

SHRINKING THE GEOGRAPHICAL SPACE DUE TO THE GLOBAL CRISES

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Abstract: The present paper analyses the way in which different economic, social, geopolitical crises have affected or are still affecting the world population. In this respect, the authors have tried to classify the crises according to the geographical space they affect. In order to point out the seriousness of the global crises we have chosen two cases with a high global destabilising potential. We shall have on the one hand, the crisis of the World Trade Organisation which is due to the disagreements regarding the Doha Round between the member states and on the other hand, the international terrorism that developed after the fall of Communism. However, we have also examined the global crisis effects.

Key words: geopolitics, economy, society, World Trade Organisation, international terrorism, globalisation, information technology.

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AN INTRODUCTION TO THE WORLD WHICH NO LONGER BELONGS TO US

We are not sure if people – i.e. the world population – build their future ideals taking account of all the aspects of reality, such as the natural, social, economic, and geopolitical features, in order to live a quiet life. However, we are certain that the world is constantly troubled by different crises. That is why we recall the idea of *perpetual crises* (Mionel, Mionel, 2009, 37-45), in order to show that various communities experience an afflicted existence because of those particular crises. Thus, we can illustrate the previous statement with the Near East populations who are haunted by the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the difficult situation of the African peoples from Darfur, Somalia, etc., as well as the deep abyss torturing Afghanistan (FPR, 2009), starting with the American Blitzkrieg in 2001. However, the previous economic situation in Afghanistan was not one of the best, and together with the Taliban leadership and the balance between the two world powers – the USA and the USSR – the crisis has been constantly kept alive within this state (Chaudet, Permantier, Pélopidas, 2008, 269-275). There

are of course many other examples which affect the globe worldwide and these are all examples of crises, as they are presented by the mass-media. Moreover, the famous international relations analysts support the idea that the end of the Cold War marked the disappearance of the bipolar world, as well as the beginning of the unipolar world – having the USA as super-power – which has led to the appearance of many crises. Thus, according to Zbigniew Brzezinski the problems have affected mostly Eurasia, having a malignant effect. He thought that “*most crises were developing or they were just bursting on this vast continent (Eurasia), which, had been the main stage for the strategic rivalries between the USA and the USSR, during the last four decades*” (Brzezinski, 2008, 40). This way, Mackinder's *heartland* becomes the stage of the most important crises.

Now, when the virgin areas of our planet have almost disappeared, the internet and the mass-media conquer the less accessible parts of the globe thus generating the age of informatics, we are the witnesses of a process which shortens the geographical distances. Thus, the mountain chains, the oceans, the borders no longer represent barriers in the dissemination of knowledge. Moreover, under the influence of the crises, these distances seem to shrink more and more, and people perceive them as their own experiences. When the mass-media broadcast news from Haiti, after this year's devastating earthquake, people almost feel the pain of the Haitian drama. People and governments take action in order to give a helping hand and it makes us ask ourselves if we experience an international crisis, or is it only a Haitian crisis? Or maybe, if the recovery of Haiti, due to the world wide help, constitutes an advantage for humanity?

The previous experiences have shown that these types of crises not only affect the states, but also the entire geographical region they belong to. Either it is the case of natural disasters, such as earth quakes, floods, tsunamis, or political conflicts, or it is the case of social-economic crises, the regional effects are largely the same. First of all, this type of crisis may degenerate into an internal conflict due to the lack of basic needs, such as food, health care, or drinkable water. The second problem may appear with neighbouring states under the form of massive immigration in search of a better condition. This is the case of military conflicts, or even worse, conflicts between the states where the inward and outward immigration happens. This is how an insignificant case happening on one side of the globe may generate a world crisis of an unlimited time.

