

THE EUROPEAN UNION'S RECOVERY AND RESILIENCE FUND, IN THE CONTEXT OF THE EUROPEAN INTEGRATION PROJECT AND ITS FUTURE PROSPECTS

FILIPE GUERRA

filipe.guerra@ua.pt

Jurist. Master's student in the course of Public Administration and Management and of PhD in Public Policies, in the Department of Social, Political and Territorial Sciences of the University of Aveiro (Portugal). Post-Graduate in Labour Law by the Institute of Labour and Company Law of the Faculty of Law of the University of Coimbra and also holds a degree in Law from the Lusíada University of Porto.

Abstract

Throughout its history, the process of European integration has been shaped by successive stages of transfer of competences and powers from the Member States to the European Union and its institutions. At the same time, and with progressively shorter latency periods, several moments of crisis in the integration process were recorded. Of these crises, the financial crisis that began in 2008 was of particular importance, demonstrating the difficulties in reaching consensus and the fragmentation of interests within the European integration process.

This article aims to make a historical revisitation of several crisis moments in the European integration process, with special attention to the past sovereign debt and Eurozone crises. From this exposition, an argument is made about the susceptibility of fragmentation of interests within the European Union, what are the causes and consequences of this fragmentation and how this was reproduced throughout 2020 in the construction of the Recovery and Resilience Fund, launched by the European Union in response to the crisis triggered by the Covid-19 pandemic. Additionally, a diverse set of perspectives on the Resilience and Recovery Fund and its relevance in the framework of the continuity of the European integration process is presented.

Finally, we conclude that the European integration process is once again marked by the strengthening of its political agenda and by recent signs of adaptation of the European Union institutions to the management of constant crisis cycles, allowing the integration process to continue.

Keywords

European Union, Resilience and Recovery Fund, Integration, Crisis, COVID-19.

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FILIPPE GUERRA

Introduction

From a geographical point of view, the European integration process is composed of successive enlargements to new member states, thus incorporating a growing diversification of national realities and new sub-regional scales with different levels of development.

Throughout its history, the integration process has faced several moments of crisis, exposing growing asymmetries and divergences of interests, with emphasis on the *Brexit* process, which led to the United Kingdom's withdrawal from the European Union (EU), a precedent never before experienced.

The health crisis generated by the Covid-19 pandemic, starting in early 2020, within weeks reached all EU countries. However, the impacts of this crisis, were not the same in all Member States, not only from the health point of view, but also in terms of its effects on national economies. In this context, the pre-pandemic economic conditions of the member states and their resilience to various types of crises were some of the elements that created relevant differences.

Faced with the political and legal framework of the EU, to which the Member States have freely surrendered, and with a crisis that, although on different scales and dimensions, has affected everyone, the European institutions have begun to construct an economic plan for the rapid recovery of national economies. However, early on, in the various negotiating arenas, various fundamental disagreements were found as to its constitution, with the repetition of disagreements already expressed in previous crises, namely from 2008 onwards.

Throughout 2020, the EU showed signs of fragmentation, including the constitution and political solidification of national blocs with divergent interests within its institutions. Despite the health and economic emergency, only at the end of 2020 did the EU reach a final agreement between its institutions and the Member States, through a negotiation with a joint solution between the Recovery and Resilience Fund and the Multiannual Financial Framework 2021-2027.

This article initially presents the founding aspects of the previous political and financial crises, what their economic and political consequences were and how these were

¹ Article translated by Cláudia Tavares.



projected into the negotiations of the Resilience and Recovery Fund. Next, the main negotiating divergences and key moments throughout 2020 are observed, as well as the characteristics and expectations about the future of the Recovery and Resilience Fund. And finally, we point out the changes and policy differences adopted by the EU in the resolution of crises, which signs of transformation can be observed at present and their relevance in the context of continuity of the European integration process.

Theoretical framework: lessons from the Eurozone crisis and its projection in 2020

Alongside the successive enlargements with new Member States and the strengthening of the powers of its institutions, the European integration process around the EU has at the same time been marked by several moments of divergence and tension between Member States. Over the decades these tensions have been frequent, but it has been recorded that latency periods between crises are progressively shorter. Since 2008, there have been four particularly visible moments of crisis, namely the Eurozone crisis, the migration crisis, the Brexit process, and so-called illiberalism (Hooghe & Marks, 2019).

