



Solidarity and the EU at the time of Covid-19: the opportunity to build a stronger social and economic Europe

Stefano Bastianon

Quite predictably, at least for those who are familiar with the basics of European law and policies, the European Council of 23 April 2020 has not magically solved all the problems. They are all still on the table and an even more urgent solution is required. For this reason it is now time to start a reflection on the next steps to be taken.

To do that it is useful to rewind the tape and go back to the [Eurogroup meeting of 9 April 2020](#). In that occasion the Ministers of the euro area Member States outlined a comprehensive economic strategy to deal with health emergency needs, to support economic activity and to prepare the ground for the recovery. Notwithstanding the relevance and importance of measures already adopted at European level and officially endorsed by the Eurogroup (such as the activation of both the 'unusual events clause' and the 'general escape clause' within the Stability and Growth Pact, the launch of a EUR 750 billion Pandemic Emergency Purchase Programme (PEPP) by the ECB, the initiative of the EIB Group to create a pan-European guarantee fund of EUR 25 billion and the SURE temporary instrument supporting Member States to protect employment in the specific emergency circumstances of the COVID-19 crisis), the mass media have highlighted especially, if not only, the proposal for a Recovery Fund.

According to the [press release](#) the Eurogroup «agreed to work on a Recovery Fund to prepare and support the recovery, providing funding through the EU budget to programmes designed to kick-start the economy in line with European priorities and ensuring EU solidarity with the most affected member states. Such a fund would be temporary, targeted and commensurate with the extraordinary costs of the current crisis and help spread them over time through appropriate financing. Subject to guidance from Leaders, discussions on the legal and practical aspects of such a fund, including its relation to the EU budget, its sources of financing and on innovative financial instruments, consistent with EU Treaties, will prepare the ground for a decision».

Then, on the 23 April 2020 there was the [European Council](#). It decided to work towards establishing a recovery fund. According to Member States this fund «shall be of a sufficient magnitude, targeted towards the sectors and geographical parts of Europe most affected,



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and be dedicated to dealing with this unprecedented crisis». To that end Member States have charged the Commission to elaborate a proposal and underlined that such proposal shall be urgent, commensurate with the Covid-19 challenge and consistent with the Multiannual Financial Framework in the form it will take following its adjustment due to the current crisis.

One step forward or two steps back? It is difficult to say. Right after the video-conference of the European Council the Italian Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte said that leaders had made “great progress”; on the contrary, German Chancellor Angela Merkel said that leaders agreed on the need for a fund but disagreed on details. She also pointed out that “it is not acceptable that debts are mutualised”. The French President Emmanuel Macron said that the deepest divisions between Member States were not over the idea of jointly issued debt, but whether funds be transferred in the form of loans or grants, but he also specified that loans would be counter-productive, only serving to pile yet more debt on the worst-hit States.

Loans or grants? Is the future of European Union embedded in these two words?

The Commission has now the floor. That is surely good. It represents the interests of the European Union as a whole. Its proposal should be the European Union’s proposal. But the final decision lies in the hands of the Council which is made up of Member States. Therefore, it must be very clear that whatever the decision, for better or worse, it will be a decision of the Member States, not of the European Union. This is especially true considering the marginalization of the European Parliament within the European decision-making as far as the proposals currently under discussion are concerned (Art. 122 TFEU). From its very inception the European Union was governed by the principle of conferral of powers. Under this principle, laid down in Article 5 of the Treaty on European Union, the European Union acts only within the limits of the competences that Member States have conferred upon it in the Treaties.

This explains why today the Netherlands can firmly oppose any proposal for a temporary and exceptional mutualisation of debts and at the same time benefit of being a fiscal



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paradise within the European Union.

However, the anomaly of a Europe with a common currency, a common market, a common monetary policy but without a common economic and fiscal policy should be evident to all. The European Union should rediscover its vocation to be above all a “community”. And in a community (from the latin *cum munus*) those who can, give; those who cannot, take.

Such a rule of common sense and solidarity should govern the European Union too. Especially in war/emergency time as the present one. Unfortunately, instead of working together to overcome the crisis, until today Member States have struggled to impose their own idea of what is better for themselves.

«The nation is no longer considered the historical product of coexistence among men who, following a lengthy process, have achieved a greater harmony in their customs and aspirations and view their state as the most effective way of organizing collective life within the context of all human society: in fact, it has become a divine entity, an organism whose sole concern is its own existence and development, without a second thought for the harm it may cause others». These words were written in 1941 by Altiero Spinelli and Ernesto Rossi in [The Ventotene Manifesto](#) «For a free and united Europe». Many European scholars are used to link the birth of the European integration process to the Schuman Declaration. It is time to reconsider the relevance of this document. This is not a sterile nostalgia operation: it is time to realize that Europe is facing a new kind of war, without guns and bombs, but still with death: and in the near future, the recovery will be even more difficult than after the Second World War.

If the European Union wants to survive, it must set aside its selfishness and let itself be guided by the idea of solidarity. In the preamble of the Treaty on the European Union it is clearly written that Member States desire to deepen the solidarity between their peoples while respecting their history, their culture and their traditions. Solidarity cannot be limited by opportunistic economic evaluations. At least not now. The leading idea should be the desire to achieve the strengthening and the convergence of the economies of all Member States and to promote economic and social progress for their peoples. To that end, it is no



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more possible to run a common monetary policy without a common treasury. That was the past. Now new tools inspired only by the principle of solidarity among peoples are needed. Member States must understand, at least now, that the European people is more important than individual Member States.

The problem is not in the form, but in the substance of future actions. «The most pressing problem, without whose solution progress is merely an illusion, is the definitive abolition of the division of Europe». The time has come to read The Ventotene Manifesto «For a free and united Europe» with new eyes. Like then, even now «no European country can remain on the sidelines while the others fight». No Member State can put its own economic wellbeing above solidarity towards other Member States. It must be understood that there is only one European people and the Member States have the duty to save the European people as a whole, no ifs and buts. It is now time to stop struggling politically, both at national and European level. No Member State is better or worse than the other: all Member States have to win the war against Covid-19 and they must fight together. Only in this way will victory be for everyone, no matter how small or big, virtuous or less virtuous. In a real community, nobody wins if one loses. All for one and one for all. Curiously in his conclusions following the video conference of the members of the European Council of 23 April 2020 the President of the European Council said that «the well-being of each EU Member State depends on the well-being of the whole of the EU». Similarly, in the document called [A roadmap for recovery. Towards a more resilient, sustainable and fair Europe](#) it is clearly stated that «the shock of the pandemic is symmetric; it is important to avoid the recovery becoming asymmetric. Not all have suffered in the same way, not all have the same leverages to use and not all regions will be able to restart their economies quickly. The EU's recovery plan must therefore be based on solidarity, cohesion and convergence. We must ensure a level playing field for all. A functioning Single Market is beneficial to all EU citizens (...). The recovery must be inclusive and co-owned by all involved».

Europe needs to be pervaded by a new pro-European spirit where there is no space for distinction between North and South, rich and poor in order to start a new Europeanism phase inspired by the principle of solidarity. In these days of social distancing, the leaders of



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Member States have the opportunity to work together to reinforce the European dream of the Founding Fathers. If so, the European Union not only will overcome the present crisis, but it also will be stronger economically and socially. It is now time to fill the word solidarity with concrete contents and actions.

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