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Four paths to a common goal

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The more than three years that separate us from the last European elections in 2019 have been a real shock therapy for the EU institutions. First the sovereigntist threat, feared to be rising after Brexit, foiled by the launch of the Von der Leyen Commission, then the announcement of the Green New Deal that gave all Europeans, after so long, the sense of a great common challenge: To be the world vanguard of the fight against climate change; then in 2020 the Coronavirus crisis and, after initial uncertainties, the joint decisions on vaccines and especially their supply; now the threat to European security with Russia's aggression against Ukraine and in this context the threat to energy security and the gas crisis. These are all major events that have overwhelmingly affected the life of our continent and have also made clear the need for a united response from the EU institutions.

The State of the Union speech delivered before the European Parliament by the President of the Commission on 14 September was centred on these same themes. It also set out an ambitious framework of objectives and reforms in terms of energy regulation, technological reindustrialisation and the supply of critical raw materials, as well as the defence and promotion of the rule of law. All this within the new financial framework of the Next Generation EU, a EUR 750 billion package designed to stimulate a 'sustainable, even, inclusive and fair recovery': the largest growth support package ever funded by the EU.

There is, however, a gap between the height of the ambitions and the adequacy of the institutions and decision-making mechanisms called upon to give them substance. In a profound and objectively irreversible way, the mission of this most original invention that is the European Union is changing.

If in the second part of the 20th century the founding reason for the Community path was to build and maintain peace between European countries in the aftermath of the tragedy of the Second World War, if after the fall of the Berlin Wall this meant building the single currency to give greater substance to the idea of a common destiny and to Europeanise a finally reunited Germany, today, in the context of a completely globalised world, these self-referential dimensions can no longer seem sufficient.

The Community path was created to defuse security threats from within our continent: two world wars in a little over thirty years; but it was not designed to secure members from threats outside the community, such as those relating to health security, military security and energy security.

And indeed, faced with an external shock such as COVID-19, the European Union initially appeared uncertain and insecure. It was only after a certain amount of time - an explicit and timely reminder from the Italian President of the Republic Sergio Mattarella was not irrelevant - that it finally decided to take charge of the emergency and experiment with a common health policy. Acting as a single buyer, it ensured the purchase of vaccines at reduced prices and, in a relatively short space of time, managed to vaccinate almost the entire population. Actually, in that case, the Union acted as a force. For everyone.

None of this would have been possible without loosening the budget constraints by initiating an expansive monetary policy. A decisive factor was Germany's change of perspective, which interpreted the COVID-19 crisis in a completely opposite way to that of Greece in 2010.

While the COVID-19 emergency was not yet completely over, a second serious crisis loomed, this time concerning the most political sphere by definition, that of military security. 24 February 2022 irreversibly changes the foreign policy of many Member States vis-à-vis the Russian Federation and consequently changes Europe's foreign policy and energy policy.

In the autumn of 2022, Italy and Europe are still completely within this second major external shock. In this case, the political response of condemnation and sanction of Russian aggression was prompt and unequivocal along with support for the right of resistance, territorial integrity and independence of Ukraine.

The energy crisis that immediately followed the military crisis has, however, highlighted on the one hand the limits of the Green New Deal strategy, which risks being set aside in the name of a massive return to coal, and on the other the persistence of divergent and conflicting national energy strategies. The case of the Amsterdam gas market, a veritable paradise for speculation, is emblematic. Added to this are the positions of some countries such as Germany and the Netherlands against the price cap on gas. We are therefore a long way from having a European energy strategy starting from the elementary consideration that there is no European natural gas infrastructure.

At subsequent meetings, such as the European Council of 6 October in Prague and 20-21 October in Brussels, some steps were taken in the right direction, but the times call for even more challenging and courageous decisions to ensure an effective and profitable energy shield for all Europeans.

All these considerations make it clear that we are indeed facing a new phase. After the early phase, which identified coal and steel as resources to be pooled, transforming them from an opportunity for conflict into an instrument of cooperation, and after Maastricht, which pooled the currency, ensuring the stability and convergence of many of the countries that had just joined the EU, we are now called upon to make a structural

leap: to pool not only financial and production standards, in short the economy, but to unify strategies, visions, international relations, in a word: to pool politics.

It is difficult to identify the steps along this still completely unexplored path. The extraordinariness of events, however, requires an appropriate extraordinariness of action. There is a widespread perception that there is a need for an extraordinary initiative, both at the level of policies but also and above all at the level of institutions and democratic life within the Union.

The Forum that CeSPI intends to promote, as an ideal continuation of the path started with the Conference on the Future of Europe, aims to provoke a debate to be conducted without false modesty and in a spirit of truth, without exaltations or demonisations of any kind, because it is free from personal, factional or apparatus calculations. A space for reflection and confrontation, a collection of analyses, proposals, criticisms, even uncomfortable ones, but from which a constructive spirit can nevertheless be grasped.

