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Union or Unity: The State of Europe Put to the Test by the Pandemic

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Abstract

Europe's response to the dramatic tests of the pandemic has unfolded amidst a climate of uncertainty. From Britain's exit from the European Union to the cyclic waves of nationalist sentiment, the central question emerges: did Europe act united in the face of catastrophic events, or maintain its unity? What actions and reactions were implemented to confront the Coronavirus on a unified front? Ironically, after an exhaustive struggle against the health, and socio-economic crisis caused by COVID-19, marked by an unprecedented mobilization of human and economic resources in the Union's history, Europe abruptly confronted a new reality: the outbreak of war in Ukraine. These disruptive

events prompt reflection on the future European Union's potential evolution.

Key words: Union, Unity, Europe, EU, Pandemic, Sovereignty.

Introduction

Within a broadly articulated political and scholarly debate on the "state of the union" of Europe and the reconsideration of the role of nation-states, which on the one hand have seen erosion through partial transfers of sovereign prerogatives in multiple areas, yet on the other hand remain capable of sending vital impulses, such as the exit of Great Britain (Brexit), stirring national passions that are never dormant and always ready to rise again, the phenomenon of a pandemic broke out.

This situation presented itself as an extraordinary test of the various postures of the nation-states as well as of their respective public opinions. In response to the emergency, they exhibited varying degrees of their collective mentalities, contributing different perspectives to the European decision-making process. European solidarity and a sense of 'sacred selfishness' were influenced by encouraged social compartmentalization, seen as a preferred tool in response to the phenomenon.

The big question, therefore, concerns the future of the integration process, its durability, its sustainability, its enhancement, or its inertia.[1]

An additional source of pressure against the European structure was the foreign policy of the Trump administration,[2] which demonstrated skepticism and, at times, coolness in its relations with Brussels, and preferred bilateral relations with individual member states.

It must be noted that another formidable variable, the Russian-Ukrainian conflict,

[1] F Raspadori, "Il Coronavirus E Il Futuro Dell'Unione Europea," in *Andrà Tutto Bene? La Pandemia Di Coronavirus. Memoria Storica E Comunità Internazionale*, ed. Lorenzo Medici and Francesco Randazzo (Libellula Edizioni, 2020), 101–18.
[2] F Randazzo, "Le Relazioni Internazionali al Tempo Del Coronavirus," in *Andrà Tutto Bene? La Pandemia Di Coronavirus. Memoria Storica E Comunità Internazionale*, ed. Lorenzo Medici and Francesco Randazzo (Libellula Edizioni, 2020), 79–100.

inevitably intersected with the pandemic phenomenon. There is no doubt that this has contributed to strengthening and even broadening the Union.

The area where the greatest pressure, due to the emergency, naturally exerted itself, was the economic and financial sphere. The euro has demonstrated a rigid and fundamentally ideological resilience, yet it proved to be inadequate for governing an emergency.[3] However, for the first time, there was the possibility of achieving a "quasi-monetization" of public debts, due to the vigorous initiatives of the European Central Bank[4] and a true configuration of a "common European response".[5] All this has invoked a renewed sense of addressing of the problem of a common fiscal policy, a necessary counterpart of economic and financial policy.[6]

The challenge, then, remains the usual and well-known one as in recent years: Whether the Union can transform itself into an effective unified body, at least in terms of intentions, or if it will continue to function as a loosely defined entity, subject to broad or narrow interpretation at the discretion and convenience of member states, or in response to circumstances. In short, the path toward shared sovereignty and a Europe-nation, in the midst of which the integration process had run aground, has been reopened by the pandemic and the military conflict between Russia and Ukraine, and it now questions policies and consciences.

