

COVID-19 Emergency: Europe Needs a Vaccine

by Nicoletta Pirozzi

The Coronavirus outbreak, due to its political, economic and social backlashes, as well as its immediate public health implications, is potentially the most difficult test of the 2000s for the European Union, even more so than the financial crisis of 2008 and the so-called migration crisis of 2015–16. The Union's response to this emergency appeared inadequate and rather late, particularly if compared with that of China, the country where the emergency began, and which today seems to have moved beyond the most critical phase of the epidemic.

The unilateral decisions of Poland, Slovakia, the Czech Republic, Denmark, Cyprus, Latvia and Lithuania to close their borders and effectively suspend the Schengen Agreement are not reassuring. Nor is the initial blockade in the supply of protective medical devices, including masks, to the other member states ordered by France and Germany. EU institutions, on their part, have shown little political cohesion

and foresight, producing a patchwork of messages and initiatives that had no positive impact on the perception of citizens.

All of this has undoubtedly contributed to increased criticism of the European model. In both public debate and social media there have been renewed demands for the re-acquisition of competences at a national level, as well as calls to look at China as an alternative example of crisis management.

On the one hand, such arguments are easily disputable on a rational level. The idea of reacting to a global pandemic with purely national measures is in itself absurd, above all because the virus knows no borders. Only coordinated and transnational action is capable of limiting its spread. On the other hand, the Chinese model cannot be a viable alternative. The centralisation of the response implemented by the Chinese government, the widespread control and manipulation of public information

Nicoletta Pirozzi is Head of IAI Programme "EU politics and institutions" and Institutional Relations Manager at the Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI).

through state media, and the extensive collection of citizen data to limit travel and infections¹ are typical tools of an autocratic regime and entail the denial of freedoms and individual rights that are at the cornerstone of European societies.

If the goal is to better adjust the European response and to adapt the system to mitigate the current crisis (but also to prevent new crises in the future), a more sensible approach is that of analysing the competences and tools currently available to the European Union and proposing remedies on that basis, both for the near future and for the longer term. As said, we are facing a multidimensional phenomenon involving at least three elements: the factual response to the health crisis, correct and timely information and the containment of economic and social consequences.

Regarding the factual response to the emergency, it should be stressed that member states have exclusive competence for setting national health policies, including the organisation and delivery of health services. The Union has only a role in complementing such policies, which includes the fight against so-called “major health scourges” (based on Article 168 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union).² Building on this

legal basis, more coordinated action could and should have been promoted by Brussels and in particular by the Health Ministers of the 27 member states convened in the Employment, Social Policy, Health and Consumer Affairs Council (Health).

Furthermore, the Lisbon Treaty introduced the so-called “solidarity clause” (Article 222 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union), according to which the Union and its member states shall act jointly when one of them is the subject of a terrorist attack or the victim of a natural or man-made disaster.³ This clause could have been triggered by Italy through a notification to the European Commission and the Presidency of the Council. At that stage, primary responsibility would have rested with the Commission and the High Representative that would have had to identify the most appropriate EU instruments, including the European Solidarity Fund.

Meanwhile, the EU Civil Protection Mechanism, activated by Italy at the end of February to ask member states to provide protective masks, did not work as it should. As pointed out by the Italian Permanent Representative to the EU Maurizio Massari, no country has responded to the call.⁴ It was not until Sunday that reports of the unblocking of protective masks and other material

¹ Francesca Ghiretti e Lorenzo Mariani, “Cina: primo caso di successo?”, in *AffarInternazionali*, 12 marzo 2020, <https://www.affarinternazionali.it/?p=79197>.

² Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (TFEU), Part Three: Union Policies and Internal Actions, Title XIV: Public Health, Article 168 (ex Article 152 TEC), https://eur-lex.europa.eu/eli/treaty/tfeu_2008/art_168/oj.

³ TFEU, Part Five: The Union’s External Action, Title VII: Solidarity Clause, Article 222, https://eur-lex.europa.eu/eli/treaty/tfeu_2016/art_222/oj.

⁴ Maurizio Massari, “Italian Ambassador to the EU: Italy Needs Europe’s Help”, in *Politico*, 10 March 2020, <https://www.politico.eu/article/coronavirus-italy-needs-europe-help>.

from France and Germany emerged, thanks to the intervention of the European Commission.⁵

This leads to the communications strategy, which seems to reflect the confusion and reluctance to act in a coordinated manner at the European level. The Union could have done a much better job in reassuring citizens and demonstrating itself as a responsive and cohesive actor, living up to the ambitions of “a Europe that protects”, as written in strategic documents and as championed by European leaders.

