Patrick McCarthy Memorial Series on Intellectuals and Politics

Although “improvisation” is often viewed as a negative attribute, suggesting lack of preparation, in a political arena “improvisation” can in fact be beneficial and positive. Professor Luuk van Middelaar explains that as the European Union continues to grow as a bloc, having leaders in Brussels with the ability to improvise will become increasingly important; the EU needs dynamic leaders who are able to think on their feet in order to find innovative solutions to new problems that the bloc will face. Professor van Middelaar describes the evolution of the EU as a shift from an arena solely of “the politics of rules” to one that houses “the politics of events” alongside those politics of rules, with the importance of improvisation gaining more weight as the shift to “the politics of events” continues. In order to illustrate this, Professor van Middelaar identifies four major crises that arose in the EU in recent years that demonstrate fundamental ways in which the EU must adjust its policy and decision-making processes and capabilities, and that have simultaneously helped to transform the way that the EU understands itself.

The first of these four crises is the Euro crisis in Greece beginning in 2009, which illustrates that in emergency situations, political motives and considerations trump purely economic ones. The answer to the question “Why is Greece still a part of the Eurozone?” is a deeply political one, one that can be seen both as (until 2012) a function of commitment to economic stability, as it would have cost the EU a great deal had Greece gone bankrupt and left the EU but also (before and after 2012) a commitment to EU cohesion, proving that the European Union is not only an economic zone with focus on solely economic issues.

The second major EU crisis was the Ukraine crisis in 2014, through which, Professor van Middelaar explains, the EU came to contend with the fact that it has borders and exercises power, “whether it likes it or not.” The case of the Ukraine crisis was one of clashing narratives, with the EU on one side claiming their attempts to bring Ukraine into the EU was not a power game and that, in fact, the EU does not play such power games, but rather that bringing Ukraine into the EU was simply an economically and valued-driven choice that was generally beneficial. Russia, on the other hand, viewed this as a territorial advance of the West and the EU towards Russia’s borders. Through the ensuing crisis, the EU came to better understand that it does, in fact, exercise power and that it needs the intellectual toolkit to talk about these issues; it occupies borders and has neighbors, and it must develop the diplomatic language to negotiate this power.

The third crisis, the refugee crisis in 2015-2016, illustrates the way in which the instruments of Brussels regulatory politics are not adequate to control unprecedented events, as some issues require more personal political authority than issues with which the EU was accustomed to dealing in the past. The “refugee quota” solution on which Brussels landed illustrated the typical thought process that has guided many EU solutions

in the past. Professor van Middelaar gives the example of fish quotas as a way to compare the inadequacy of Brussels's response to the refugee crisis: the EU responded the only way it knows how to the refugee crisis, "distributing the pain" and enacting refugee quotas for each EU member country as they might for fishing limits. However, the realities of accepting, assisting, and assimilating refugees is a vastly different proposition than is accepting limits on fishing quantities. Furthering the inadequacy of this response is the fact that this issue was pushed through on a majority vote, despite the fact that it was politically appropriate for a majority voting structure. Professor van Middelaar sees a need in such situations for another form of political quality: the need for political figures who can convince in the moment and have the ability to communicate—those who can muster their personal political authority.

The last crisis that Professor van Middelaar identifies is the general populist backlash that has surfaced across Europe and manifested itself in situations such as the Brexit vote in Great Britain. He points to such backlash as evidence that the EU is at such a point that heavy and controversial decisions cannot be depoliticized; the public wants to have a say in these matters. Professor van Middelaar says that the backlash is the action of the public demonstrating its frustration with the notion that decisions made in Brussels are sacred or cannot be changed; they want the opportunity to not only have a say, but also have alternatives.

The continued evolution of the EU will necessitate leaders who are able to, in the moment under time pressure, make decisions as a result of understanding political right and wrong, not as a result of a treaty requiring them to make a certain decision. Professor van Middelaar cautions that if the EU is not able to make this adjustment, the public will further give up and walk away, as was seen in the Brexit decision.