
EU at a crossroads: Recovery Fund, Brexit, governance and foreign affairs. "We need a Europe that is more."

A perilous albeit promising crossroads. The European Union, with its 27 Member States, reached the finishing line in the summer on various fronts, at least four of which are of critical importance: Recovery Fund, Brexit, Foreign affairs, Conference on the Future of Europe. The first - also known as Next Generation EU - was mentioned a few days ago in a message delivered at the Ambrosetti Forum by Italy's Head of State Sergio Mattarella, offering an inspiring insight into the months of Covid-19 and the future that lies ahead of us. Mattarella focused in particular on Italy, but the scope and content of his speech apply to all EU Member Countries.

The pandemic," said the President, " exposed our shared vulnerability, as we are all confronted with mounting interdependence."

Indeed, "as paradoxical as it may seem, while at an international level societies are increasingly interconnected in terms of value chains and cultures, States may be challenged by opposing tendencies." Nationalist closures are to be rejected, while welcoming close cooperation between European countries, aimed at overcoming the emerging economic and social crisis, also to reaffirm Europe's role as a world player. Mattarella then pointed out: "The recovery plan (i.e. the Recovery Fund ed.'s note), approved by all the Heads of Government and State at last July's European Council, constitutes - in terms of amount of resources and for the quality of the newly adopted solutions - an exceptional turning point whose level of ambition is commensurate with the historical value of the continent's integration. The attained result is simultaneously a point of departure and arrival." He specified: "It is a point of arrival inasmuch as it marks the accomplishment of a plan that goes from the single market to the common currency, the banking union, reaching the creation of a common fiscal tool which, for the first time, envisages concrete elements for the counter-cyclical stability of our economies. Yet it is also a starting point, for if we succeed in securing the recovery that our citizens expect through the deployed mechanisms, we will have made a safe and significant step forward towards strengthening cohesion and progressive continental integration, for a shared effort of democratic, impactful sovereignty." *Mattarella positively evaluated the decisions agreed in Brussels so far. However, he equally emphasized that the opportunity offered by the European recovery plan should not be wasted.* This is where Italy (institutions, companies, universities, citizens...) is expected to take a decisive step with projects aimed at modernizing the country - to be financed with €209 billion allocated by Brussels. The projects should not involve current expenditure, nor should they be restricted to tax cuts for electoral purposes. Instead, they must provide for well-defined and coherent actions in a number of specific areas: digitization, green transition and sustainable economy, infrastructure (especially in the south of Italy), employment and social cohesion, research and education, by means of public-private cooperation - unprecedented for Italy. October 15, the first date for submitting projects to EU institutions, is just around the corner. Yet on the whole, the Recovery Fund is an upcoming challenge for the EU, as it could give the go-ahead to a "new Community Europe" whereby the foundations of the integration process lead to peaceful coexistence, based on solidarity and subsidiarity, aimed at the well-being of citizens and families. This opportunity must not be wasted.

The second challenge the EU is called to face is Brexit.

The United Kingdom decided to leave the EU more than four years ago. But during this period, owing to the ascertained incapacity of British politics, London has failed to square the circle. With a number of signed documents and retracted promises, Downing Street governments merely confirmed that

leaving the "common home" is a disadvantage and an almost impossible solution insofar as the close interdependence developed over the decades between EU economies and societies - including the islands! - is acknowledged. A new round of negotiations took place in the last few days. British Prime Minister Boris Johnson further twisted the withdrawal agreement signed by his country's government, jeopardizing Ireland/Northern Ireland relations and risking to revive civil war on the green Island. There are two possible scenarios: either the United Kingdom leaves the EU on December 31 with a sensible and advantageous agreement for both parties (the UK and EU-27) or it leaves without a defined set of rules, that will be detrimental to British and European citizens and businesses alike. Tertium non datur. It's up to Johnson to formulate the answer.

Foreign policy is the third issue the EU is called to address.

Lebanon, Belarus, Turkey, Syria, Libya are just some of the fronts involving Euro-Mediterranean stability. In addition to which one could add an equal number of situations requiring multipolar policies for promoting peace, democracy and development. Europe's voice is currently missing; foreign affairs decisions under the EU Council unanimity rule will never be taken. Internal procedures must be changed to provide the Union with an effective capacity for action on a global scale, which is urgently awaited and desired in many areas of the planet, starting with Africa.

Last but not least, the Conference on the Future of Europe.

Announced for May and postponed due to the coronavirus, it might start in late autumn. But EU national governments seem reluctant to confirm. The Conference is expected to reshape some fundamental aspects of European governance, including the role and functions of the Strasbourg and Brussels institutions; the relationship between the EU and its Member States; the key issue of European citizenship. In order to effectively respond to citizens' needs, Europe must change: we don't need "more Europe" (i.e. more rules, more bureaucracy) but a "Europe that is more" : more efficient, concrete, cohesive, solid, close to people and families, open to the world. The Conference on the Future of Europe, which could be finalized in the coming weeks, must have this ambition. Dodging the questions leads nowhere.

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