The crisis surrounding the Covid-19 pandemic throughout 2020 in the EU has produced consequences on several levels, highlighting its health, economic and social impacts. The capacity of the EU institutions to solve the set of problems triggered by the pandemic crisis would be a new test of the resilience of its institutions, of its capacity to build consensus and common solutions, towards the continuation of the integration process. From an economic, political and social point of view, the so-called Eurozone crisis in 2008 had left important consequences and set an unpleasant political precedent. It was now important to recognise whether the EU could develop a different economic crisis resolution.

The Euro Zone crisis in 2008 was triggered after the successive collapses of various financial institutions in the USA, starting with the notorious *Lehman Brothers* case. From these collapses, on the other side of the Atlantic, and the exposure of European banks to this crisis, a sovereign debt crisis was created, to the extent that some EU Member States did not have the necessary liquidity to save their banking systems, thus requiring external assistance (Glencross, 2014).

Against this background, in the so-called sovereign debt market, some southern states, such as Greece, Spain, Portugal (and Ireland), became debtors, while the central states became creditors, insofar as they allowed the debtor states to continue to be financed in the sovereign debt market (Grauwe, 2016). However, the creditor states imposed as a counterpart to their financial assistance, the imposition of domestic austerity measures on the debtor states, as a guarantee of repayment of the amounts borrowed (Grauwe, 2016).

In this process, the European Commission did not remain equidistant, accepting to become an agent of political pressure in defence of the creditor countries, pressuring the debtor countries to take austerity measures and the so-called structural reforms (Grauwe, 2016). The solution found and its political construction, with different



institutional levels, constituted a combination of intergovernmental coordination and supranational hierarchy (Börzel, 2016).

The impact of austerity measures, such as the increase in unemployment or the cuts in pension systems, in debtor countries, has led to strong public opposition, which has had immediate political effects, namely electoral, with the rise of populist and Eurosceptic movements, among other extremist parties. Large sections of the electorates in debtor countries blamed the EU for austerity measures and their effects (Ceballos, 2015). In short, the 2008 crisis, demonstrated a correspondence, between the effects of the policies pursued from the EU institutions, their nature and their impact on the lives of citizens, and the evidence of solidarity between member states, with the acceptance of the European integration process.

The economic crises from 2008 and in 2020, even though at their origins they are completely different in nature, with regard to the issues and the negotiating blocks formed, which resulted in negotiating divergences, have some relevant similarities, although in the projection of their conclusion there are significant differences.

Within the scope of the similarities between crises, to which reference was made, the way in which these periods of crisis exposed the profound asymmetries existing between the economies of the member states and the respective political interests, on the one hand, and, on the other, the visible susceptibility to division between member states in the EU institutions, with a tendency towards the formation of negotiating blocs defending disparate interests and with different proposals. The EU currently seems to have structural differences, which nevertheless reveal a strong interdependence between member states.

The 2008 crisis and the solutions found, namely with the imposition of austerity measures on debtor countries, had set precedents as to the form and content of its resolution, resulting in a serious political crisis, with signs of discontent in the continuity of the integration process. The risk of a possible repetition in 2020 of the solutions and formulas of the past was posed by the Covid-19 pandemic crisis. In this context, the question was whether there would be a repetition of policies or whether the EU had understood the potential disruptive consequences of its solutions in deepening its integration process. Important political figures in 2020 were also present in the 2008 policy definitions, such as Christine Lagarde, current President of the European Central Bank, or Angela Merkel, Chancellor of Germany.

Methodology

This article was carried out through the attention dedicated to a multiplicity of sources, seeking to ensure their multidisciplinary, analytical diversity and reliability. In this sense, a survey of data was carried out based on statements and publications of representatives of the EU and its Member States, collected through the certified and official websites of the EU institutions. In other cases, the collection was carried out from reproductions published in various media and news agencies of international reference, preferably specialised in matters of politics, economics and the EU. This collection was carried out throughout the years 2020 and 2021.



The search for academic literature, for the literature review, sought to focus on publications whose analysis focused on matters related to the European integration process, the European integration crises, the Eurozone and sovereign debt crisis, the Recovery and Resilience Fund and the Covid-19 pandemic crisis. In this sense, we selected a set of publications that presented varied perspectives, seeking greater analytical and multidisciplinary breadth and variety, in which cases of analytical complementarity were also found. Most of the selected sources, in terms of authors and place of publication, are of European origin. In this search and selection exercise, we also sought to include the most recent publications, with the final selection being representative of the period between 2014 and 2021.