It is especially in these times of crisis that the social responsibility of individuals can make a difference, and this is why it is essential to send clear and non-contradictory messages. At the same time, it is important to ensure that institutions are present to strengthen trust among the population. If the President of the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen, launched, on 11 March, a heartfelt – albeit belated – message of closeness to Italy,⁶ the European country most severely affected by this emergency so far, the following day the President of the European Central Bank, Christine Lagarde, made a sudden statement⁷

⁵ Thierry Breton, “After intense discussions, I welcome that [Germany] and [France] now allow for export of #COVID19 protective equipment...”, Twitter post, 15 March 2020, <https://twitter.com/ThierryBreton/status/1239159582821408770>.

⁶ Ursula von der Leyen, “Cari italiani, in questo momento difficile, voglio dirvi che non siete soli...”, Twitter post, 11 March 2020, <https://twitter.com/vonderleyen/status/1237761542902382592>.

⁷ European Central Bank, *Christine Lagarde, Luis de Guindos: Introductory statement to the press conference (with Q&A)*, 12 March 2020, <https://www.ecb.europa.eu/press/pressconf/2020/html/ecb.is200312~f857a21b6c.en.html>.

which caused the Italian bonds spread burst out and generated a stern reaction by the Italian Head of State.⁸ Lagarde’s clarifications and von der Leyen’s reassurance that the Union would do “whatever is necessary” to help its member states and its citizens only came subsequently.⁹

Yet, there is another challenge in terms of communication that will need to be carefully monitored and countered by the Italian and European institutions: that of strategic communication against misinformation about the Coronavirus emergency, which is spreading from many sides. Examples of this are the Kremlin’s campaign aimed at making the United States bear the responsibility for the virus, or Beijing’s attempts to discredit European action by countering it with solidarity and benevolent actions. Therefore, it will be necessary to invest more in countering these attempts of interference by authoritarian foreign powers, especially to avoid longer-term repercussions on the resilience of our democratic societies.

Lastly, there are measures relating to the economic and social impact of the emergency. Measures that have blocked free movement and halted commercial and productive activities in some countries risk having disastrous consequences for the European economy and require strong support

⁸ Italian President, *Nota del Presidente della Repubblica Sergio Mattarella*, 12 March 2020, <https://www.quirinale.it/elementi/46574>.

⁹ Eszter Zalan, “Von der Leyen on Virus: ‘EU Will Do Whatever Is Necessary’”, in *EUobserver*, 13 March 2020, <https://euobserver.com/coronavirus/147731>.

mechanisms. In recent days, good news came from Brussels,¹⁰ such as the green light for member states to make all necessary expenditures on health, social, labour and economic support measures based on the “unusual events outside the control of government” clause.

There was also a go-ahead for state aid for those companies that have liquidity crises and need urgent support, such as those in the air transport and tourism sectors. In the coming weeks, 1 billion euro of the European budget will be allocated to guarantee the European Investment Fund in order to give banks an incentive to provide liquidity of at least 8 billion euro to small and medium-sized enterprises in difficulty. A speeding-up of the launch of a European unemployment benefit scheme, already under consideration by the Commission, is also expected.

Finally, the Commission proposes to allocate 37 billion euro from the Cohesion Fund to deal with the emergency as well as to expand the European Solidarity Fund. This move forward, which is also due to incisive diplomatic action by the Italian Minister for Economic Affairs and Finance, Roberto Gualtieri, and by the political work of European Commissioner Paolo Gentiloni, is to be applauded, not least because it could substantially change the European economic and financial paradigm in a direction that Italy itself has repeatedly called for.

¹⁰ European Commission, *COVID-19: Commission Sets Out European Coordinated Response to Counter the Economic Impact of the Coronavirus*, 13 March 2020, https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_20_459.

What is now missing is a major public investment plan that concerns not only the health sector but also all those sectors that will be hit hardest by the crisis, from welfare to infrastructure to education. In short, it is to be hoped that this emergency will convince everyone of the need to provide the Union with the financial and political instruments it needs to face up to its economic and structural challenges. This should also be reflected in the sizes and priorities of the next multi-annual budget cycle 2021–27.

Coronavirus will have consequences that no one yet is able to fully assess. What the Union cannot afford is to turn it into yet another missed opportunity for its citizens to feel the closeness and utility of its institutions, with words and deeds.

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Via Angelo Brunetti, 9 - I-00186 Rome, Italy

T +39 06 3224360

F + 39 06 3224363

iai@iai.it

www.iai.it

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