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Covid-19: Where's the EU?

So far, the EU has shown lacklustre corona crisis management. A view from Italy shows what needs to happen now

Read this article in German.

In Germany and a number of other countries it is constantly repeated that they need to make sure that they avoid the 'conditions in Italy'. That represents a complete misunderstanding of the situation and indeed is an affront, given what Italy is going through. The Italian government is acting courageously and consistently and the Italian population has achieved something remarkable: overnight it has adjusted its social interactions without further ado, from Bolzano to Palermo, avoiding one another rather than going out together in a historically unprecedented act of community spirit and responsibility. It was very brave to set out on such a path as the pioneer, even though it means that basic democratic rights – freedom of association and movement – are strictly curtailed, at least for the time being.

The initial reactions of many European partners, institutions and media to Italy's drastic measures, by contrast, included derision, a reluctance to take things seriously and inertia. Only now, as cases of covid-19 are spreading rapidly throughout Europe and all EU countries are affected, are similar emergency measures being taken, albeit with unnecessary delays, and 'conditions in Italy' are being taken as a model for other European countries.

In Italy, by contrast, there is clearly a general sense that, once again, Europe has left Italy to fend for itself in a severe crisis. As in the case of the euro-crisis of 2008, the refugee crisis of 2015 and now in coping with the corona crisis of 2020. An enormous 88 per cent responded 'no' in answer to the question of whether the EU is helping Italy. Germany and Europe in general need to heed this statistic. Hitherto, European solutions have been inadequate. A sense that the corona crisis is not so much an Italian crisis as a European one is only gradually emerging. It should have been learned from previous crises how important every word and gesture is.

The EU's lacklustre response

The press conference given by ECB chief Christine Lagarde on 12 March, by contrast, provided devastating testimony of the ignorance and arrogance that Italy now clearly associates with Europe. Her remarks that she would not aim at a kind of 'whatever it takes 2.0' and that it was not the task of the ECB to end the spread of the virus sent bond premiums skyrocketing and Italian confidence in help from Europe hit rock bottom. The subsequent apology did nothing to help matters and did as little to repair the damage as the statement made the following day by Commission President Ursula von der Leyen that they would do 'whatever it takes to support the European economy'.

An uncoordinated approach, confused communications and a lack of solidarity are scarcely the right way to tackle this unprecedented crisis in Europe.

According to Italy's ambassador to the EU Maurizio Massari, Italy has been offered no assistance from any other EU country since February, despite its appeals. Only on 15 March did the EU's Industry Commissioner inform them that respirators and medical supplies were on their way from France and Germany – too late to make up for the loss of trust caused by the previous export ban. Only China has acted promptly, sending two teams of medical experts to Italy, which is greatly appreciated by the Italian population.

An uncoordinated approach, confused communications and a lack of solidarity are scarcely the right way to tackle this unprecedented crisis in Europe. The crisis will be a stress test for Europe. It needs to prove itself in this crisis and curb the regression to national ways of thinking and acting.

Five points to remember

The following points are decisive in this regard:

First, the member states have exclusive responsibility for establishing national health care policy, including the organisation and provision of health services. According to Art. 168 TFEU the European Union's role is only to complement national policymaking; such complementary provision is reflected in the words »combating serious cross-border threats to health'. Despite this legal foundation a better coordinated approach is needed on the part of European institutions and in particular the EPSCO Council (Employment, Social Policy, Health and Consumer Affairs). The virus knows no borders and only concerted and urgent

action by these political actors can minimise its spread.

Second, at the level of communications the EU institutions must work together resolutely and coherently. Together with other measures (for example, the European stability mechanism) Mario Draghi's 2012 'whatever it takes' in the short term calmed the markets and in the long term saved the euro. Belated and inaccurate communications should be avoided.

The virus knows no borders and so the response to the virus must know no borders either!

Third, Italy must not be left in the lurch this time. The EU needs to show solidarity. The EU must invoke the solidarity clause of Art. 222 TFEU without delay and provide the requisite assistance. This clause enables the EU to mobilise 'all the instruments at its disposal' when a member state is the 'the victim of a natural or man-made disaster'. Although understandable in terms of national concerns, the export ban imposed on medical supplies by France and Germany was an assault on European solidarity.

Fourth, importantly, preventive economic policy measures are needed. Even before the covid-19 crisis Italy was on the brink of recession and it is only a matter of time before its public finances, the banking sector and the real economy are severely affected. The fact that the EU is exhibiting 'maximum flexibility' so that the 27 member states can boost their spending and make state aid available is a first good sign. The joint EU institutions, as well as Germany and France as the biggest and second biggest EU economies, need to show a constant readiness to provide financial and material support.

Fifth, this extraordinary emergency should convince all participants – EU institutions and national governments – of the necessity of providing the European Union with further financial and political instruments to cope with periodic and structural crises. Given the current crisis and the ensuing negative fallout Europe should consider carefully whether it might be a good idea to revise the scope and priorities of the EU budgetary plan for the period 2021–2027 and, as proposed by the European Parliament, to set the amount at 1.3 per cent of GDP.

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