To emphasise the influence of crises upon humanity the authors have chosen an excerpt from the novel *Cancer Ward*, written by the Russian novelist Alexandr Solzhenitsyn, who tried to present the Stalinist security system and its action against the civil society. Thus, Solzhenitsyn said “*each man has hundreds of threads attached to him and spread all over. There is a total of millions, and, if these threads became visible the sky would be entirely covered by a spider net, and if they were fabrics and elastic, then busses, and trams, and even people would lose their ability to move... But they are neither visible, nor material, which means that they are not always... perceptible*” (Soljenitiņin, 2009, 222-223). The author has perfectly explained the situation and the history of the USSR has recorded it for over fifty years. The USSR has been haunted by a social crisis which has not been over yet. However, the analogy to Solzhenitsyn's threads may also be applied to the globalised world we live in.

On the other hand, there is no year without a crisis. If we try to remember the historical events, we come across less than 200 years of peace, and these are made of counted day when no conflict burst. Isn't this a historical evolution of

crises? Or a perpetuation of these crises? However, this makes us wonder if in a further corner of the planet a conflict may develop, i.e. a crisis! But we do not take into account other crises when we confront one of them. Thus, according to the American President Barack Obama (Obama, 2008), the present crisis has been torturing us for at least five years; first it was the financial crisis, and now it is the economic crisis.

Following this long introduction which has had the purpose of revealing the point of the analysis, we shall focus on the types of crises and their effects on the geographical space.

A SHORT CLASSIFICATION OF CRISES ACCORDING TO THEIR GEOGRAPHICAL SPACE

Generally speaking, the attempt to accomplish a typology of processes, phenomena, events etc., is not very easy, as the classification must take into account the objectivity and the coherence of all elements. The word *crisis* acquires a cluster of nuances, according to its context. However, this typology may highlight the diversity and the dynamics of these crises, as well as their timeless character. *Foreign Policy (global politics, economy and ideas)* – an international magazine – focuses on the difficult events at an economic and geopolitical level, and among the articles published in this magazine, the word *crisis* is always present. The magazine is interested in the World Trade Organisation, the economic evolution of the oil price, the crisis in Sudan, as well as the gloomy future of Yemen, Egypt and Crimea (FPR, 2010, 40-43).

Before the short crisis typology announced by the title of the paper, we must highlight the importance of the *global crisis*. Both in the introduction and in the first part of the paper we have mentioned some of the event marking the existence of society throughout the world. That is to say that the “crises geography” is extremely important both from the human point of view and from the affected space. Thus, what we call global crises in this article refer to those unwanted events which represent interruptions of the social and economic development. These crises may be very short, or very long (ten years). However, if we take into account the dimension of the space where the crises develop, we encounter:

- national crises;
- regional crises;
- international crises;
- global crises;

The national crises are divided into natural disaster crises (such as floods, fires, dry weather etc.), economic and social crises which are mostly related to the first category, but there are also special cases which are different. This is the case of ethnic minorities, which generate internal problems (such as the Kurds, the Basks), and where the state must take action in order to solve the situation.

The regional crises may also be divided into natural causes and social-economic causes, however, the diversity of their causes, events and elements is far greater:

- degenerative domestic conflicts, dealing with high immigrants flows towards the neighbouring countries;
- inter-state conflicts;
- natural disasters which affect large areas (huge fires, hurricanes, tsunamis, etc.);

- environmental accidents that affect both the state and the region;
- problems related to the lack of drinkable water;
- troubled economic, diplomatic and regional relations, and other issues.

The international crises, as opposed to the regional and global crises, affect an important part of the countries around the world. Here, we could speak about the international conflicts in Iraq, Afghanistan, or the Former Republic of Yugoslavia. Even if the general leadership is that of NATO, there are very many states that contribute to the development of that particular conflict. For instance, since 2001 there have been 42 states around the world involved in the Afghanistan conflict. Similarly, the Iraq conflict (Chaudet, Permantier, Pélodidas, 2008, 276-280) has witnessed the implication of 20 states (http://www.strategikon.ro/files/analize/Irak_domino_retrageri.pdf), after the Italian and Spanish troops withdrawal. And the examples may continue, as in the cases of Yugoslavia, Somalia, or Darfur.