The Union exists, and is a great achievement, as the offspring of a global military conflict in which all continental powers were defeated. The question of our day is when and or to what extent this union is or can become Unity. The pandemic has evoked

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[3] B Ponti, "I Paradigmi Macro-Economici Dell'UE Alla Prova Della Pandemia," in *Andrà Tutto Bene? La Pandemia Di Coronavirus. Memoria Storica E Comunità Internazionale*, ed. Lorenzo Medici and Francesco Randazzo (Libellula Edizioni, 2020), 163–78.
[4] P Della Posta and M Signorelli, "Covid-19 E Politiche Macroeconomiche Dell'Unione Economica E Monetaria Europee," in *Andrà Tutto Bene? La Pandemia Di Coronavirus. Memoria Storica E Comunità Internazionale*, ed. Lorenzo Medici and Francesco Randazzo (Libellula Edizioni, 2020), 161–74.
[5] M Bartoli, "La Risposta Dell'UE al Covid-19 Tra Aiuti Pubblici, Interventi Sociali E Governance Economica," in *Andrà Tutto Bene? La Pandemia Di Coronavirus. Memoria Storica E Comunità Internazionale*, ed. Lorenzo Medici and Francesco Randazzo (Libellula Edizioni, 2020), 175–90.
[6] A Argentiero and P Polinori, "Le Politiche Fiscali Europee al Tempo Del Covid 19," in *Andrà Tutto Bene? La Pandemia Di Coronavirus. Memoria Storica E Comunità Internazionale*, ed. Lorenzo Medici and Francesco Randazzo (Libellula Edizioni, 2020), 191–200.

scenarios of dismemberment which the war, in an apparent paradox, has erased.

Union or unity?

Historical context

It is not uncommon for the terms "union" and "unity" to be misused in an attempt to associate the semantic characteristics of the former noun with the latter.
In all, upon further delving into their terminology, it is possible to distinguish "unity" from "union" by the presence of a significant concept: harmony. Unity is characteristic of that which, although made up of various parts, constitutes a unique, harmonious whole.

This lexical distinction helps to understand that while Europe responded with solidarity when confronted with such a momentous stress test as the pandemic, unprecedented as it was, to claim that it exhibited unity would be tantamount to embarking on a path paved with good intentions, yet recognized for not being the best.

As the cradle of the most important revolutions, from the French to the Industrial revolutions, and the battleground of some of the major world conflicts, Europe can be defined as the first aggregate experience among the defeated. A speech by Churchill in 1946 at the University of Zurich urged Europeans to put the horrors of the past behind and look to the future. According to him, the first step to recreate the 'European family' of justice, mercy, and freedom lay precisely in 'building a kind of United States of Europe.'[7]

Historically, a feeble attempt at union, subsequently abandoned, was conceived by England and France during World War II. The project, devised by Jean Monnet, one of the founding fathers of the European Union, and Desmond Morton, an assistant to Winston Churchill, aimed for a political union and a federal constitution to establish common defence, foreign policy and financial and economic bodies in a joint effort to face the threat of Hitler.

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[7] Unione europea, "Winston Churchill," european-union.europa.eu, n.d., https://european-union.europa.eu/principles-countries-history/history-eu/eu-pioneers/winston-churchill_it.

The Pandemic

For a Europe with "variable geometry,"[8] it is noteworthy that a distinctive feature of the Covid-19 crisis was its symmetrical nature, impacting all member states equally with origins entirely exogenous to economic policy.

The impact of the Coronavirus then proved to be significantly variable from State to State, also due to specific economic structures and different economic-social conditions at the outset. The economic and financial measures adopted by the States therefore had considerable repercussions on national public finances, coupled with the loss of tax revenues. Therefore, faced with the exceptional nature of the situation, the European Union decided to equip itself with equally exceptional instruments.

Among those was the proposal to amend the decision on the System of own resources of the European Union, under which the European Commission could be authorized to borrow from capital markets on behalf of the EU for a limited, albeit not necessarily short, period and exclusively for purposes related to the Covid-19 crisis.

The complexity of the health crisis coupled with the need for interstate coordination have highlighted, even more clearly now than in the past, the weakness and limited effectiveness from a national dimension of the exercise of public powers. Policy formulations have been equally fragile and partial in the face of the severity of a phenomenon that cannot be confined within territorial limits, such as a pandemic. Moreover, attempts to cope with the need for prompt and coordinated interventions were completely disregarded, as each State around the world acted independently and differently.

