



EUROPE IS INTEGRATED WITHIN ITS BORDERS

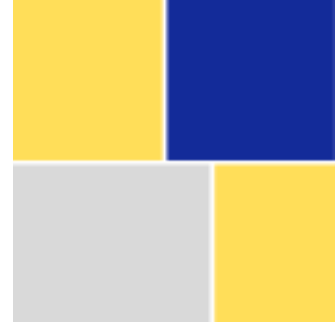
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During these pandemic months almost all of us have had to conceive ourselves anew, at times change our discourse and, above all, rethink our priorities and those of our environment. A good example has been the evolution of the main priority of our organisation in recent months: the well-being of citizens living in border regions, highlighting their role in the process of European integration. Much of this integration takes place at that growing number of borders where many citizens cross daily to work, study, shop or engage in many other activities. The normalisation of everyday relations across borders may be one of the most powerful images of this huge effort to live together, which we know as the European Union (EU).

At the end of February we still considered that the coronavirus was not our concern in much of our continent. Members of our association (European border and cross-border regions) urged us to send a communication to the European Commission expressing our concern at the possible reduction of funds for Cohesion Policy in the next programming period 2021-2027. The Commission, Parliament and the Council were discussing the Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) at the time without an agreement in sight and with little prospect of increasing accounts which, after all, correspond to just over 1% of the GDP of all Member States. Once the organisation's position had been drawn up and transmitted through the usual channels to the Commission services, we were faced with an official declaration of a pandemic and a general closure of the EU's borders, including most internal borders, from mid-March onwards. Schengen had disappeared and the work of decades of building trust, restoring good neighbourly relations and eliminating prejudice across national borders was once again at risk.

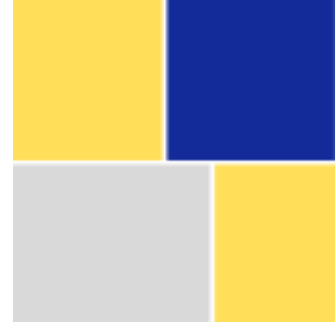
The confinement imposed on most European territories passed with an expectant gaze at the increasing numbers of cases (especially of deaths) awaiting the longed-for peak and subsequent decline. And then came the peaks and the plateaus, the tension and the solidarity, the information and the disinformation, the heroes and the villains. Now comes the time to ease the confinement during the month of June. Many companies are recovering their activity, although others have fallen by the wayside, and sectors critically affected such as tourism or culture are gradually moving towards a brighter future, but equally uncertain as long as the expected vaccine does not arrive. Meanwhile, the European Union has responded to this crisis in a much more forceful way than many expected, and the commitment to European inter-territorial solidarity that the Commission has put on the table may be one of the



great milestones of European construction, comparable to the Maastricht Treaty or the major enlargement of 2004. We must seize this opportunity to undertake the reforms that we had yet to achieve: the transition to a more sustainable model of development than many regions still have, to reduce the digital gaps in access to public services, to employment... All this will have to be done together and, preferably, this 'together' should be more than just EU Member States.

But it is also true that this ambitious proposal, which almost doubles the Union's budget, has highlighted some of the remaining differences between EU Member States, precisely because of their statehood and their difficulty in understanding the supranational scope of the current challenges. If climate change, migration or the need to comply with the SDGs had not fully convinced some Governments of the need to act together and effectively, perhaps this mutant coronavirus will at least help to highlight the threats unknown to borders and other conventions that we humans have invented to protect us... probably from ourselves. It has become quite clear that concerted and decisive action is needed to halt the deterioration of our planet. And it is also necessary to preserve and strengthen the few global institutions that have succeeded in achieving very important objectives for the entire population. This is the case of the World Health Organization, of processes such as the European Union or the United Nations System, and others such as the African Union, the Central American Integration System, Mercosur or the Andean Community, the Union for the Mediterranean and other similar initiatives. They should all be strengthened in order to consolidate common spaces for the building of peace and democracy, respect for human rights and the rule of law, protection of the environment, development of energy and clean productive activities, the fight against hunger and extreme poverty, and the provision of basic services for all. There is a growing global interrelationship, as this pandemic has revealed, and we have more and more multilateral agencies, but there is a sense of a lack of transparency, of a lack of involvement of increasingly informed citizens (but at great risk of succumbing to the abundance of information of all kinds). There is also the impression that nation states turn to these multilateral initiatives, including the EU, with the organisation's logo on the jacket but the national agenda under the arm.