The global crises are the worst, because they affect the entire geographical space. The First, as well as the Second World Wars represent real cases of this kind. The causes are, nevertheless among the most varied:

- natural disaster, hap-hazard and huge anthropogenic;
- food and health care scarcity for a big part of the world population – is mostly the case of many nations in Africa and Asia;
- humanitarian crises;
- problems within the international financial system;
- world economic crises (such as the period during 29-33, as well as the one which started in 2007, or the problems of the WTO);
- international terrorism under different forms;
- tensions due to power fuels, and we mostly refer to oil and natural gases;
- a mixture of many causes, etc.

The typology list we have mentioned will not be an exhaustive one, but rather an applied analysis in order to highlight the difficult problems of the present crisis, as well as the general crises the world deals with. According to Professor Silviu Neguț, we could say that „*the minute one conflict* (or crisis – the authors) *is solved in one part of the planet; there is another one* (another crisis – the authors) *in another part of the globe*” (Neguț, 2010) On the other hand, there is a correlation between the four types of crises, because the move from national to the regional level may be accomplished rather fast. The best example for this matter is the world conflagrations, which have started due to domestic problems. The internal German frustration caused by the absence from “*the dip in the gravy*”, as Otto von Bismarck would have said, has degenerated into the world greatest armed conflict. What does this mean to our paper? Within the crises typology and within the planetary geographical space, this conflict may be interpreted as a domestic German crisis which has overpassed the geographical dimension. Thus it passed from a domestic crisis – which was probably of an identity nature – to a regional crisis due to the attacks against Poland and the other neighbouring countries, and then, to an international crisis which has covered almost all European states. Thus a global crisis appeared, as over 80% of the world population was involved in the war. Is it really the case of shrinking the geographical space under the influence of the Second World War?

Moreover, if at a historical scale we can find many examples of geopolitical crises which have shrunk the geographical role of the space, nowadays, the

economy and the global activities connected to it seem to have a greater influence. Therefore, the economic conflicts and tensions directly substitute the geopolitical ones, both in their intensity and in the attention paid by the mass-media. Thus, the present reality generates a hypothesis we shall further analyse – i.e. a society affected by globalisation, where positive and negative effects are visible, the international organisations, such as the WTO has to deal with a series of problems.

THE WORLD TRADE ORGANISATION IN A CHAOTIC WORLD

Even if a century ago the international organisations were almost inexistent, nowadays we can see how their number increases and how different their purposes are. However, some of the most important ones, are of an economic nature, as they are procupied with international cooperation and economic development. For instance, the World Trade Organisation (WTO) is one of the most important ones in the field. Even if in the past it was very difficult for two countries in different hemispheres to undergo important commercial exchanges, it is now possible, due to the WTO and to the shrinking of the geographical space, which is no longer a barrier for international trade. Therefore, under the influence of the economic agreements and the international legislation, we have witnessed the shrinking of the geographical space.

Thus, it is not a random choice to present the WTO case in this article, it is rather a key element in the world economy evolution. The WTO dynamics was not always a peaceful one, but rather a difficult one, with many negotiations rounds as well as differences of opinion regarding the agreements within the organisation.

The WTO itself shows its dynamics and its complexity at different economic levels. On the one hand, the WTO represents an organisation whose purpose is to liberalise the commercial exchanges, an international forum where different state governments may negotiate commercial agreements, and on the other hand, it represents the international framework where different states may solve their commercial conflicts (http://www.wto.org/english/thewto_e/whatis_e/tif_e/fact1_e.htm). In other words, the WTO is a system of international commercial regulations. There are, anyhow, many problems which are waiting to be solved, even within the WTO.

The organisation has a rather recent history, but we think that its pillars were built over 60 years ago with the Bretton Woods meetings in 1944, and later, in 1948, in Havana (Cuba), when an international trade organisation was to be created. Almost 50 years later the WTO was established. During this time, the world market was extremely rigid, due to commercial norms and tariff concessions given to a group of states known under the name of GATT. This organisation was established in 1995 out of negotiations and it is still dealing with negotiations.