In Europe, the current situation is still weak as the level of integration has meant that each State reacted with both health and economic measures of varying content, in a very complicated attempt to balance between containing the pandemic while safeguarding

[8] Edizioni Simone, "Che Significa Europa a Geometria Variabile - Dizionari Simone Online," dizionari.simone.it, accessed July 14, 2024, https://dizionari.simone.it/11/europa-a-geometria-variabile.

economic interests. This lack of homogeneity was often further compounded by measures from sub-state levels of government, which led to a further differentiation in responses and conditions.

At the same time, the complexity of perception and relationship between citizens and the EU government had become apparent in response to EU interventions. The situation in the first place was further aggravated by the EU's slow response to the health emergency. In fact, it is worth noting that it was not until 16 March 2020 that the chairperson of the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen, had proposed border closures for 26 member states for thirty days, which could have been further extended if necessary.

The approval from the European Council took place the following day by videoconference, leaving it up to the individual states for its practical implementation, with the now known aftereffects.

The lack of simultaneity in sealing off European borders to contain the virus is just one of the revealing elements of the ineffectiveness of diversified and uncoordinated responses to the magnitude and speed of the epidemic.

In fact, the response of the Union was slower in respect to the U.S. administration, the British or even the Israeli governments in finalizing contracts, resulting in the delay in supplies. However, the Commission is not alone, or even primarily responsible for errors and delays.

Issues Emerged Due to a Mix of Factors

Firstly, the multilevel European governance (supranational, national, and regional) inherently implies bureaucratic slowness and complexity.

Secondly, given very limited competencies in health policy, the Commission could only enter into framework agreements with a number of pharmaceutical companies in the summer of 2020, but the quantities of each vaccine to be purchased (in correspondence to financial commitments) and vaccination campaigns were decided by individual countries,

which often took a long time.

Thirdly, the European Medicines Agency (EMA) had stricter verification procedures for the use of new drugs.

And lastly, in the race for a vaccine, resources and decision-making speed do matter, but so does geopolitical power, where the EU possesses more power than any of its member states but less than the other great powers and unitary nation states.

According to Alberto Martinelli, professor emeritus of Political Science and Sociology at the University of Milan, the European Union has emerged stronger having tragically learned from the pandemic crisis that the people of Europe, nation-states, institutions and citizens achieve better results when they act as a unified entity, as crisis response is more effective when they share both objectives (recovery and resilience, energy transition, digital revolution and social cohesion) and instruments (common debt for future investments and control over the use of resources by the Commission).[9]

The pandemic stress-test has given way to further avenues for reflection. It is well known how European institutions are structured, like other international organizations such as the UN, more as consociate realities and not alliances. To stay abreast with world powers such as China, Russia and the US, the introduction of a federal or confederal instrument is conceivable. However, confederations are complicated realities to implement within the EU system and require a significant degree of public support and development, as in the case of Switzerland.

The federation, on the other hand, due to its characteristic of representing unity while ensuring diversity, could be a viable option.

With the increased power of the Commission and Parliament, both the

[9] Alberto Martinelli, "L'Unione Europea Di Fronte Alla Pandemia Covid-19," *IL COSTITUZIONALISMO MULTILIVELLO NEL TERZO MILLENNIO: SCRITTI in ONORE DI PAOLA BILANCIA*, no. 4 (February 2, 2022), https://www.federalismi.it/nv14/articolo-documento.cfm?Artid=46704&content=&content_author=.

supranational and community methods have concurrently been strengthened in comparison to the intergovernmental method. It should be noted that EU decision-making processes vary depending on the regulatory area involved. As a rule, decisions are made through the community method, applying the use of ordinary legislative procedure.

This method differs from the roles of the supranational institutions of the Union. The European Commission has the right to introduce and implement legislation, with some exceptions, while the Parliament and Council are co-legislators, adopting legislation on an equal basis.

In the decision-making process, the intergovernmental method of operation mainly concerns common foreign and security policy and certain aspects of judicial and police cooperation.

In this case, the Commission's right of initiative is shared with EU member states or limited to specific areas of activity; the Council acts unanimously and adopts acts and the Parliament participates in the decision-making process to varying degrees.[10]

Another noteworthy stress-test to allude to is that of the war in Ukraine, which broke out in 2022. Faced with this new crisis, the European Union, united, perhaps even too much, immediately took sides. In broadening the occasion of the war to the immigration situation - the latter to be regarded as a persistent conflict of our times - it is possible to see how these events induced an extroverted response, unlike the pandemic that induced one of introversion. While it is true that a genuinely aggregated and cohesive political entity can be recognized by its ability, more or less evident but nonetheless present, to acknowledge its national interests, which is what essentially happened in the case of the pandemic, the same cannot be said of the Ukrainian crisis.