The Recovery and Resilience Plan: characterisation

Throughout the year 2020, the European institutions faced the need to sustain the severe economic consequences of the Covid-19 pandemic. The 2020 crisis was delivering the biggest shock to the European economy since World War II, in the words of Christine Lagarde (2020). The EU should rise to the occasion, and the response that the EU would be able to give to the serious crisis would be a responsibility, the failure of which could represent a potential existential crisis (Ladi & Tsarouhas, 2020).

Faced with the political centrality of the health crisis, and in national health systems, the EU institutions initiated in the first quarter of the year the first steps to counteract the growing crisis, which was already affecting the economies of the Member States. Thus, on 26 March 2020, an envelope of 37 billion euros, was approved in the European Parliament, from amounts reallocated from appropriations for structural funds and other cofinancing where unspent (European Parliament, 2020a). But given the scale of the crisis much more would be needed and negotiations began at the highest level for the formation of a major post-crisis recovery plan.

At the end of the extraordinary summit of heads of state on 26 March, the outlook was not encouraging. Member states were divided on the launch of European debt securities (so-called "*coronabonds*") and the nature of other possible financial instruments (Siza & Aníbal, 2020). The political climate was very tense and potentially discordant, as evidenced by the statements made by the Portuguese Prime Minister, António Costa, in response to the Dutch proposal for an investigation into the budgetary conditions of the southern countries, not hesitating to consider that "such a statement is repugnant within the framework of a European Union. And that's just the expression: repugnant (...) nobody wants to listen to Dutch finance ministers again, as we heard in 2008, 2009, 2010" (O'Leary, 2020). The reference to the 2008 crisis and its divisions was evident.

Days after this summit, Pedro Sanchez, Prime Minister of Spain, a country hit hard by the pandemic crisis, published a clear article in several European newspapers on the magnitude of the crisis and the relevance of what was at stake, linking European solidarity with the need for cohesion, arguing that without this cohesion the credibility of the European project would be compromised (Sanchez, 2020). The EU needed to find solutions that would ensure its bonds of solidarity.



On 18 May, Angela Merkel and Emmanuel Macron, leaders of the so-called Franco-German axis, held an important meeting with a view to the EU's future response to the crisis. From this moment came the proposal to establish a fund consisting of 500 billion euros, to be distributed among member states, and to be reimbursed in the future (Boffey, 2020). This meeting and the respective conclusions were particularly relevant because they revealed a strategy of economic governance different from the one followed in the 2008 crisis, through a financial exit common to all Member States, using a "Recovery Fund" (Bundesregierung, 2020).

The European Commission's proposal for the Recovery Fund, presented on 27 May, reproduced the essence of the Franco-German proposal, but increased its figures to 750 billion, divided between grants and loans, to be made possible through an EU loan from the financial markets, and made possible through a new own resources ceiling, on a temporary basis, of 2.00% of the EU's gross national income (European Commission, 2020a). The EU seemed to have understood that, unlike the solution adopted for the Eurozone crisis, loans are not sufficient to stabilise crisis situations, carrying significant potential for divergence between nations, parallel to their asymmetries.

Even so, several countries were not satisfied with this European Commission proposal, in particular the so-called "frugals" - the Netherlands, Austria, Sweden and Denmark - which did not shy away from issuing several public statements of disagreement in the days and weeks that followed. Among its main reasons were the considered excessive weight of its contributions (Euroactiv, 2020), the haste in negotiations (Reuters, 2020), the excessive disproportion of grants over loans (Lovfen, 2020), or the absence of necessary structural reforms in assisted countries (Politico, 2020). Their discordant stance imposed the continuity of negotiations and recalled some demands of the creditor countries during the Eurozone crisis.

After intense negotiations, on 21 July, the President of the Council, Charles Mitchell, announced "we did it" (Herszenhorn & Bayer, 2020). There would be agreement on the Recovery and Resilience Fund, negotiated in parallel with the Multiannual Financial Framework 2021-2027, presenting itself as providing 750 billion euros, distributed between 390 billion in grants and 360 billion in loans, integrated in an overall package of 1824.3 billion euros, called 'Next Generation EU'. The result of this programme was that the so-called frugals also achieved some victories on their agenda, such as the reduction of the amount initially foreseen for subsidies or the extension to themselves of the rebate mechanism (which allows for the reduction of contributions to the Community Budget), among other aspects (European Council, 2020a).