In order to facilitate and organise the collection of contributions in the best possible way, the following four macro areas will be set up, following the model of the Conference on the Future of Europe.

1. Democracy and European values, rights and rule of law, security;

2. Climate change, environment and health;

3. Economic strengthening, social justice, work and education, sport and digital transformation;

4. EU in the world.

DEMOCRACY and the RULE OF LAW

The European Union is a highly original construction, unique in the history of mankind. Its law has been formed over time through treaties, directives and regulations adopted jointly by the Parliament and the Council, and again through the jurisprudence of the Court of Justice of the European Union, which together with the European Court of Human Rights, represents the most advanced legal civilization has produced in terms of fundamental human rights and their protection. However, this very strong legal fabric, the result of decades of sedimentation, is not adequately perceived by public opinion. There is a problem in the perception of the democratic legitimacy of the Community institutions also because of a legislative procedure that should be more transparent and capable of involving citizens. Emblematic in this regard is the fact that the European Parliament is the only parliament in the world that has no legislative initiative and, moreover, has little power to direct and sanction the Commission, which, in order to be operational, must have the favourable vote of Parliament, but cannot be challenged by it.

In recent years, various hypotheses have emerged to bring the European institutions closer to the citizens. Here are just a few of them, such as the proposal to have a single, uniform electoral law; the proposal to directly elect the President of the European Commission; the unification of the office of President of the Council with that of President of the Commission. Another strand of discussion concerns the role of national parliaments and their greater involvement in the day-to-day work of the European institutions: the so-called ascendancy phase.

These are topics on which there is already a debate but to which this forum would like to contribute in a timely and qualified manner. In addition to these measures to promote democratic life, others must be developed to safeguard the rule of law and fundamental values within the EU, for which constant monitoring is absolutely necessary.

Recent episodes have highlighted different levels of enforcement of EU legislation within the Member States, as the primacy of EU law over national law is not a principle recognised by all. It is obvious that these discrepancies need to be homogenised: it is difficult to walk together if a certain type of subjective right is recognised in some States and not in others.

Lastly, there is the more political issue of reforming the treaties and overcoming the right of veto and therefore unanimous voting for the adoption of majority voting. A solution viewed with extreme fear by the small countries. Yet it should be recognised by all that, *rebus sic stantibus*, the EU institutions struggle to give themselves a coherent and unified direction. It would be a different story if, instead of the reform of the treaties, the awareness of a completely new phase were to mature, giving rise to a movement for the election of a real constituent assembly of the European Union that would definitively transform the current *statenbund* into a real *bundenstaat*.

CLIMATE CHANGE, ENVIRONMENT AND HEALTH

The second axis of reflection concerns health and environmental issues. A fundamental methodological point is the assumption of a long-term logic, namely a perspective that is in many ways opposed to the dominant one of the last forty years: that short-term economic culture centred on measurable results from three months to three months and based exclusively on the principle of creating value for shareholders and maximising it. The health emergency and the climate emergency have demonstrated the inadequacy of this approach because of the social health and environmental costs it imposes on society as a whole.

Let us begin with the former. The pandemic has raised the issue of a long-term approach to European public health. There is a widespread awareness that what happened between 2020 and 2022, given the volume and speed of trade around the world, could happen again with greater regularity. We cannot be caught unprepared as with COVID-19. There is talk of a 'European Health Union' as a necessary new dimension of EU integration.

The pandemic issue has made it clear that centralisation of certain policies, such as the supply of vaccines, generates benefits for all. Taking this approach systematically, however, tends to run counter to the principle of subsidiarity, one of the cornerstones of European integration. One of the objectives of this discussion area

is precisely, in the light of experience, to try to understand how to reconcile, and on which sectors and subjects, these two clearly alternative principles: that of centralisation and that of subsidiarity.

Linked to this track of reflection is a second one that concerns the weaknesses manifested by the European production system in the production chain of health products. This has led to the emergence of the need for a European industrial policy in the health sector capable of filling these gaps while maintaining high health standards for all citizens.

A similar long-term logic must also be adopted when it comes to the environment and combating climate change. It is a matter of giving substance to the investments envisaged by the Next Generation EU in order to truly achieve climate neutrality in 2050. Today we know that energy production accounts for more than 75% of the Union's greenhouse gas emissions, while on another scale 40% of our energy consumption relates to buildings.

Despite the efforts made in recent years, the dependence of the European development model on fossil fuels is still extremely high. Italy and Europe are too vulnerable to price shocks of these resources. All this makes it even more urgent to have a genuine 'European energy policy' with the twin goals of energy self-sufficiency and climate neutrality.