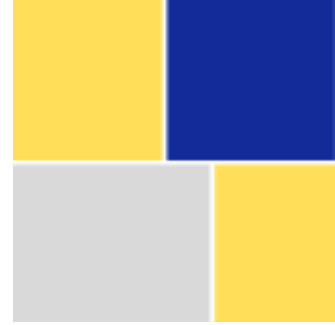
So how can we consider the immediate future? And the less immediate? In the face of this question I usually recall that book written, almost twenty years ago, by a former president of the Spanish government and a famous journalist entitled, *El futuro ya no es lo que era*, where both of them were already anticipating that we were entering a time when it is not easy to predict almost anything. It was published a few days after 9/11. Then came 11-M and other attacks, increasingly frequent natural disasters, political, social and financial instabilities, a deep crisis in most of the world, the proliferation of populism and



nationalism, Brexit and its effects on the border between Ireland and Northern Ireland, including the uncertainty after just over 20 years since the exemplary Good Friday Agreement (GFA). If President Trump gets his way and completes the wall on the border with Mexico, he will be setting a disastrous precedent that has already begun to be greeted by some EU members. If nationalism and populism advance, Euroscepticism will be consolidated. And without addressing climate and demographic change, the SDGs, and the digital divide, we will have no future. It could be said that things did not look good (and the worst was yet to come).

The first signs of deterioration (before the pandemic) could already be seen at some of our borders, and it is also at the borders that the strongest steps can be taken to counter this **erosion of European integration**. As underlined at the last Annual Conference of our Association in Dresden (24 October 2019), "if after the World Wars and their disasters we were able to heal our wounds from which the scars of History remained as borders, it is on those same borders that the greatest wealth we have must be built, although we don't always use it. That solid integrating material, although intangible, with which humanity has managed to reach its highest levels of development. We are not referring to material wealth, but to **trust**". When we had not yet suspected anything about the threat that was looming, we already sensed that these are times of great decisions in which we have to answer the question: are we willing to continue to foster rampant distrust, fear and grumbling, and run the risk of ending up locked in our own borders or must we rather make progress in building a growing space of democracy, prosperity and sustainability?

We carried on with what we were doing, the last round of negotiations for the 2021-2027 European budget was starting, and some of the traditional European policies had to be protected, since they were at risk due to new priorities, while the states were immersed in a dispute which sought to separate the harmonious development of all European territories from the need to drastically reduce the impact of such development on the natural environment. We aspired to a new generation of European territorial cooperation aimed at simplifying procedures, support for small projects and the most vulnerable regions, coordination and integration of financing instruments and placing sustainable development, climate action and further digitisation at the centre of actions. In the context of these discussions on the new Multiannual Financial Framework, AEBR participates in the Alliance for Cohesion, an initiative promoted by the former President of the Committee of the Regions, Karl-Heinz Lambertz. This Alliance demands that the European budget after 2020 be geared towards a strong, more effective, visible and accessible cohesion policy for all regions of the European Union. The Alliance promotes, inter alia, that cohesion policy:



(a) "expresses European solidarity to overcome the economic, social and territorial divide;

(b) must be better communicated as the EU policy closest to the citizen, having a direct impact on their daily lives;

(c) contributes to strengthening of the partnership principle and the place-based approach by reinforcing the key role of local and regional authorities in delivering the policy;

(d) must be better coordinated with other EU policies on a level playing;

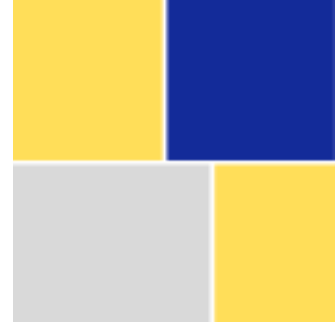
(e) must not be subject to conditionalities at European level that cannot be influenced by local and regional authorities and other beneficiaries; or

(f) must be simplified and improved, based on increased trust between the levels of government implementing the funds and a more flexibility."

The aim is to enable a long-term investment policy for all regions of Europe to support growth and employment at local and regional level by promoting innovative solutions to issues such as climate change and energy transition, social inclusion or cross-border, transnational and interregional cooperation.

And that is where the pandemic came in. Border closures came almost on the 25th anniversary of the Schengen Agreement. The 'Europe without borders', which seemed to have been set in stone, had to be dismantled to control the spread of the virus. And now that they are reopening, we should not forget how fragile some of our achievements are, how we should cherish and care for them, and not forget those who cannot enjoy them.

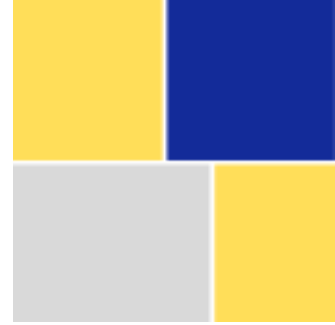
All states have taken measures to fight Covid-19, but the effects of the pandemic cannot yet be predicted with guarantees, as there are not many certainties. But European public health services have reacted very decisively, and citizens have accepted the need for confinement and protective measures, especially social distance. The only outcome we can expect is full control of the pandemic, sooner or later. We have accepted these tremendous restrictions on our fundamental freedoms of movement because the goal is to contain the virus. However, this has caused major drawbacks in border regions, although in some regions more than in others, depending on how they have taken into account the reality of cross-border interlinkages, making restrictions on movement between countries questionable when all internal restrictions are being lifted. In fact, there are many borders where whole sectors depend essentially on the other side to operate normally. As CESCO (Central European Services for Cross-Border Initiatives) recently stated, "solidarity between Europeans means separation between people at the moment, but we do not need to separate countries."



