

European Union in the Covid-19 pandemic, between unity and fragmentation





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The coronavirus pandemic is still a crucial challenge for Europe and the European Union. This terrible threat could still interrupt the fragile union between European states in the name of national solutions, or it could become an opportunity for greater unity through sharing health, economic and social policies between states.

Almost two years after the beginning of the pandemic, it can be said that the EU has faced, even if not yet solved, the health problem in the name of the highest possible cohesion. Beyond doubt, there is no lack of discordant voices: on the one hand, within the individual countries by the various nationalist parties; and on the other, at regional level by some sovereign governments, such as Hungary and Poland. However, the Franco-German alliance has held up and has become the backbone on which Italy, Spain, Portugal, Belgium, and the Netherlands have also leaned.

The European Commission has coordinated a unified European response to the coronavirus outbreak to contain the spread of the virus, support national health systems and counter the socio-economic impact of the pandemic by taking unprecedented measures at both national and EU levels.

First of all, the European cohesion has allowed a single front in bargaining with the major world pharmaceutical companies, thus avoiding harmful competition between the states of the union. The European Commission has secured up to 4.6 billion COVID-19 vaccines doses so far, and negotiations for additional ones are ongoing. Deliveries of vaccines to EU countries have steadily increased, and vaccination is accelerating. The latest update of 28 September 2021 counts 767.5 million vaccine doses delivered and 74.6% of the EU adult population fully vaccinated. The result of these cohesion policies has allowed tiered prices of vaccines and medical supplies, even in the face of the enormous increase in demand.

Secondly, this has guaranteed a homogeneous health treatment of all European citizens and an equal right of access to vaccination. In like manner, after a first

unsuccessful attempt by individual states to contain the virus through the uneven closure of borders and the reduction of mobility, the movement of goods and people was also centrally managed. A common portal has also been created (<https://reopen.europa.eu>) which provides information on the various measures in force in several European countries, the requirements for travel, and information on the EU's digital COVID certificate, which guarantees the right to free movement. Frequently updated information available in 24 languages makes the EU, which was at first one of the areas most affected by the epidemic, one of the safest travel areas in the world.

The improvement of the health condition has allowed the launch of a great Keynesian-style recovery plan to face the recession; otherwise, inevitable after years of restrictions, the collapse of trade, tourism and consumption, in conjunction with income available to families and businesses. In 2020, the EU provided an unprecedented response to the coronavirus crisis that hit Europe and the world.

The EU's long-term budget coupled with NextGenerationEU, the temporary instrument designed to boost and power the recovery. It will be the largest stimulus package ever financed in Europe, with a total of €2.018 trillion (in current prices) to help rebuild a post-COVID-19 Europe. It consists of the EU Multiannual Financial Framework for 2021-2027 of EUR 1.211 trillion (EUR 1.074 trillion in 2018 prices), topped up by EUR 806.9 billion (EUR 750 billion in 2018 prices) through NextGenerationEU. In this way, the EU secures the bankrolls for its political priorities, like digitalization and green deals. The budget also ensures room for flexibility, thus enabling the EU to respond to unforeseen circumstances and support the recovery while investing in the EU's regions, farmers, companies, researchers, students, citizens in general, along with neighboring countries.

By the end of August, the Commission had assessed and approved 19 of "the national recovery and resilience plans" being submitted. The first disbursements, worth more than EUR 49 billion, have already reached Belgium, Cyprus, Denmark, Germany, Greece, Spain, France, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, and Portugal, as of September 21st. Each European country has presented a special resilience and relaunch plan, based on the forecasts of the Recovery Plan, which will be approved and financed by the EU with the creation of common debt. On other occasions, it would have been unthinkable to make the public debt of the various states common. However, in these pandemic times, even the most hardened nationalists have had to admit that the different European economies are now totally interdependent. Therefore, for treatments to be effective, they must be common: a recession in several countries inevitably turns into a generalized downturn.

The stability of Europe has allowed a rapid economic recovery of the various states, with the European stock exchanges all rising following the American stock market. These are provisional and not definitive results because they are conditioned by the progress of the epidemic. If this were to resume force, the restrictions imposed by governments would necessarily restart, and the economy will pay the bill with a more severe recession than the first because it would fail, both at the recovery of confidence and the extraordinary means used so far to defeat this danger.

In any case, the problems caused to European states by the greatest epidemic of the century are far from being solved. Now, attention will necessarily have to shift to other areas of the world as well. The EU will also have to deal with the development of the epidemic in other areas of the world. Indeed, in many European countries, the second vaccination campaign has begun, administering a third dose to the most vulnerable subjects or to those most exposed to the risk of contracting the virus. On the one hand, this will ensure very high vaccination coverage in European territories. Nevertheless, it will cause a new flow of vaccine production to the EU, to the detriment of other regions where access to the vaccine is difficult and prohibitive for most of the population. In consequence, Europe will have to face a new challenge, which this time will go beyond regional borders and, once again, will ask for a united voice on the world scene.

