

15 It's not over yet. Anyway 10 takeaways of this pandemic mess

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„Never waste a good crisis.“ This was allegedly stated by Winston Churchill. So, let's consider it a good advice and try to take advantage of the current Covid-19 pandemic crisis. Perhaps Churchill was referring more to making decisions during a crisis for the time afterwards. But his quote can also be understood as a call to learn lessons from a crisis. Here I am trying to mention ten of them as I see them:

15.1 Don't assess a crisis and its management before it's over

While I highly appreciate this book and its goal – that is why I am grateful for the opportunity to contribute – I have to acknowledge that there is some uncertainty in assessing a crisis before it is over. Anyway, we do it. I do it too. And I find a lot of sense in it. I just want to make us all aware of the fact that it is clearly not over, and that we will understand many of our own misinterpretations and mistakes only afterwards. My friend Bettina Rausch, who heads the 'Political Academy' of the Austrian People's Party (OeVP) as president, drew my attention to an abbreviation that says a lot about the reality of our time, with which we will have to deal now and in the future decades to come. It reads as "VUCA" and stands for vulnerability, uncertainty, complexity and ambiguity.

Well, this is it! This is the world we live in. Generations before us have overcome major problems, genocides, wars and more. And problems like that still exist in today's world. While we have good reasons to be grateful to everyone living on this planet before us, who has contributed to a better world, we face more ambiguity, complexity, uncertainty and new kinds of vulnerabilities than ever before. This was clearly shown to us by the pandemic through many phenomena occurring collaterally. In this article, I am focusing more on these phenomena rather than on health issues.

15.2 If it's a crisis, let's call it a crisis

For the current generation of leaders in countries based on democracy and the rule of law, a crisis like the pandemic is unprecedented. Executives and managers in therefore privileged societies are used to spread good news, motivate others, draw attention to the positive aspects and opportunities, while remaining reasonable. – Of course, we must not stop encouraging one another. We need a word of encouragement or a helping hand even more than before during the crisis!

But the nature of this crisis requires a long-term strategy, dealing with the uncertainty mentioned above, as well as a clear language on its character: it is a serious crisis, a true "game changer" with enormous repercussions. The world as we knew it before the crisis will be gone. Timeless pillars such as creativity, innovation, diligence, trustful cooperation or to care for each other will remain in place. But many daily processes and professional fields will change. During the crisis, crisis management needs our full attention and a high level of discipline.

Leaders need to speak frankly about the crisis to the men and women they are working for. Focusing only on the bright aspects is highly insufficient and leads to a lack of crisis response. Men and women in leading positions are criticized even more during the crisis. Among the

points that commentators argue about is the question of "fear". Does this or that leadership behaviour cause fear? Well, if there is something to be really afraid of, I would rather expect a good leader to draw attention to it, which may cause fear – and lead to appropriate reactions.

15.3 A true crisis affects everybody

During the first months of the crisis, the chief editor of the Austrian daily 'Die Presse', Rainer Nowak, stated that "a true crisis would be a crisis for everybody". The context of this period was a general political atmosphere claiming that the governing bodies were misusing the crisis for their own popularity and leverage. – Almost a year later, it can easily be assessed that Nowak was right. If a crisis is real, it affects everybody.

We may have learned during the pandemic crisis that it is not just the leaders mentioned above – especially government officials – that are affected in both their professional and personal lives. But that our neighbour, a person on the street or a service agent on the phone are affected as well. That is why, there are many good reasons to help each other, not to underestimate the state of another person, but to keep in mind that this person is also affected; and that reliable relationships are a natural human need and, especially during a crisis, we need each other and are requested to care for each other.

15.4 Never underestimate conspiracy theories

No matter how mature an evidence may be, there will still be rumours about miscalculations or even about mysterious powers behind the scenes manipulating science and the public. No matter what political affiliation a politically engaged person has, no matter what kind of media content a journalist produces – as long as the respective people act reasonably, they already knew before this pandemic that there are conspiracy theories around. These theories are obviously wrong but still there will always be a number of people believing in them. This divides our societies and slows down processes in all areas of crisis management – from the governmental area to academia.