The following months saw new rounds of negotiations on the Resilience and Recovery Fund and the Multiannual Financial Framework 2021-2027, with difficulties in reaching agreement between the European Council and the European Parliament, particularly on new sources of revenue and financing, on the payment of interest (whether to be allocated inside or outside the Community budget) or on the funds allocated to various Community programmes. Difficulties only overcome on 10 November (European Council, 2020b).

The process of approving the Recovery and Resilience Fund and the Multiannual Financial Framework 2021-2027 (their joint negotiation had created a reciprocal dependency)



would still experience new difficulties at the end of the year, with the so-called illiberal member states (Hungary and Poland) obstructing their final approval due to the defence mechanism of the rule of law (Struczewski, 2020). This was a mechanism that conditioned the access to community funds to the verification of the protection of the rule of law, in matters such as the independence of the judicial systems. After weeks of negotiations, which included public accusations that were not very favourable to Hungary and Poland (Hall, 2020) and even references to the exclusion of these countries in the ongoing process (Baume & Burchard, 2020), it was possible to reach an agreement by resorting to a delay in the implementation of this mechanism. Thus, both parties seemed satisfied (Bayer, 2020).

The eventual final failure of the negotiations, and the EU's inability to act in unity at a time of serious crisis, could have a high cost on the continuity of the integration process, and the EU could find itself caught between reform and even dissolution (Celi et al., 2020).

Over the months, successive negotiations in various arenas revealed the EU's susceptibility to the constitution of blocs of countries within its institutions, according to their respective interests and which to a large extent reflect the previous tensions and different agendas, already known from 2008. In 2020, there was also the affirmation of a new bloc typology, namely the group of so-called illiberals. On the other hand, and significantly, there was a different typology of EU approach to the crisis, apparently driven by the Franco-German axis.

Recovery and Resilience Plan: a reaction to crisis in structural design

The economic crisis, triggered by the pandemic COVID-19, has affected individual Member States, but not all of them in the same way, with significant differences in impact. Among several factors contributing to this asymmetry, one can highlight the different levels of confinement and economic and social restrictions imposed by countries; the greater losses in economies more dependent on services and tourism; the greater impact in countries with a higher level of indebtedness and therefore less capacity to take fiscal or debt measures with the markets; or even the different quality and effectiveness of the response of national governments (Sapir, 2020). We can also mention that the different impacts of the pandemic on health systems is another relevant factor.

According to data presented by André Sapir (2020), the impact of the pandemic on Member States' GDP was particularly significant in Croatia (-13.4%), Spain (-12.5%), Ireland (-12.1%), France (-11.7%) and Italy (-11.5%). While countries like Sweden, Denmark, Germany, Finland and Poland were the least affected. From these data, one can therefore foresee different needs for aid.

The Recovery and Resilience Mechanism presented as the central axis of the 'Next Generation EU' programme, has EUR 672.5 billion available, of which EUR 360 billion is loans and EUR 312.5 billion in grants, according to the conclusions of the European Council of 21 July 2020 (European Council, 2020c). According to different analyses, the main beneficiaries of the 'Next Generation EU' programme will be the countries of



Southern and Eastern Europe (Alcidi & Gros, 2020) and this mechanism can thus contribute to the reduction of economic asymmetries between Member States (Watzka & Watt, 2020).

According to Watzka and Watt (2020), if the destination of the funds serves to finance public investment (as is planned), several consequences can be expected, among which are: an increase in public capital stocks throughout the EU area, especially in Southern and Eastern countries; a decrease in economic asymmetries; as a consequence of the increase in GDP, public debt ratios will tend to fall; and finally, in the countries most affected by the crisis, the plan may compensate for productive losses in the pandemic. In other words, a redistributive character of this project can be detected, in the sense that it benefits the less developed countries. This aspect also indirectly benefits stronger economies, such as Germany, which also need economic stability from member states for their export markets.

The policy of redistribution between countries, based on a combination of subsidies and loans, in addition to combating asymmetries between Member States (which had not happened before), strengthens the legitimacy of the EU and its institutions by contributing to greater economic and social cohesion.

Access to the funds allocated to the Recovery and Resilience Mechanism by the Member States is conditional on the presentation of their national recovery plans, which must correspond to the various criteria presented by the European Commission, and to which they must be submitted, normally by the end of April 2021, subject to subsequent final approval by the European Council (European Council, 2021). The respective payments will be made according to the fulfilment of various objectives and may be interrupted if these objectives are not met. Moreover, this conditioning and possibility of interrupting payments was one of the victories obtained in the negotiation rounds, led in large part by the so-called group of frugals (the Netherlands, Austria, Denmark and Sweden).

