



Europe between problems and renovation projects

EU is crossed by growing inequalities and rising nationalisms, in a world everyday more belligerent. How can European countries concretely renew its institutions or use them better, to make EU a cohesive and stronger political subject, able to deal with the many complex contemporary issues? We talked about this with Ermal Brok, a German politician (CDU-PPE) who served as Member of the European Parliament (MEP) from 1980 until 2019, and who is best known for his role as chairman of the European Parliament Committee on Foreign Affairs.

By Simone Furzi

Mr Brok, you cooperated to write the first treaty of the ESM (European Stability Mechanism). You know that its last emendation process has been at the centre of the political public debate, and it has summoned lots of critics.

In your opinion, in which aspects do you think that ESM is insufficient or wrong, and, on the other hand, in which ones do you think it can be useful for EU?

At first, we have to say that the ESM has fulfilled its goals for the very beginning: to overcome the crisis. So, it has been relatively successful. We have seen now that the countries that participated to its programs are paying back. No one country went to bankrupt. I think it's a sign of credibility of that mechanism.

But I also think it should be changed in a mechanism that works "a priori". Until now it has been used just to resolve crisis, instead, it should be used also in order to prevent crisis. As in Macron's proposals, the ECOFIN is on the way to find a solution, so we have to push more in this direction than we have done before.

It would be wise to prevent crisis, which is always cheaper than resolve crisis.

The conditions should be clarified, then the ESM can be used in the coronavirus' crisis, too.

Still about institutional reformation projects, you together with Roberto Gualtieri, the current Minister of Economic Affairs of Italy, asked to give the EU Parliament more influence about the EU's diplomatic service. How did the EEAS developed in this years and how could it be implemented?

Firstable, considering what the Treaty of Lisbon sets up about, we see that the European External Action Service (EEAS) is not fully fulfilled, because the two High Representatives, we have had until now, have not used all the provided instruments. Also, there's a direction that too many national diplomats are playing an important role in EEAS, which contributes to keep too much the division between european and national services. In order to create more unity and synergy, diplomats from different countries should be trained and educated together.

At last, I think that the High Representatives should use more the possibilities of majority voting, which is already available and that could be used (for example for some decisions in European Council) to push forward ambitious proposal, which are backed by the majority of European countries.

I think it is needed to go forward in this direction to enhance the EEAS's role.

Regarding EU's foreign politics, we just said that European countries should acquire a unique voice. It's clear that at the moment they don't have an independent and incisive action on the most relevant world issues.

Europe seems to generally follow the USA's line, even if sometimes it tries to dissent with Trump's excessive boldness in cases like the Paris Agreement, the Rojava affair or the duties issue. European countries are also sometimes in competition between them, like in Lybia, and, at the eyes of the public opinion, they often appear to be not reliable.

EU seems to be both weak and hostile against Russia, uncertain with China and too much condescending with the USA. How do you think that EU foreign polityc could become more independent and coherent? And do you think that the creation of a European military collective defense, as Macron has often promoted, would be useful for it?

I think military strenght must be there. EU is in "soft power" very strong: 60% of all humanitarian and development aid is financed by the EU and its member States. But its political influence, if you see for example in Syria, is close to zero sometimes. The reason is that it doesn't have military capacities. The members States of EU spend every year 240 bilion for defence, that is much more than Russia does. But it's ridiculous, because everyone produces its own ammunitions! We have to use money much better if we want to have a synergy effect. For that I think that the debate about the 2% of GDP for NATO is a wrong debate, because until we have not the synergy effect in Europe, we don't follow the right path.

Moreover, we are in a positive momentum: Ursula Von der Leyen is working through the Commission to create a "stronger Europe in the world". An ambitious plan which includes the aim to set up the development of the synergy effect, expecially on the industrial side of defence¹. It's indispensable to enhance EU's hard power next to its soft power. And we have to do it also because we can't believe anymore that in any circustances USA will protect us and our interests. So we have to look on all our possibilities and capabilities.

However, even if USA of Trump and European States have often a different opinions (as it possible to see observing the votes at UNO Assembly), for sure, in a moment that we need collective defence, Europe is still NATO. The better that we can do is to do complementary to NATO, not instead of NATO.

Going back to the renewal of EU's institutions, Emmanuel Macron and Angela Merkel have proposed a "Intergovernmental Conference about the future of Europe"; an opportunity to discuss democratic reforms and define the position of EU in the world.

Do you think that will this conference be there? And which guide lines and enforceable decisions would come out from that?