ECONOMIC REINFORCEMENT

First the COVID-19 crisis, now the energy crisis have put the Union's economies and budgets under severe stress. Two main issues emerge. The first, of a macroeconomic nature, concerns the future economic and budgetary direction of the Union. The second, of a microeconomic nature, concerns which sectors, which productions, which services will have to characterise the economic and productive fabric of the Union for the next 30 years, or in classical economist's terms: what place will the European Union have to have in the international division of labour of the 21st century.

As of today, 2022, we know that the debt-to-GDP ratio of the euro area is just under the 100% threshold. Taken as a whole, this is not a number that heralds an emergency situation. It is only when considered in relation to the most fragile countries that this can entail risks of speculative attacks that can undermine the resilience of the euro area.

The debate is therefore open on whether and how to update the parameters that are agreed in the treaties. In the eyes of many observers, the new European strategy, Next Generation EU, appears to be a return to the season of public interventionism. If confirmed it would represent the overcoming of the monetarist Europe of Maastricht based on the sacralisation of parameters and the mantra of competition as well as on a bureaucratic-regulatory interpretation of state aid.

There is also the proposal for a 'capital market union' to encourage European companies, whose debts have risen sharply with the crisis, to finance themselves not only through the banking system but through other channels.

In terms of the real economy, the crises of recent years have revealed major gaps in the European production system, not only, as we have seen, in medical supplies, but for example in technologically advanced sectors such as semiconductors. Economic interdependence risks making us lose technological sovereignty. Economic reinforcement is also productive reinforcement, in the sense that we need to be able to preside over all strategic sectors without being forced to depend on non-EU suppliers and their possible power of blackmail. In this sense, some of the internationalisation strategies of companies inaugurated in the last 30 years can be reconsidered, aiming instead at shortening supply chains and bringing the production cycle back to the EU.

EU IN THE WORLD

The return of war in Europe, with the appearance of obvious threats to its security, urgently and dramatically re-proposes the issue of the need for a common European defence, an issue that had already become apparent in 2021 at the time of the USA's hasty and unilateral withdrawal from Afghanistan. Connected to the theme of common defence is that of the Union's posture in international relations. There is no common defence without a common foreign policy. In this area, a debate has emerged that this Forum would like to explore between the 'French' concept of 'strategic autonomy' and the 'German' concept of 'strategic sovereignty'.

Here suffice it to point out that the former, the French one, has a marked geopolitical character and is embodied in a progressive path of distinction between the strategic objectives of the European Union and those of NATO, pointing to the fact that the element of nuclear deterrence, classically imputed to the US, could be replaced by the French one.

As for the concept of 'strategic sovereignty' to which the adjective 'technological' is also added, here we are still in a mixed dimension between geoeconomics and geopolitics. The point is to further integrate European information and technology systems to ensure security as well as ownership and control of production chains. Exemplary is the question of the supply of microchips.

These two points obviously do not exhaust all the horns of the dilemma because if the EU's way of presenting itself in the world is to change, the institutions that oversee this way must also change. Common foreign and defence policy ultimately means shared geopolitics and an equally shared analysis of external threats, as well as a common diplomatic corps and army.

If there is one area where the treaty system has demonstrated its inadequacy to govern international and extra-EU processes, it is migration. Rather than recognising in these great movements of populations an epoch-making phenomenon, which is predominantly the result of instability caused by wars, terrorism and natural disasters, the EU has intended to govern this phenomenon with a bureaucratic rather than a strategic approach. Hence the conception and current application of the 1990 Dublin Convention, which binds all asylum application procedures to the country of first arrival, but which has proved to be totally inadequate in the management of mass migration flows and their redistribution on European territory.

There is therefore a question of EU solidarity towards emergencies in the world, but also a question of internal solidarity between EU countries. The case of the refugees from the war in Ukraine is different, where the Union has shown general solidarity and no friction even with different reception loads between countries.

Where migration is the result of destabilisation, such as in Africa, a mediating and preventive role for EU foreign policy would be important. The school case is the mission in Lebanon, which since 2006 has prevented the Middle Eastern country from being completely sucked into the region's instability.

There is therefore an increasing need for a European actor capable of making its own contribution to global security not only by combating the terrorist phenomenon but also through nation-building initiatives. In this perspective, there appears to be an urgent need to fine-tune the EU Africa strategy, which is still too weak to make Europe's role on this continent effective, especially when compared to other major players such as China, Russia and Turkey.

The last point concerns the incomplete EU accession process. The decision to grant candidate status to Ukraine and Moldova following the Russian invasion has made the EU's delay in dealing with the issue of Western Balkan membership even more anachronistic. It is no mystery how the instability in the Balkans is in itself a long-term threat to European stability and security.