However, the financial availability of this stimulus and its practical implementation are not linear, entailing some risks of failure, highlighting at least two difficulties. On the one hand, as the allocation of funds is planned for the period between 2021 and 2023, and their disbursement until 2026, it is still unknown how they will be distributed over time (Watzka & Watt, 2020), on the other hand, the different levels of absorption capacity for European funds by the Member States should be considered, as in the disparity observed between Estonia's absorption rate of 95% and Croatia's of only 48%. In this way, there are also significant asymmetries which jeopardise the usefulness of the plan (Darvas, 2020).

Thus, there are two types of risk that may arise, the first related to the traditional slowness of absorption of structural and investment funds by the States, and the second due to the limits in the capacity of national governments to channel large sums of public money (Alcidi & Gros, 2020). It will be a challenge for many Member States to deal simultaneously with the rapid implementation of such significant amounts, and also, from the Community perspective, a significant risk of losing the opportunity to affirm its project.

The traditional operationalisation of community programmes always requires definition, approval and implementation procedures, which tend to be lengthy and prolonged



(Darvas, 2020), and this mechanism is no exception. This will be a difficulty whose rapidity to overcome will be crucial for its effectiveness at a time of crisis that will require effective and equally rapid responses, under penalty of frustration and discontent in the neediest economies and in public opinion expectant after media and hopeful announcements.

On the other hand, it could always be argued that financial markets could help solve this problem of speed by providing immediate loans to countries, thus avoiding, or reducing, recourse to loans later. However, this possibility does not obviate the need for quick procedures and payments given the magnitude of the economic crisis in member states (Darvas, 2020).

Access to the funds of this new instrument is also subject to a set of options and objectives predefined by the European Commission (European Commission, 2020b), which are much more ambitious than a response strictly directed to the challenges posed by the pandemic, corresponding in their discretion to a set of objectives of strategic importance for the political and economic stability of the EU (Alcidi & Gros, 2020). It is difficult to observe a direct relationship between the "fight against climate change" or the "digital transition" as immediate responses to the increase in unemployment related to the economic shock waves triggered by the pandemic. Based on this apparent duality of objectives, a clear definition of the real possibilities and criteria for directing funds becomes more complex.

According to Iain Begg (2021), the EU is witnessing a reassertion of its industrial policies and a paradigm shift towards market liberalisation, in line with the more recent past. Among other potentially explanatory elements for this paradigm shift are concerns about low growth rates in the EU, the growing role of China and Europe's loss of influence, or technological and productive changes in fields such as automation or digitalisation. The Recovery and Resilience Plan seeks to provide responses to these and other contemporary problems, such as climate change. Reflecting these concerns, there is increasing visibility of the term "strategic autonomy" in the European discourse.

The 'Next Generation EU' programme is still mistrusted because it focuses its funding on national regeneration programmes and their infrastructure, lacking a long-term perspective of investment on a European scale, with a broader view of all the Member States and not only of successive national levels (Watzka & Watt, 2020).

The Plan and the Future of Integration in the European Union

According to Charles Michel, President of the European Council, when presenting his proposal for the Multiannual Financial Framework and recovery package, "the objectives of our recovery can be summed up in three words: convergence, resilience and transformation. More concretely this means: repairing the damage caused by Covid-19, reforming our economies and reshaping our societies" (European Council, 2020d).

Charles Michel's statements convey the idea that his proposal is not only aimed at repairing the damage caused by Covid-19, there are much higher goals with future, economic and social implications. Thus, given the size of the financial packages and the nature of their objectives, their success may help to reduce existing asymmetries and



create greater interdependence between Member States, strengthening their ties to the EU and its institutions, deepening the integration process and opening the way to a new phase of institutional construction (Braun, 2015).

According to Jean Pisany-Ferry (2020a), the Recovery and Resilience Plan is a risky bet by the EU and its institutions. Should this Plan succeed in reaching, or even surpassing, its objectives, it could pave the way for new steps in the process of European integration, recovering the expectations it created, extending into new areas such as fiscal unification together with monetary unity (let us remember that monetary unity did not also include unity of the banking system). However, if it fails, this could turn the Plan into a serious blow to the credibility, effectiveness and quality of the responses that the EU can provide in emergency and crisis situations, frustrating federalist or other aspirations towards deeper European integration.