Experts knew the problem before the pandemic. The problem was already rapidly worsening with the misuse of social media platforms, but it has really escalated since the beginning of the pandemic. The main reasons for that may be the following: People have time as they stay at home. They are always connected to the internet and – as companies in this area have also assessed – use much more time for online conversations and social media of different kinds. Due to the pandemic and the crisis management, many people get increasingly bored, or stressed, or angry. Once they try to find guilt, where there is no specific guilt, they become increasingly open to conspiracy theories. And then these theories spread with high speed and get worse and worse.

Joking about those minorities, whose members can be understood as spreaders and victims of conspiracy theories would be the wrong reaction. When conspiracy theories are spreading among the public, leaders must listen, must take them seriously and even literally! Only then will it be possible to react properly, to reach out to spreaders, victims and possible victims with proper answers related to common sense but also the right sentiments. Because the sentiments behind such tragic developments are always real! That is in my view one lesson of this.

15.5 A crisis demands a true crisis response

Anticipating further developments is among the most important factors that make leadership excellent. The sooner an extraordinary scenario is understood as such, the sooner decisions can be made to prevent people from suffering unnecessary harm. If a real crisis scenario is

underestimated and defined as a regular challenge, the response will not be adequate. – These thoughts may sound banal. But as the world has seen during the current pandemic crisis for some leaders it has been extremely difficult – and for some obviously mentally impossible - to accept the severe crisis as such.

Acceptance is not the only mandatory condition for a true crisis response, but it is imperative for everything else. A worthy response also needs interaction, communication to establish a common understanding of the situation, constant research for new evidence of anything related to the problem, and many other things mentioned in this text. – The main takeaway here is to trust evidence-based forecasts and not fall back into our wishful thinking.

15.6 Don't close parliaments, never

Even during the toughest days when Italy was severely hit by the disease and many passed away, the President of the Italian Parliament, Roberto Fico, claimed that parliamentarians must not stand back but do their job. He stated: "MPs are like doctors, they cannot halt. Parliament must be in the front row, it must not withdraw, like doctors and many others do not withdraw. I want to remind everyone of that. Because in times of crisis, parliament not only remains a means of guaranteeing democratic principles, but is called upon to support people, who stand in the first line of the fight against the crisis and people, who are suffering economic and social losses".

In my view, parliamentarism is one of the greatest innovations in human history. It is not a technological one, but a social and political one. It avoids violence by authorities or in the streets. It includes each and every citizen, it creates a structure and an atmosphere of representation and it guarantees the renewal of power every few years. The last point has been defined by the philosopher Sir Karl Popper as an essential feature of democratic systems.

Parliaments must remain open during crises of any kind. The European Parliament's President David Sassoli, an Italian as well, whose work I generally appreciate, has been criticised for trying to put parliament into a remote-only status during the autumn and winter of the pandemic. While everyone had to trust each other in continuing to work as proper as possible under pandemic-conditions to avoid unnecessary danger, while monumental political decisions had to be taken to support companies and employees, the idea of putting the parliament into the background was wrong. Consequently, the decision did not uphold for more than a few weeks. After a month, the European Parliament was running on a crisis-adequate level again, with care, distance and all necessary means and measures, but fit to act.

15.7 Let's develop at least something to be called resilience

Politically, the most important takeaway for the European level is the need for a quick and sustainable development of what experts call 'strategic autonomy'. There will be a next crisis. Resilience means to be prepared for a blackout as well as for an embargo, for a new migration crisis as well as for riots due to disinformation, political polarization and social division, for a cyber attack as well as for a regular military attack, for terrorist attacks with conventional weapons or even with chemicals or other means.

Most important in this field is our mindset, our understanding of what we are defending against what kinds of threats. We are defending ourselves, our children, future generations; we are also defending the 'European Way Of Life' and its values – human dignity, individual freedom, democracy, rule of law. We are defending our capability to support other parts of the world with development aid and economic cooperation. Since today's Europe has achieved enormous maturity in many fields, there is a lot to lose, there are a lot of targets to attack, there is some weakness in our current shape.

As mentioned before, it is too early to define every single lesson as the crisis is still ongoing and about to negatively surprise each of us day by day. Especially the EU's crisis management cannot yet be honestly assessed. What we can still assume, however, is that in some respects Europe has acted excellently while in other respects it has not been quick, brave or determined enough. We will have to figure out many things and to decide at highspeed on open questions for example on our understanding of the crisis mode, on bureaucracy, on so-called data protection, innovation etc.!