We are faced with a virus that remains unknown in many respects, which produces many asymptomatic infections, making it difficult to detect and much more to prevent as long as we do not have a vaccine. According to urgent research (poor guidance for science) on all continents, the effectiveness of tests remains very doubtful. And the type of immunisations acquired after contact with the virus cannot yet be established. But it is also true that the scientific community knows a little more every day. The current series of mass serological tests are providing valuable information, and multiple teams are working on developing an effective vaccine and on finding better treatments for more severe patients. Meanwhile, containment, handling of all the sick, control measures, such as social distance and common sense, are our best arsenal.

It is also true that such threats have been known for decades. International agencies, especially the WHO and other health institutions, think-tanks, Ngos, etc., have long warned of the lack of preparation to prevent a major epidemic becoming a pandemic: lack of Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) in the ICUs and lack of ICUs, cuts in health policies in some countries, especially as a result of the economic and financial crisis, and endemic cuts in quality public services in others. Health expenditure indices have been published, and legions of specialised agencies, organisations and experts have produced a multitude of recommendations. The EU has also regulated some aspects of particular interest, such as cross-border healthcare (by a Directive adopted in 2011, still to be fully implemented in all Member States, to meet the specific health needs of border citizens). But it also reacted when the pandemic broke out by adjusting certain cross-border aspects, particularly in view of the measures taken unilaterally, of course, by some Member States with many borders.

Among many other claims, it has been argued that, despite the assumption that we live in a global society where the market produces and meets all our needs, the pandemic has shown us that Europe does not produce enough to secure strategic stocks of essential medicines and medical supplies. The need to maintain supply chains may open our eyes to the reality that states alone cannot do it, that borders need specific, coordinated management on both sides, and "a too inhospitable global society cannot be trusted," in words of the director of the opinion section of a well-known newspaper in Madrid. That is why the answer is more Europe. A Europe that acts with one voice, strengthening its cohesion and identity, as well as the awareness of its place in the world. However, the EU can only publish guides and recommendations, since health is the exclusive competence of the states, although it is managed in some cases by central governments and in others by the regions or municipalities. The large asymmetry between competences, service portfolios and the quality of services, as well as between therapeutic approaches and other circumstances specific to




cross-border environments, are additional difficulties to be taken into account. The different ways of dealing with this crisis in different countries have also been somewhat surprising. But it is also true that the pandemic has entered in different ways in each country, showing different dynamics and social patterns in which the virus has spread with different intensities.

Some countries, very well equipped for various reasons, but mainly as a result of lessons learned from past threats and adequate preparedness, have been able to identify and isolate initial outbreaks, controlling the spread of the virus from the outset with a manageable impact on health systems. In other cases, the virus entered societies through different channels where interpersonal and intergenerational contact is very close. Despite very strict measures, the virus was transmitted very quickly, jeopardising the system's ability to react. And in other countries, despite the significant spread of the virus and the increasing incidence of the disease, not enough restrictions were put in place and the effects of Covid-19 on the number of victims, on the economy, etc., are even more uncertain.

As far as the European club is concerned, the beginning of the crisis was devastating: very rapid growth in the number of cases and deaths, strict national measures, messages of rupture and harsh statements by some finance minister of the north described as repugnant by some prime minister of the south, maximalist positions on both sides, unilateral reactions, etc. Fortunately, the situation began to improve very quickly in most cases, from the Eurogroup's commitment on urgent measures to the more constructive and calm tone of the European Council of 23 April (compared with previous ones, in particular the one held on 26 March). The budget proposal that the Commission has put on the table is very promising, and Parliament has expressed itself favourably, although we still have to wait for the last word from the Council, the most important of all.

We must not forget that there have been discrepancies in almost all aspects: the amount of the reconstruction fund, how to finance it (each country's contribution, common indebtedness), how to distribute aid (subsidies or credits) and its territorial and sectoral distribution. The most affected countries in the south asked for EUR 1 billion, with EU debt and subsidies. The "frugal four" preferred a smaller fund distributed in the form of credits. But even this is considered too much by some. The south does not want to lose the battle of debt mutualisation and the north does not want any more pressure. An intermediate solution leading to a collapse in the south is not in the interests of the north (or those of the Single Market), and the south should not underestimate the popular rejection of certain measures in the north.



This virus is definitely going to change our lives and could accelerate the transition to a more sustainable energy model. Some have wanted to see in the pandemic and its consequences a direct application of *Occam's razor* to politics: fossil fuels damage health and worsen the climate change, while clean alternatives are available, although undervalued and underdeveloped. There are many visions and perspectives on the changes that this pandemic will leave in our daily lives. Faced with those who call for a national retreat and the end of globalisation, the German philosopher Peter Sloterdijk has drawn attention to the extreme interdependence that we have achieved and has defined the concept of "co-immunism": an individual commitment with mutual protection. Overall, most of the messages go in the direction of a joint effort for recovery, renouncing a return to previous models of development and addressing climate change while rebuilding the European economy. If this operation were to succeed, Europe would have taken a giant step forward in consolidating its legacy for future generations.