There are some important principles which constitute the basis of WTO agreements which refer to the international commercial system. According to these principles, the international commercial system must be:

- *undiscriminating* – a country must not treat its trade partners differently;
- *freer* – obstacles must be overcome through negotiations;
- *predictable* – enterprises, investors and foreign governments must commercial impediments will not be settled arbitrarily;
- *more competitive* – non-loyal practices are discouraged, such as export subsidies and dumping in order to gain the market;

- more advantageous for the less developed countries – giving them more time to adapt, more flexibility and privileges.

Thus, for a long period of time people thought that the new geopolitical reality will bring benefits to the international commercial cooperation. For instance, the collateral American and European effort has led to the end of Uruguay Round (Brzezinski, 2008, 89) in 1994. The time that passed from the establishment of this organisation has marked a lot of achievements, among which the acceptance of China in 2001. However, after 10 years of WTO, it was only the beginning of new trouble. One of the example of such trouble is the ratification of commercial agreements from the Doha Round.

“One day, history will refer to 2010 as the year the global commercial system died – or got a lethal disease. The world leaders’ will to end the Doha Round of negotiations this year (2010) seems to be a new failure...” (FPR, 2010, 40), Paul Blustein wrote – a journalist with the Global Economy and Development Programme within Brookings Institution. However, according to Stuart Harbinson, the former President the General Council of the WTO, *“This time... the crisis is real, we have overcome too many dead-lines, and the WTO cannot allow this to happen again. The organisation’s creditworthiness is risked... 2010 is the real dead-line”* (FPR, 2010, 40). The crisis is clearly expressed, and such a crisis may very well be categorised as a global one, if we take into account the large number of members and their economic exchanges. It is clear that the WTO is at a loss and in order to understand the dysfunctions of the organisation, we must get inside the world commercial process at an inter-state level so as to give some conclusive examples.

First of all, the tensions between the North – i.e. a considerable part of the developed Western states – and the South – which is less developed, and where the agriculture represents the most important part of the economy – affects the Doha Round and represents one of the first examples of inside commercial tensions, which have started in 2003. The disagreements are mostly connected to the exclusion of agricultural subsidies and to export dumping practiced by the USA and the EU, in order to protect the domestic agricultural department and to keep their leading place within world agriculture exports. At the same time, the North fear is oriented towards the exports of cheap agricultural products, such as those coming from Brazil and Argentina, which could challenge the prices and the family farms in the USA (Le Monde Diplomatique, 2006, 123). However, this northern attitude seriously undermines the basic WTO principles.

The second issue deals with the WTO in relation to the world climate changes. Thus, some characters within the American as well as the European political lives wish to enforce the so called “green tariffs” on those products coming from countries which have high carbon waste on a short term (FPR, 2010, 40). This is to say that the “green tariffs” are clearly directed towards China and India, two of the most dynamic economic leaders in the world, which are important member of BRIC¹. In response to this strategic American-European challenge, and due to the lack of clear laws, the pair India-China would have a comfortable space of manoeuvre in order to contest such tariffs, but challenging the WTO courts of law: are these measures illegal, and will trade liberalisation jeopardise saving the planet? And if the tariffs are legal, China and India have the right to impose duties on products which come from western countries, which are also responsible for

¹ BRIC represents the group of emergent economy states consisting of Brazil, Russia, India and China.

the global warmth (FPR, 2010, 40). But the geostrategic movement which emerges from these conflicts will define the future of the organisation as well as that of world trade.

The third issue, which is as important as the others, deals with the privileged currency areas, such the EU, NAFTA, MERCOSUR, APEC and so on. For instance, compared to the world flow practiced by GATT during the 90s, it is now the case of privileged currency areas. On the one hand we have the no more barriers concerning commercial exchanges among the member states, and on the other hand, we have the customs alliance, which have not only deleted the barriers, but they have unified the customs duties and the commercial policies (Defarges, 1998, 55). Taken as a whole, all these measures seem to be oriented towards the same inference: as the economic competition is getting higher, the regional market demand has to bring benefits to the participant states and they need to penetrate other markets. However, some regional constructions seem to be heterogeneous (Defarges, 1998, 55). This is also the case of the European Union, which is both an economic and a political block. In the future, these regional constructions could undermine the WTO functions through their economic evolution.

