

THE SOCIOECONOMIC AND POLITICAL IMPACT OF COVID 19 AND THE RESPONSE OF THE EU: A CRITICAL ASSESSMENT



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The COVID-19 pandemic hit the whole humanity at unprecedented levels. It created distress across the entire EU and generated a crisis with serious economic, social and political implications.

The Member States that were faced with the first wave of COVID-19 believed that they would emerge faster from the crisis. But, contrariwise, this crisis lasts longer thus forcing all countries to adapt their policies according to the economic support that they are receiving. It is true that the money that is spent is much more than the initial budget. Bold decisions are clearly required for the recovery of the economy.

As far as the vaccine is concerned, we have to highlight that this was circulated quite early, within 10 months, against all odds. It is essential now to ensure that vaccines will be efficiently distributed in order things to return to normal as soon as possible. At this point there is no room for national egoisms vis-à-vis the delivery of the vaccines. There will be fast-spreading variants of the COVID-19 virus in case a harmonised strategy and a global alliance against COVID-19 is not implemented.

The European Union, after long and tough discussions- and compromises as well- adopted measures to combat the pandemic and address the economic consequences. The initial management of the COVID-19 crisis on behalf of the European Union turned out to be weak mainly because, as I already mentioned, the national self-interests seem to dominate the European response. This can also be explained by the fact that under the Treaties, the primary responsibility for health protection and, in particular, healthcare systems continues to lie with the Member States. Nevertheless, the European Commission could have shown better reflexes for a coordinated and consolidated response to the pandemic since the first phase of the virus.

One year after the pandemic was declared by the World Health Organization (WHO) EU came forward with a wide range of measures and a plan including massive investments to support people and businesses as Europe battles a

deep economic recession due to the Covid-19 outbreak. Last February, in the European Parliament, we approved the rules establishing the Recovery and Resilience Facility, the flagship €750 billion EU programme to support reforms needed to mitigate the economic and social consequences of the pandemic and to prepare the EU economies for a sustainable, digital future.

Moreover, specific measures have been taken for the reinforcement of the Member States' healthcare systems thus building resilience and preparedness for future crisis. But it is certainly proven, and I say this as a Socialist, that national healthcare systems are the flagship of the healthcare systems. The absolute privatization of health systems cannot be efficient and neither societies can be benefited from. This is a clear response to the extreme neoliberals.

Regarding the socioeconomic and political consequences of COVID-19, I believe it is still early to make a thorough assessment. We need first to return to normalcy so that we can fully comprehend the magnitude of the consequences and the disaster due to the pandemic. However, I estimate that it is the Member States of the South in particular that have been hit hardest if we consider that the tourism sector is an important part of their GDP.

In addition, the European Commission should not enter into harsh monetary surveillance in the next period. There must be a relaxation and a margin for recovery otherwise we will sink into a worse recession, as it happened in the case of the Greek Memorandum, where since 2010 Greece has not really emerged from the crisis.

I would also like to point out that there has been a clear loss of citizens' rights based on the emergency measures implemented by Member State. There was a restriction of fundamental rights like the freedom of movement, freedom of assembly and of association, even freedom of expression in some Member States on the pretext of fighting disinformation.

We need to ensure that any emergency measures must be limited to what is necessary and strictly proportionate. They must not last indefinitely thus further restricting citizens' rights in the name of the pandemic especially when taking into consideration the fact that some countries are facing a second or third wave of COVID-19 and lockdowns.

Everyone must contribute in a constructive way in order to get out of the crisis as soon as possible-even if that implies that we give up some of our usual habits- by showing social responsibility.

In conclusion, I would like to convey a positive message by saying that despite current challenges, the COVID-19 crisis presents an once-in-a-lifetime opportunity for the EU. It brought in light the need to strengthen EU's

health capacity and therefore it put forward the new health programme EU4Health to tackle cross-border health threats. With the new ways of working and communicating (teleworking, remote learning) there is an opportunity to upgrade citizens' digital skills to reduce the digital skills gap. Also in a time when governments are allocating massive resources to alleviate the economic and social impact of COVID-19, it is essential to seize the opportunities offered by gearing the European Recovery Funds towards a circular and climate-neutral economy.