Finally, in this context, the position of Germany stands out, which during the

[10] Publications Office of the European Union, "The Community and Intergovernmental Methods," eur-lex.europa.eu, May 5, 2022, https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/ALL/?uri=LEGISSUM:community_intergovernmental_methods.

pandemic suppressed the pressure of public opinion, contentious to joint debt. However, during the energy and war crisis, it untangled itself by pursuing a policy of genuine national interest, both in its massive aid to families and businesses as well as in recovering its relationship, as a single nation-state with China and its production system.

Conclusion

The responses on the part of the various European governments to dramatic crises such as the Covid-19 pandemic were less timely and effective than they should have been, but not because their sovereignty is limited by the Union, as the national-populist parties claim, but rather for the exact opposite reason. The Union is still incomplete and fundamental policy areas, such as healthcare, are outside the competence of the supranational institutions.

Consequently, the European Union remains intact and operational. Although it has certainly been affected by the Coronavirus pandemic, it has not experienced catastrophic setbacks, and its existence and resilience have never been in doubt. Indeed, the 1990s are long gone, when there was once doubt in achieving economic and other goals towards "entering Europe," even at the cost, incredible to say, of splitting up the country so that the "virtuous part" could enter.

During the first two decades of the 2000s, the situation has evolved. The term "Italexit" has even been mentioned, and Euroscepticism has grown stronger. However, this scepticism has not led to outright hostility.

The primary takeaway from the pandemic is that the European Union needs to be consolidated. This can be achieved by:

- Strengthening the Community method as opposed to the intergovernmental method
- Reinforcing the role of the Commission and Parliament as opposed to that of the Council
- Gradually reducing unanimity voting

- Expanding the sphere of policies of supranational competence (common policy for health emergencies, European social pillar and common foreign and defence policy)
- Deepening economic interdependence and collaboration among European peoples and governments
- And developing sentiments of loyalty and solidarity within the framework of European citizenship.

The decisions on the part of the Commission to borrow from the markets along with the introduction of their own new taxes to the European budget must be implemented and maintained, now that the pandemic emergency has ended, by establishing a European Treasury and a gradual harmonization of fiscal policies of member states. The unfortunate events related to the epidemic have shown how Unity is still lacking. While it is possible to affirm the presence of a developed economic union, the same cannot be said about an ethical-political union.

We have in fact witnessed forms of solidarity, perhaps a sporadic union of intentions, but certainly not unity. However, the road to this goal is underway and this is a direct consequence of the pandemic; a consequence that certainly does not compensate for the tragic loss of lives and extreme suffering, but one that has nonetheless accelerated the process of political integration.

The pathway towards greater integration and sustainable development requires a redefinition of the relations of power and influence among the main players of EU governance in a more supranational and community-oriented direction. This calls for a consolidation of the hegemony of pro-European political groups with respect to the Eurosceptic national-populist ones, and a prevalence of countries that prioritize growth over advocates of financial rigor. In managing the pandemic crisis, this redefinition has partially occurred, but it must be further developed.

As noted by Roberta Pinotti, President of the Defense Committee, Senate of the Republic, it is imperative for the Union to take some steps forward in its capabilities

toward a foreign and defence policy, in order to reverse the process of marginalization that we have observed in various crisis scenarios as well as strengthen its role in favour of security and stability.

This, he asserts, is to prevent a security vacuum brought about by a retraction on the part of the UN, the EU and NATO, which provides an opportunity for individual players and their ambitions to redesign power relations. Europe's lack of political unity and the absence of a European foreign, security and defence policy have created an opposition to progress that has prevented Europe from contributing to stabilization of a neighbouring area, which has created a domino effect and fostered disillusionment and scepticism in the Balkans and the resurgence of nationalistic nostalgia.

This indeed confirms the prediction made in 1976 by Jean Monnet when he asserted that Europe would be established through crises, building itself on the sum of the solutions provided.