The three elements that trouble the WTO envisage other problems as well. At the same time they warn against the deep hole of the global commercial system. The WTO crisis is even deeper as the world economy does not seem to get better. Therefore, the states adopt and enforce commercial measures which favour their national interests, even with the risk of breaking the international regulations, which have been agreed upon inside the WTO. Examples of such disobedience may be given at any time: starting with the USA that required billions of dollars pay-back from China (http://www.hotnews.ro/stiri-ultima_ora-5363646-china-reclamata-omc.htm), taking into account the Chinese huge amount of fake CD sales at the beginning of 2009 and ending with China, which complained against the USA regarding the customs duties that have been imposed by the Americans for the tyres import from China (http://www.adevarul.ro/financiar/business_extern/OMC-SUA-China-impotriva-plangere_0_116388719.html) for a period of 3 years, since the beginning of 2009. This way, the gap between the results and the initial plans will question the future of the WTO as a negotiation forum. However, if the organisation does not create new agreements and if it is always troubled by conflicts, how long will it be until it will lose its authority to be the mediator of commercial disputes? This way, the member states will ignore the WTO decisions and its disintegration will be imminent and thus the commercial system will disappear.

THE SERIES OF CRISES FOLLOWING INTERNATIONAL TERRORISM

Besides the WTO crisis, there is another obstacle in the way of world development, and that is international terrorism. This probably is the most important disease blocking the economic and social development of all at the end of times. Starting at the end of the 20th century and the beginning of the 21st this phenomenon has been practiced since the ancient times. However, terrorism is now more and more diversified concerning its way of action as well as its purposes. Thus, such an ample phenomenon has captured the attention of the international councils, institutions and organisations, as well as the states dealing with terrorism. They have tried to prevent and to diminish the influence of terrorism and thus, they reinforced their security system. There is no need to

say that terrorism – such the example of September 11th 2001 in the USA – represents a huge crisis. At the same time we have to take into account the terrorist factions, who can strike at any time anywhere.

The most important international institutions have defined international terrorism as: the use of violence and threatening in order to induce fear, so as to intimidate and constrain the governments to act in favour of political, ideological or religious purposes. But, as Vasile Simileanu, an expert in the field, said, terrorism “*is interested mainly in meeting political targets, by spreading fear and using violence against innocent people*” (Simileanu, 2003, 88). There are many forms of terrorism as we have mentioned, but, international terrorism captures our attention because of its effects on the global geographical space. It is not the case of this analysis to remember all the phenomena and the types of terrorist action. However, what we are interested in is the intensity and the number of such actions, their impact on the affected geographical areas and the international community solidarity against them. At the same time, in order to have a vast image of the whole, we must know the terrorist group which has prepared the attack, as well as their purpose.

A simple image of the events on September 11th 2001 and the answer give by the presidential administration in Washington raise a few questions regarding the terrorist attack. Even if, compared to the surface of the oceans, the surface of the land is only 1/3 this was not an impediment for the members of Al Qaeda. They have made the preparations for the bloodiest and most serious terrorist attack in the mountains of Afghanistan in real time due to the broadcasting companies. On September 11th, the geographical space has shrunk at its minimum size, as more than half the world population was terrified. During those moments all the people who were touched by the American grief were actually accusing the terrorist group led by Osama bin Laden.

During those dreadful moments, a national crisis started to develop a few months later the domestic crisis became a world crisis, created by the generated feeling of fear around the world. It was obvious that the most fearful were the American allies, as the reasons why such a propitious terrorist attack was possible were precisely the development of technology and communication. Thus, Al Qaeda took advantage of the access to information and technical data, which made their action possible.