Firstable, we have to find an agreement in the form of the Conference. My proposal would be that in the very beginning there will be a small group of eminent people which makes some proposals that the Conference can debate. It should be a basis for the discussion.

However, at the moment, I do not believe that it is possible to change the treaties. We need at least five or six years to make 27 nations find an agreement and then fulfill the ratification process, and we don't have so much time.

So we should use all instruments and all the possibilities that the present treaties offer to intervene in the more important sectors: migration, social politics, coordinated taxation in certain sectors as digital and defence. The basis of the ESM and the instruments to be prepared for shocks like this coronavirus.

¹ <https://www.ilcaffegeopolitico.org/115109/a-stronger-europe-in-the-world-il-piano-per-restituire-leadership-globale-allue>

One of the most alarming issue for EU and a European federalist project is the arise of the new nationalisms. Especially in the states of Eastern Europe, but also in the other ones, including Germany, and overall the Brexit case. Fear for migrations, the emerging inequalities, the cultural disorientation and an intensification in the use of raw force to resolve international disputes seem to be the most important causes of this worrying arise.

Do you think that would it be required for EU to invest more on culture and education (the last OECD's report underlines increasing gap between Chinese and Western students²)? And are a new welfare state and economic model needed?

Firstly, we should talk more positively about Europe. We have solved two financial crisis: no country went bankrupt. We are still the biggest industrial market. If you see that overall, the European countries are so much better than thirty years ago.

But for sure, we need an economy with social balance. In the treaty of Lissabon has been written that the EU committed herself to a social market economy, which would be competitive and would have social balance. So we have to see economic strenght put together with social balance. Therefore, I think that the distribution of wealth must be done in a better way. But reducing wealth differences between and into the member countries can't be achieved through EU's budget, that is just 1% of the EU'S GDP. The Germany's budget is two and half times bigger than the EU's budget. So this problem can't be solved only on a european level, but it is very much also on the economical, social and taxation policies in the member States.

As EU, we have to project future policies, for example organizing the internal market, and putting more money in innovation and education. The EU should do more and therefore that the EU's should not stick just the 1% GNP and should not put money just for classical infrastructures.

About the rise of nationalisms, first of all, we have to say that Brexit is a special English case, which can't be completely compared to others sovranist-populist movements, like the ones led by Lega, RN or AfD. However, all these movements use the fear of blue collar workers about globalization, making them believe that could be better protected in a nation-state. Which is not true at all! A singular european state, no matter how big, can't compete with China or USA on a international market level. Also, it would be unable to efficiently fight global problems as the climate change. The only solution is to work together on a European level. Individual states solutions are unefficient. As Juncker said: "Luxembourg is small compared with big countries in Europe, but looking from Beijing or Washington, all European countries are small countries, even if some of the biggest ones have not understood it yet". The coronavirus' crisis is again a prove for that.

The next question is about the most important issue, which concerns the humanity's future: climate change. Do you think that EU could have the strenght to lead a process which involves a deeper cooperation (and lesser competition) between states, a radical changement of the present consumerist economic system and the creation of a more equitable and inclusive democracy? And which concrete actions should be taken in the next years?

The EU can set up limits, goals (ex. emission free), then the member States have to do the programs in order to achieve these goals (Germany has just made its own one). Therefore, we have to see how to change our energy sources, infrastructures and even our way of life. Then, last but not least, to see what we can do abroad.

The COP25 in Madrid has been a disaster. The main goal, which was to find an agreement throught which richer countries could help poorer countries in the ecological transition, has not been achieved.

² <https://www.lastampa.it/cultura/2019/12/03/news/scuola-il-rapporto-ocse-studenti-italiani-perdono-competitivita-rimandati-in-lettura-e-scienze-ok-in-matematica-1.38047663>

Especially due to the behaviour of the Brazilian President Bolsonaro. Moreover, USA, which is the greatest responsible for pollution together with India and China, has to change its policies. Europe alone can't solve any problem. It is responsible, for example, of 8% of all CO₂ emissions, so its impact is quite small. But Europe should not use this as an excuse.

And what about european companies, which are responsables for a large amount of pollution abroad?

European companies must follow european rules and laws. Full stop.

Lastly, what does the EU do in this coronavirus' crisis?

All the member states were unprepared and too many governments wanted then to show to their own citizens. The practical and psychological results were disastrous. Now it is understood that the virus has to be fought in an coordinated ways, well as the economic consequences.

In December the EU has asked member states that protective items should be ordered together. The member states did not take notice of it. Only a few weeks ago programms could be started. COVID-19 is again a prove that we have not enough Europe.