

European citizens deserve more and better from the EU budget under discussion

As stated by civil society actors and the European Parliament, the Council decisions about the EU multiannual budget are not acceptable. Mobilisation and institutional discussions have to redress its shortcomings and ill-directions.

In the aftermath of the Council meeting, many Head of States reported on the outcomes with wishful when not misleading announcements, not really in line with the facts.

For us, "the future being different" after the huge shock that of the Covid-19 crisis means a global solidarity approach to tackle the disaggregation of effective access to basic rights that has been exacerbated. Instead, we heard Heads of States delivering more than ever cynical, defiant or self-justification statements.

Let us just recall the Hungarian and Polish leaders claiming victory because European funds would be disbursed even if there is disrespect of the rule of law. Shouldn't we be entitled to hear them claim pride that the EU infringes nowhere the rule of law?

Also, the Dutch leader claimed victory for downsizing the grants to the countries suffering most the pandemic effects, because in his view grants should not go to Italy, a country he did not trust the capacity to reforms. Europe-oriented thinking would have been a claim of victory for agreeing the largest possible package to address the larger than ever crisis.

The French president thought the main message to spread was that some of the goals he put forward at a Sorbonne speech in September 2017 were echoed in the results of the meeting. Not only is this questionable, but more useful would have been opinions about how to face the consequences of the downsizing that has occurred.

Such cynical, defiant and self-justification discourses are disastrous messages sent to European citizens that participated in 2019 European elections in such big numbers, claiming this way their attachment to a European common future.

The European Council multiannual budget proposal does not meet the challenges

Beyond worrying behaviour of leaders that we would expect to be concentrating on a European common good when they enter Council meetings, we have bad news emerging from the decisions agreed. Let us mention some, significant ones.

Many political and strategic priorities policies used to characterise the EU ambitions beyond its core economic, financial and monetary mandate receive shrinking funding: ecological transition and biodiversity, fight to climate change, health, education, gender equality, digital innovation, asylum and migration, humanitarian aid, democracy and fundamental values.

Many important programmes will be cut or left with insufficient budget: "Erasmus+" which is a flagship for the building of a European friendly-oriented youth; the "rights and values" programme which aims to support civil society defenders of the European claimed humanistic values; "NDICI" which is the international solidarity and development arm for EU support to the developing countries; the "Creative Europe" programme that supports culture and medias; research programmes which are intended to support innovation and knowledge building; the "EU4Health" programme that has been presented as the common approach to a European shared health shield.

We see a full graveyard of abandoned ambitions in key sectors for making a Europe in common. It is striking that this can happen inside the Council closed doors' meeting with no large-scale public debate.

Moreover, the means foreseen by the European budget to address the consequences of the crisis look like a complement to the monetary policy led by the European Central Bank, and not as the bulk of the means to answer the challenges.

Even for Italy, the main beneficiary for these funds, the 81 billion euros of the grant component only represents a direct financing that amounts to 1,5 % of its GDP, for a limited three years period if we consider the length needed to get out of the crisis.

The supporters of the agreement ask us to concentrate our opinion on the breakthrough that is the emission of a common debt. This is real. But the vagueness about how it shall be repaid leaves the worrisome possibility of using the future ordinary multiannual budget.

The rule of law issue should not exist within the European Union reality. In the reality, we have countries where the rule of law is under threat and civic actors have to repeatedly challenge abuses. Expectations were high that the Council decides to establish a link between the disbursement of EU funds and respect for the rule of law. The vagueness of the mandate given to designing the conditions put for disbursements at a later stage is not conducive to optimism. The message sent to citizens is that respect for rights and values is not a prerequisite for agreeing on and accessing to the European financial policies.

The European Civic Forum considers that the present Council decision about the Multiannual Financial Framework and the Next Generation EU funding is globally unacceptable. It does not reflect people's expectations raised during the crisis; it is not conducive to consolidate a European citizenship relying on more of common in the EU.

The European Parliament declaration raises the crucial issues at stake

It is usual to see civil society struggling and asking for support from the institutions. But when it is the European Parliament that is calling on precise central issues for democracy, European inclusivity and fundamental values, democratic civil society has all reasons to walk together.

On 23rd of July the European Parliament voted a very important resolution on the decisions of governments in the European Council for a multiannual budget complemented with a crisis management fund. After mentioning the setting of the fund for recovery as a historic step, the most used word is "deplore".

The Parliament deplores the priority given to national interests and the intergovernmental method; the reduction in resources; the exclusion of Parliament (the only elected institution) from the management of the Agreement; the lack of budgetary constraints on respect for the fundamental values of the EU; the compensation benefit given to some states; the reduction in resources with cuts in funds for fundamental and strategic priorities and programmes.

The ECF strongly welcomes the resolution approved by the European Parliament, that is so convergent with our approach and opinion to the issues at stake with the European budget, and that tells clearly truths about the European Council debate and decisions.

We support the will expressed by the European Parliament to fight for the full recognition of its role in the EU institutional architecture, and in the precise present circumstances for its right to ameliorate the agreement before its vote on it.

The voice of democratic civil society and of social actors must be raised strongly in this delicate and important moment. The institutional steps, that lie in front of us before the budget is decided, give some room for pushing in a better direction, for more solidarity and more inclusiveness. But time is short, let's act together!

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