On the other hand, a global society that is more and more independent and more connected to the economic, commercial, security and internet systems becomes quite vulnerable. One example may be the numerous pandemics which have crossed the planet for the last ten years, such as the mad cow disease, the *avian flu*, or the *swine flu*. Thus, the *mad cow disease* has forced British farms to close their businesses due to the larger number of animal slaughter and the *avian flu* has caused European and Asian bird farms to run bankrupt. At the time, the *avian flu* has also destroyed domestic personal farms. These large crises examples are doubled by the internet terrorist attacks, such as password breaking, or embezzlement. This is also the cause of the present world economic crisis. We think that, if the world economic ties were not as connected as they are, the crisis would have been lower, but due to the course of globalisation, the crisis rapidly spread throughout the world. Thus, the crisis affected almost all the world economies according to the domino principle.

On the other hand, the huge number of terrorist attacks after the Cold War – i.e. over 5,000 at a global level and around 320 a year – reveal the lack of

security and the vulnerability of each state taken separately. Thus, international terrorism represents one of the causes of the world crises. The most serious terrorist attacks have their targets in the Western states, while the terrorist groups were located in the Eastern Muslim states. That is why there are a few questions which have to be answered. Is the new world order which referred to George Bush, the American President, connected to the “the civilisations collision” of which Samuel Huntington was speaking? If so, the East-West conflict is related to the differences between the USA and the Muslim world coming from the last 30 years of American intervention in the Middle East? As Huntington said, is this the case of “the Muslim civilisation” against “the Catholic and Protestant civilisation”? And, most importantly, what is the role of the power resources in the equation of these conflicts? Why is the West the main stage these terrorist attacks? And what is cause of the numerous conflict in the Middle East, or why is this area the most troubled around the world?

These are only a few of the questions one should meditate at, so as to understand the reasons for conflict on both sides in the Persian Gulf. We believe that, at the beginning of the millennium, we should consider more than *the rethinking of the world geopolitics*, and this must be based on economic cooperation, international terrorism awareness, and on life’s importance above any political action. It is known that the USA and Israel cherish the life of each citizen and are prepared to take action in order to defend them. However, life is important in any part of the globe, no matter if we speak of an American, a Somali, a Romanian, or an Afghan. Thus, in this spirit, we should cherish life above nationality, religion, or race, and make sense of Humboldt’s “unity in diversity”.

CONCLUSIONS

The article has pointed out that shrinking the geographical space is impossible in real terms, but, the process of shrinking is emphasised by the world economic, social, or political connections, which are visible at the level of social empathy, of terrorism incrimination, or at the level of fear regarding world pan demy.

All these aspects have been possible due to the informatics and technological boom. Thus, any natural disaster, such as earthquakes, hurricanes, tsunamis, etc., or any fall of the Stock Exchange indexes in London, Tokyo, or New York; any explosion which is taking place in the Middle East, in Europe, or in Latin America, are instantly spread and people are affected worldwide. This way the mass-media has a very important part both in spreading the information as well as in processing it.

Following the flow of information, there come the crisis feed-back. If we take the example of an earthquake (such as Haiti, or Chile 2010), it presupposes a collaborative special effort to help the affected people. Many more states bring their help to those in need, and this is only thanks to the social empathy. On the other hand, a terrorist attack or a war in the Middle East may create huge and serious dysfunctions in the evolution of the oil price. Following such an event, the rise of the oil price affects all the importers and all the states involved in the oil business. Another disaster may presuppose the fall of the Tokyo Stock Exchange indexes, due to the domino effect, which will affect all the Stock Exchanges in the world (London, New York etc.).

However, the most important conclusion of this research is that nowadays, no matter the geographical position, one is exposed to any risk situated on any

part of the planet. The previous cases prove the “smallness” of the world around us as well as the high degree of risk we have to face. In this respect, the most active means to shrink the geographical space are information, technology and trade. Their amplified role is given by the more and more globalised geographical environment.

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