
European renaissance: despite some good results, the EU is challenged by numerous difficulties

A new 'Renaissance' for the European Union was ushered in after the European elections in May 2019 and after the Von der Leyen Commission took office in November 2019. We are building on the unprecedented achievements of these first two years, during which we suffered the most serious crisis in the Union's history, the Covid-19 pandemic. These achievements were deservedly acknowledged in the State of the Union address last September, demonstrating an unprecedented commitment to unity, innovation, timeliness and effective actions, combined with a stronger vision of the EU's role and its future, both in terms of the strategic autonomy target and the determination to play a leading role in the climate and energy transition process, which is now well under way. The response to the pandemic crisis and the unquestionable success of the vaccination campaign throughout the continent, including a more substantial commitment towards other world regions than others; the Recovery and Resilience Strategy and the instruments deployed in record time for the vast majority of Member States and reflected in approved and operational plans, are undeniable successes. *But a number of thorny issues are emerging, which risk hampering, if not jeopardising, the 'Renaissance' process underway.* First of all, **the political scenario**. The difficult coalition talks to form a new government in Germany after the end of the long-running and stabilising Merkel era; France's presidential election campaign and related uncertainties; political instability gripping a growing number of Central and Eastern European countries, from Romania to Bulgaria, from Austria to the Czech Republic, culminating in the Hungarian elections of April 2022; the new election for the EU Parliament's President at the beginning of next year - with growing tension among the political groups and also within certain groups; potential friction over the renewal of the European Council President's mandate in May 2022. Additional difficulties may arise both with regard to the minority government in Spain and to the situation in Italy, the first significant indicators of which are already emerging, also in connection with the forthcoming expiration of the term of office of the President of the Republic. All these factors weaken the stability of the political scene and will in any event cause the "isolation" of the European Commission. Consequently, agreements on major political items on the European agenda are bound to increase in complexity and are likely to be postponed. This is not good news. Secondly, the escalating crisis surrounding the cornerstone of the edifice of European integration as a whole, namely **the rule of law and the primacy of European law over national law**. The explosive case of Poland, constituting a possible, but in my view unlikely, #Polexit, adds fuel to the fire, both in the case of Poland and of Hungary. After the observations of the German Constitutional Court, including some recent ones, the rift is growing fast and is being resonated not only by sovereignist movements throughout Europe, but also by important leaders such as Michel Barnier (on immigration issues) as well as by a number of governments of central European states. Significantly, the Slovenian government, which holds the six-month rotating presidency, likewise voiced highly problematic stances that are, in fact, aligned with countries advocating the supremacy of national law. In my opinion, this line of conflict is bound to gain momentum, with political divisions entailing alarming consequences. *Indeed, the reductionist interpretation of the role of the Union, which for many states amounts to an 'à la carte' Europe, is gaining ground:* i.e. I pay when it suits me, I take whatever I need and more, I apply the common rules that suit me according to opportunities and situations, but I invariably clamp down on efforts to move forward and strengthen common action, using every available option granted by unanimous voting in the Council. Be it social policies, foreign policy, sanctions on Russia, migration issues, banking union or tax policies. If the values and principles underpinning the Union and enshrined in the Treaties cease to constitute the shared foundation, and if national sovereignty is erected as a barrier in the face of policies deemed relevant to respective national debates, the edifice may start to collapse. Third, the **migration and refugee question** has been dragging on for the past eight years with no decisions taken, no unity and no sign

of reaching solutions commensurate with the problems of the day. In fact, Europe has resorted with increasing frequency to the rationale of 'fortress Europe', defended by walls, barbed wire fences and troops trained and equipped to push people back, even violating the fundamental human rights enshrined in international conventions. The Pact presented by the Commission a year ago, cautious yet holistic, makes no progress. Indeed, divisive factors are increasing, as evidenced in the recent letter from twelve Member States. Moreover, we are still a long way from seriously tackling the impending, inevitable and massive "climate refugee" crisis, cautiously estimated at 250 million people. A new commodity for traffickers and people-smugglers, or for the States that previously used them on their southern borders, and now on their eastern borders too, to apply political pressure on the Union. Fourth, the unexpected but foreseeable **gas price crisis that is likely to dramatically impact consumers' bills**, along with the crisis in the global supply chain of raw materials and finished products essential to the digital and energy transition under way. This is a severe blow to the optimistic prospects of post-pandemic recovery for industry and end consumers, with a serious impact on the poorest and most marginalised regions of the EU. There are also growing indications of opposition to the energy transition agenda and to the "Fit for 55" package presented by the Commission in July, on which both Parliament and the Council are due to deliberate in the coming months, with the risk of widespread social protests that could be exploited by anti-EU and sovereignist movements across Europe. The Climate Conference in Glasgow is the ultimate moment of truth. For now, the recent publication of the World Energy Outlook 2021, the most authoritative report on the subject, issued by the International Energy Agency, raises a number of concerns. Accordingly, global energy markets will face a turbulent and volatile period ahead and the energy transition tracks being pursued by many countries are robust but nowhere near sufficient to meet the internationally agreed climate goals that are urgently needed. **These critical junctures will hardly benefit two other important items on the European Agenda:** the reform of the Stability and Growth Pact, whose debate is only just starting to pick up steam, with the ECOFIN September meeting's positions, and the promised, albeit as-yet limited, European Defence Union. Not to mention the many critical developments in the EU's external relations, ranging from its eastern border to the inconclusive outcome of the last summit on the Balkans, which left free rein to other vested interests (Chinese, Russian, Turkish, etc.), Turkey, Africa and, in particular, the Sahel area, where the creation of a new extremist caliphate, along the lines of the one defeated in Syria and Iraq, is gaining momentum. Or the long-lasting confrontational nature of the Brexit divorce, with a simmering dispute over Northern Ireland. *Admittedly, there has been no shortage of divisive factors and crises in the complex European integration process, which has nevertheless progressed.* But the systemic and neuralgic relevance of some of the mentioned factors risks not only hindering the successful unity of intent of the first two years, it also risks jeopardising the achievement of transformation, strategic autonomy and the consolidation of the EU's role, both internally and externally: the promise and signature of the European roadmap in the first half of the term of office started with the elections in May 2019. It may well be that the European renaissance path embarked upon will merely suffer a few significant setbacks until next summer. Or it may eventually be washed up on rocks or swept away by storms. The dice has not been cast. But precisely for this reason, a strong, concerted and far-sighted effort by Europe's leading political, social, economic, cultural and spiritual players is needed. Moreover, as happened in 2019, we must avoid leaving the playing field open to those wishing to disrupt the European Renaissance process. (*) *former President of the European Economic and Social Committee*

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