



THE CHALLENGES AND PERSPECTIVES OF THE EUROPEAN UNION

Prof. Marco Brunazzo

Department of Sociology and Social Research
University of Trento

When European leaders met in 2017 for the 60th anniversary of the Treaties of Rome, the UK had just invoked Article 50 of the Treaty on EU, starting a two-year countdown to leave the EU. The festivities were eclipsed by the financial, migration and Brexit crisis, along with difficult transatlantic relations after the election of Donald Trump just when the southern and eastern borders showed signs of unrest.

Jean Monnet, French diplomat and founding father of the EU, believed that 'Europe would be built through crises and that it would be the sum of their solutions.' He expected European elites to choose integration even in difficult times, when the only alternative would be to reverse the process of creating an ever closer Union. The question is whether the nature of the crises facing the EU at the beginning of the

21st century is different and whether disintegration is a real possibility. The crisis produced by Covid-19 may prove to be an even greater challenge.

Today the EU is facing a series of existential dilemmas. The first one is the dilemma between solidarity and respect for the rules. Winston Churchill's appeal for a United States of Europe in 1946 called on European countries to abandon the rivalry created by defending national interests and to work closely to solve common problems. For most of the history of European integration, Member States have willingly sacrificed their immediate interests to support a partner country. However, in the 1980s, the government of Margaret Thatcher felt that EU budgetary rules and the Common Agricultural Policy penalised the UK disproportionately. The UK's large service sector and relatively small agricultural sector made it a net contributor to the EU budget and a limited beneficiary of the CAP. On that occasion, the other Member States agreed to reduce the UK's contribution to the EU budget.

The challenges facing the EU today make it hard to guarantee solidarity and respect for the rules. The refugee and migration crisis showed that shared responsibility of reception goes against EU rules. Some Member States opposed the migrant transfer project by invoking the Dublin Regulation, stating that if the regulations were not respected, this would challenge both the management of the EU's external borders and the free movement of people inside the Schengen Area. This time, respect for the rules came at the expense of solidarity.

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There are convincing reasons to argue that a union of sovereign States must be based on respect for the rules rather than on political calculations, including those based on power relations. The smaller States must feel sure that the more powerful States obey the rules, and do not apply their economic and political strength to suit their own interests. The larger, wealthier States must feel that they do not have to bear the cost when smaller States go against the rules. According to the principle of solidarity, Member States recognise that they will not have exclusive authority within their borders, and in return, they will be able to count on coordinated responses in the event of a crisis. The open question in the EU concerns the benefits and costs of mutual solidarity and under what conditions it should be granted.

The second existential dilemma is the choice between interests and values. The EU has always considered itself a special political actor, capable of expressing a special political power. European integration was an attempt to solve problems of a political nature in both Europe and the international system, unlike systems that are founded on the sovereign power of a nation State. For this reason, the EU had considered traditional concepts such as sovereignty and national interests not as principles of organisation but as political factors that caused conflict and instability. Instead, the EU was a political order based on shared values and not on conflicting interests; values that were rooted in the principles and institutions of liberal democracy. The EU was to be a civil or regulatory power, not one that used its material power to force other States to behave according to their likings.

Political instability on the EU's southern and eastern borders, changing balances of power towards Asia and the erosion of the transatlantic alliance have forced the EU to choose between its strategic interests and values. It has often been able to negotiate a balance between the two, but many of the current pressures require a clear choice. For example, the migration crisis has raised questions whether there is sufficient solidarity between Member States to keep internal borders open. This crisis has forced the EU into agreements which, according to most agencies involved with human rights and immigration, will put many migrants at risk.

The clash between values and political correctness is also present in internal matters.

Developing liberal democracy in some Member States has become a pressing concern, especially for those that joined the EU after 2004. In Hungary, Viktor Orbán's government restricted freedom of the press, shut down a university, undermined the rule of law and praised 'illiberal democracy'. There were political and geostrategic reasons for not confronting the Hungarian government, but many European citizens lost faith in the argument that the EU stands for a different type of political power.

The third challenge is how to plan the future of the EU in the face of growing domestic and international uncertainty. In 2017, to celebrate 60 years of Rome Treaties, the European Commission produced the 'White Paper on the Future of Europe'. Contrary to what the founding fathers did in 1950, the White Paper does not propose a way forward; it merely outlines five possible scenarios:

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1. Carrying On: This option focuses on minor political issues and proposes progressive change to improve the single market, the single currency, transport and digital infrastructure without major institutional reforms.

2. Nothing But The Single Market: This option focuses attention on the single market, ensuring the free movement of goods and services across borders, but no longer guarantees the free movement of people or a common asylum policy.

3. Those Who Want More Do More: This option supports 'Carrying On' regarding the basic issues in Scenario 1, adding an 'exception' for States that want to do more. This flexible approach keeps the 27 together on key issues they agree on, such as the four freedoms and the single market. They can also continue integration within the framework of existing treaties and institutions, without being hindered by others.

4. Doing Less More Efficiently: In 2025 the EU will act more quickly in its chosen areas, as the single market is the only sector where the 27 members continue to cooperate. Integration in sectors such as regional development and state aid is reduced to an exclusively national competence.

5. Doing Much More Together: This scenario is based on Jean Monnet's belief that crises would build political union and the argument put forward by many EU leaders that the EU in its current form cannot deal with the many crises it faces, let alone the Member States on their own. A true political union must be created with the power to generate and share resources through widespread consensus.

All the dilemmas and different possible solutions for the EU integration are part of the issues the Conference on the Future of Europe has to cope with. In the Joint Declaration of the European Parliament, the European Council, and the European Commission approved in 2021 and inaugurating the Conference, one can read: 'Since its creation, the European Union has mastered multiple challenges. With the COVID19 pandemic, the European Union's unique model was challenged like never before. Europe can and must also learn the lessons from these crises (...). The European Union has to show that it can provide answers to citizens' concerns and ambitions. (...). To address geopolitical challenges in the post COVID-19 global environment, Europe needs to be more assertive, taking a leading global role in promoting its values and standards in a world increasingly in turmoil'.

The Conference on the Future of Europe is a citizens-focused, bottom-up exercise for Europeans to have their say on what they expect from the European Union. It will give citizens a greater role in shaping the Union's future policies and ambitions, improving its resilience. It will do so through a multitude of Conference-events and debates organised across the Union, as well as through an interactive multilingual digital platform.

The topics the Conference will cover will be, among the others, the following: Building a healthy continent, the fight against climate change and environmental challenges, an

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economy that works for people, social fairness, equality and intergenerational solidarity, Europe's digital transformation, European rights and values including the Rule of Law, migration challenges, security, the EU's role in the world, the Union's democratic foundations, and how to strengthen democratic processes governing the European Union.

This is a very important opportunity: tomorrow's Europe starts today!

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