15.8 It's getting worse before it gets better

In a crisis it usually takes time before we accept the negative deviation from normality. If the crisis is really severe, it can happen that after this acceptance even more things go wrong than we already expected. This has clearly happened since the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic. To manage lockdowns was hard, to manage the distribution of vaccines was even harder. To manage the first kind of the virus was hard, to really accept mutations and manage them was even harder. While these examples only concern crisis management itself, there were numerous other things that governments and parliaments, hospitals and other health institutions, the military and civil society, business, academia and the media had to manage, which were not directly related to the health issues but to disinformation and misinformation as well as to other phenomena already mentioned above.

„Misfortunes never come singly.“ This seems to be an important quote to prepare for crisis. If we are aware of this risk, we can invest in prevention, try to anticipate as many scenarios as possible and avoid further or collateral damage. If we do not confuse our wishes with evidence-based predictions, we will be better prepared mentally and practically for the next obstacle to come, and the next one after it. Wishful thinking can mislead us. This is one lesson here.

15.9 To be jointly affected does not necessarily mean to react jointly

As the term literally suggests, the pan-demic is a global phenomenon, it affects all of humanity. One would expect the different leading powers to cooperate even more in order to fight the common threat. But obviously this expectation turned out to be naive. Several powers outside Europe seek confrontation rather than cooperation even more than before. Potential vaccines have been misused as a tool to divide Europe.

And beside the direct connection with the health crisis itself, violence and brutality were not stopped during the pandemic, but rather triggered. In Belarus, an illegitimate regime is trying to stay in power by all dirty means. In Ukraine, the aggression by the Russian leadership continues. In the Mediterranean Sea, Turkey has not stopped provoking Greece, Cyprus and the entire European Union; and smugglers still seduce their victims into making dangerous and pointless journeys. The conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan escalated including through the use of drones against people in more harmful ways than ever before. The war in Syria is still ongoing. The Chinese regime is increasingly suppressing people – above all the citizens of Hongkong and the Uyghurs. Europe is attacked via means of hybrid warfare on a daily basis – disinformation is one of them. No matter who is the source of such attacks – and there are many of them! – the aim is always to create divisions between European countries and within European societies.

The main lesson in my view is that the European approach of promoting cooperation rather than confrontation must be maintained and strengthened. The most important lesson from European history is that it's much better to build bridges and strengthen relationships than to provoke conflicts or seek confrontations. The general approach of Europe's contribution to the

world now and in the future must be that of cooperation. This European policy will be extremely challenged in the years to come. To defend universal values like human dignity and individual freedom, liberal democracy and the rule of law, Europe must stand its ground, which is also in the interest of global development in terms of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) and the Europeans themselves, since cooperation leads to exchange of goods and services, prosperity, friendship between peoples and peace.

15.10 It is not a game

For those who were not personally affected, as well as for western societies that were barely affected at the beginning of the pandemic, which the World Health Organisation (WHO) only defined as such on March 11th, 2020, the whole endeavour felt like a game. At least the means and measures to protect others and oneself could be characterized as models for gamification. It was new, for many it felt like fun and something very right and at the same time; it was trendy to show gratitude to nurses and doctors, supermarket employees or military personnel; it was easy to show sympathy for those heavily affected while leaning back in the chair.

Once the numbers rose at different times in different parts of the world, once it became clear that this will not be over anytime soon, once responsible leaders, especially those in the executive branch, had to continue taking tough decisions, even as they became increasingly unpopular, the general atmosphere worsened. This has not caused troubles for governments in the first place but for the crisis response, since the misbehaviour of one single person could harm the situation on a large scale.

Among the lessons of this could be that personal responsibility must be placed at the forefront of education and other areas that influence our understanding of the human nature. If a person understands his- or herself as more or less subservient, he or she will more likely not act responsibly when it is needed, but rather rely on authorities of whatever kind. This is also a threat to liberal democracy. In addition, virtues that have often been judged as outdated have also proven their value and meaning, like patience, resistance or self-restraint.