To avoid potential frustration and discontent, the EU could have been clearer on the transformative and structural role of its Recovery and Resilience Plan, however better immediate impact it may have on the less advanced and hardest hit economies (Pisany-Ferry, 2020b). For the economic recovery of the Member States, it will also be important to overcome the health crisis, efficiently massify the distribution of available vaccines (a subject on which the EU and its Commission have been the target of criticism) and put an end to the successive confinements of the population, freeing up relevant economic activities that are being hampered.

Conclusion

The combination of the need for a rapid response to the economic crisis and the tendency for slow political decision-making and implementation processes of the EU institutions is complex. Faced with an emergency of the gravity of the current economic crisis, swift and effective responses would be needed on the huge losses that member states are already facing. And the architecture of the Recovery Plan does not seem to fulfil this requirement. Moreover, even in the context of its approval, the traditional difficulties and the slowness of several Member States in absorbing Community funds will have to be taken into consideration.

The EU showed signs of understanding about the possible costs of its inaction in the face of a crisis unprecedented since its foundation, and began to build its reaction. In this way, it has shown a quicker ability to react than in previous crises, also demonstrating a capacity for learning and better crisis management, probably gained through its accumulated experience (Wolf & Ladi, 2020). Even so, the period of negotiations for the establishment of the Recovery and Resilience Fund, as mentioned, did not hide the existence of various types of asymmetries between Member States, and consequently the existence of internal divergences within the EU, confirming a still persistent trend.

Unlike the 2008 crisis, in which only after the bankruptcy of banks and the onset of economic chaos did the EU feel forced to intervene and initiate proceedings, in 2020 intervention began earlier, with different political premises and objectives, and safe from the suspicion of favouring more developed countries. On the contrary, the EU has sought a concerted and participatory response by the Member States, with a redistributive



profile, in favour of the weakest economies hit hardest by the pandemic, constructing a Recovery and Resilience Plan which, among other things, gives priority to subsidies over loans.

The fact that the EU has reached agreement on such relevant matters, on the response to the current crisis but also projecting a set of structural policies and economic development objectives for its future, tending towards economic cohesion and the correction of asymmetries, reveals new ambitions and a renewed commitment between Member States, with new elements of a political and economic nature, in the sense of strengthening their interdependence and cooperation. In short, the continuity of the integration process.

In the hardest moments of the Eurozone crisis, the EU was accused of depoliticising the economic adjustment programmes in the debtor states, a moment characterised by Schmidt as a 'policy without policies' (2020) with consequences for people's perception of its role, subordinated to the public image of technocratic institutions such as the so-called '*Troika*'. In 2020, by contrast, the leading national and institutional political figures gave visibility to their political role, as well as that of their European institutions. The political line of technocracy submerged again, with a return of the so-called politicisation (Wolf & Ladi, 2020). Personalities such as Merkel, Macron, von der Leyen and Mark Rutte were constant presence in the media and decisive in the course of the negotiations.

In short, at the confluence of these elements, it can also be said that the role of the EU and its institutions in the 2020 crisis, as presented in this article, reveals a growing political capacity to adapt to crises. The succession of crises in a short space of time will have built this capacity, by adapting to a permanent state of adversity and divergence, shaping the interior of the institutions and enabling them to the necessary responses.

However, a number of challenges and risks remain. By building a joint solution between the 'Next Generation EU' programme and the Multiannual Financial Framework 2021-2027, and assuming negotiating simultaneity and interdependence between the programmes, and that they are not only about solving the present crisis but also reshaping member states' economies, the EU and its leaders are taking on responsibilities and burdens that are not without risk in case of failure.

At present, as mentioned, there are already serious reservations about the effectiveness of these funds, about the adequacy of their amounts and the speed of their implementation, given the scale of the current crisis (Celi et al., 2020), as well as about the capacity of Member States to absorb them. If its ineffectiveness is confirmed, and in a context of asymmetries and political divergences - discrete for the time being - new forms of crisis in the integration process may emerge, both at the level of political leaders and in national public opinion, as has been seen in the past. As an example of the various weaknesses that continue to plague the EU, we note the negative reactions of various political actors to the problems in the procurement and distribution of vaccines for the Covid-19 pandemic.

In conclusion, the EU has corrected some mistakes made in the past and pursues an apparent line of increasing politicisation and accountability of its institutions. Given the expectations created among national public opinions, the success of the 'Next Generation EU' programme will be relevant in the present and future development of the European



integration process, but also in defining the relevance of the EU in the international context.

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