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Europe's emotional desert

Brexit and the EU's response to Italy's corona crisis expose the lack of proximity between citizens and the EU

Read this article in German.

EU politics has throughout its UK lifetime been a largely emotion-free zone. Far from the joy the EU anthem seeks to inspire, the UK as a collective has had a deep-rooted problem of emotional detachment in its relations with the bloc. Preoccupied with the fading glory of its empire, there was no bonding with the new born pan-European enterprise in its early years. Having refused to commit to something we never felt was really ours, when the UK did later join, there was resentment that 'Europe' had had the audacity to grow up without us and adopted the ways and habits of its other parents.

When the moment came to argue that the family should stay together, few in the UK managed to do this with convincing emotional appeal. Reductions in GDP figures too large to comprehend (although we are now learning what they mean) crowded out any discussion of solidarity, co-operation, safeguarding peace. The same unspoken rule that conditioned the Conservative Governments' first response to the Covid-19 crisis was enforced: only that which can be measured monetarily really counts.

That emotional detachment now risks derailing the wider European project at a critical moment. Defending 'the values' of the EU has too often required suspending knowing some of the truth. Always present was the nagging doubt that although in the end, 'more not less Europe' might be the long-term answer, in the here and now, the EU struggles to deal with the crises confronting it. What begins with the raw, human impulse that 'something must be done' – about children drowning in the Aegean, families without food as whole economies in southern Europe collapse, the displaced millions of the Yemen or Syria – ends with dry discussion of burden sharing, moral hazard, institutional competencies.

The stay-together-come-what-may argument

As they are passed from the weighing scales of one EU gathering to the next, these human tragedies – the response to which calls into question the very purpose of the EU – lose some of their potency. Along with this, those who want to believe in a European project to which human rights and equality are fundamental lose a bit of themselves. But still, we continue to argue, despite all this, it is worth it. The family must stay together. Separation would be worse.

As the EU now deals with its third major crisis this century, the stay-together-come-what-may argument is coming under renewed pressure. Sustaining it, even in one of the EU's founding states, will be increasingly difficult if its citizens do not *feel* they are being listened to. Help, they reason, is what they say they need, but it's not what others want to give. After over 6 weeks of lockdown in Italy, weary of mask-wearing and worried about when they can return to work, those who can still bear to follow the news despair at the lack of EU urgency. The time for summitry is over. They must be shown and not just told about solidarity.

Reasonable charges of hypocrisy aside, perhaps, just perhaps, the recognition that the UK needs its neighbours provides grounds for all for optimism.

Already several weeks ago, whilst the EU was embarking upon a series of meetings to agree its Covid-19 response, Italian news channels were dominated by the arrival of Venezuelan and Cuban doctors. Whatever the ultimate scale of the EU's financial assistance, it may be this more limited yet freely given, immediate and visible support from the other side of the world that Italians remember.

They may remember the powerful, poetic letter from their Prime Minister Conte to the European Commission, reminding the EU of its historic vision and warning that to fail to help Italy would be to damage irreparably the EU's chances of survival. Perhaps they will have noted the heartfelt apology from the President of the European Commission to Italy which it elicited.

The UK's unlikely glimmer of hope

Just as likely, they will remember – and be repeatedly reminded of – the angry proclamations of far-right leader Matteo Salvini who spoke of Italy's humiliation at having to 'beg' its neighbours for assistance. The risk that this is the case is a major threat to the future of politics in Italy

and the wider health of the EU. As several hundred European economists, intellectuals and activists write in their open letter today to Angel Merkel, calling for the introduction of European bonds, 'it is of paramount importance to act now and show the people of Europe that we are actually doing so in an extraordinary way [...] signalling to the world that Europeans stand together in the face of this crisis.'

In one of the greatest ironies of the crisis, it may be the UK which presents an unlikely glimmer of hope for the cause of pan-European cooperation. Whilst debate rages about who is responsible for the country's failure to engage in an EU equipment procurement scheme, encouragingly there has been relatively little in-principle opposition to the possible merits of participating in such continent-wide mechanisms. This in the country where, on the very day the WHO was declaring a global health emergency, preparations were underway to celebrate leaving the EU and its co-operation agencies, including the European Medical Agency.

Since 'Brexit Day', 60 German ventilators have been received in the UK with thanks, if relatively little fanfare. Romanian agricultural workers are being welcomed back in the face of a shortage of qualified labour. Migrant nurses have been lauded as heroes in the pro-hard-Brexit press. Most remarkable of all, with no apparent embarrassment, much has been made of how the UK is awaiting a critical shipment of PPE equipment from Turkey – by some of the same people who led a xenophobic campaign against Turkey, holding up its EU accession as one of the greatest threats to the UK of voting to remain in the EU.

Reasonable charges of hypocrisy aside, perhaps, just perhaps, the recognition that the UK needs its neighbours provides grounds for all for optimism. Though unlikely to reverse our own separation, we can hope for a better future co-existence. It may be some time before many feel like joyful singing. But if this is possible in the UK, so surely must be Europe's leaders today finding the courage to heed their political, emotional convictions and so begin to pave the way back to a Europe of true solidarity.



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