

The main political trends in post-pandemic Europe

Mikael Leyi

We are leaving a dramatic and paradoxical year behind us. One that came with death, suffering and painful realisations of the weaknesses of our societies, but also with encouraging experiences of the strength of our systems in the face of this monumental Covid-19 crisis. The magnifying glass offered by this pandemic exposes all the persistent inequalities, injustices and deficiencies of our societies, economies, democracies and European project. At the same time, the pandemic offers hope as it demonstrates the strength of our institutions and the collective willpower of our peoples in the face of a truly global emergency. We have seen the democratic space shrink as reactionary governments advance their autocratic agendas. We have also seen the essential role played by civil society organisations in bridging institutional gaps by organising life-saving support to communities across Europe. I believe that this dual experience will impact the coming year and define three major trends for Europe: *improved policy coordination, increased public impatience, and heightened political conflict.*

2021 will be an important political year for Europe, and will thus provide a perfect stage for these trends to unfold or a perfect storm. The EU institutions and the Portuguese presidency of the EU Council have much to deliver in carrying forward the enlarged ambitions of Europe in the face of the pandemic. The vaccines will continue to be rolled out in a coordinated fashion. The long-term budget will be implemented, and the national recovery plans put to work. The mid-term review of the Commission's work plan is approaching, and the next steps will be taken for crucial policies such as the New Pact on Migration and Asylum, the Green Deal, and the European Pillar of Social Rights (EPSR), as well as the dialogues related to the Conference on the Future of Europe (CoFoE). The international climate summit in Glasgow will be crucial for making real commitments, as we leave yet another year of record heat behind us.

We have seen a year exposing both increased policy coordination and the effects from a lack of it. In many ways, the EU has passed the most important tests of this pandemic, managing to secure both funding and coordinated distribution of the vaccines with a solidarity-driven approach. This experience points in two directions based on two realisations: the need for more and deeper cooperation, and the need for concerted and coordinated action by member states stemming from the understanding that the EU cannot afford to have states

fighting amongst themselves as they did over medical equipment at the start of the pandemic. This also provides inspiration for ongoing and future conversations on a Health Union, as well as for the CoFoE. The need for more coordination between policy areas is made evident as the crisis management is constantly enlarged to cover more and more policy areas – ranging from public health, social services, rescue packages and labour market policy, to border control and management, the climate and environmental crisis, adequate housing and fiscal policy. I believe that the experience brought about by the pandemic will influence the major political developments of 2021 and inspire conversations on the national recovery plans, the Green Deal, the EPSR, and the migration policy – most likely with much needed cross-referencing and increased coherence.

The growing public impatience and frustration with the injustices, incapacities and inequalities shown up in the most blatant way by the pandemic will have an important impact in 2021 as protests, demonstrations and gatherings become possible again, and as we move from crisis management to recovery and rebuilding. This outcry and frustration represent a public realisation of the dysfunctions of the current social and economic system that fails to guarantee the lives and health of all citizens. This generalised frustration is in fact a necessary factor in the transition towards the sustainable societies that we need to be able to build back better. There are also signs that this realisation is being mirrored at the European level, with a political class that is increasingly aware of this frustration and that is anxious to deal with it as it worries over the growing disconnect between citizens and Brussels.

The important public policy crossroads reached in 2021 will offer a perfect arena for my final prediction of a third likely trend – that of major incoming political fights both over what lessons should be drawn from this pandemic and over which path to take in the process of rolling out policy and implementing future action plans. The right and its extreme cousin will most certainly seize the opportunity of this pandemic to withhold, withdraw or downsize progressive ambitions. Hiding behind the argument of the need to focus on essentials, they will direct the efforts towards the familiar path of an economic recovery in its most neoliberal form of austerity, further pinning *us against them* in the name of crisis management. This fight is likely to heat up significantly, fuelled further by the frustration that has built up during this crisis and the heavy blanket of consensus established in so many places.

I will therefore end with a plea in relation to these three predicted trends: progressive forces inside and outside parliaments must do their utmost to make sure that 2021 becomes a new beginning and the starting point towards the new, sustainable, and just Europe that we so urgently need.