

SOLIDARITY AND CORONAVIRUS: THE END OF NAÏVE EUROPEANISM?

Héctor Sánchez Margalef, Researcher, CIDOB
[@sanchezmargalef](#)



The solidarity (or lack thereof) prompted by the coronavirus crisis might have an unexpected consequence: the end of naïve Europeanism in member states that have previously shown only unconditional support for the European integration process. Practising active solidarity is the best way to stop this naïve Europeanism from becoming Euroscepticism.

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Uncritical Europeanism has long defined southern European countries' support for the EU project. Multiple governments of different political stripes have made a show of these credentials, declaring their country to be an actor to count on when pushing through ever closer union. However, the crisis has led this unconditional support, which we might call naïve Europeanism, to start breaking down. Member states' initial reactions to the coronavirus crisis did not scream solidarity, a value on which the European Union is supposed to be founded. On the contrary, some governments once again reacted by cleaving to austerity as a value and closing borders as a protection measure.

Just as in the years of the great recession, the countries of the south demanded solidarity and the north replied that there could be none without compliance with regulations and that the instruments the EU possesses must define the European response, regardless of whether their conditionality refers to the era of savage austerity. Rhetorical clashes more typical of the era of the financial crisis brought angry reactions from the countries of the south, because this time the pandemic that caused the emergency is not a consequence of excessive deficits or debts. The north-south divide has returned (if it ever went away), and with it, naïve Europeanism, for better or worse, is coming to an end.

Italy broke ranks with that uncritical Europeanism some time ago. With an economy that has been stagnant for decades and an often-chaotic political system, it is a founding member of the club's longest-standing core. Relationships must be cared for or the spark is lost, and despite being a founding EU member, Italy's reasons for Euroscepticism have been mounting. Its citizens were not wrong to feel abandoned by fellow member states to handle refugees and migrants reaching their shores for years.

That was a full-blown crisis of solidarity, and Italy has long felt forsaken, left to face global challenges alone. Greece, Portugal and Spain, which joined the European Communities in search of democratic consolidation in the 1980s, experienced this later. For Greece, it was the 2008 depression. Portugal and Spain maintained their Europeanist credentials even during the economic and financial crisis. Portugal's Eurosceptic radical right is negligible and for a long time Spain was an exception in the EU for lacking a far-right party in its parliamentary landscape. Although the emergence of VOX has ended this exceptionality, Euroscepticism still barely makes a dent in Spanish society. Unsurprisingly, a YouGov survey for the LENA newspaper alliance showed that 84% of Spanish society wanted a more cohesive EU response to the coronavirus crisis and 67% believed EU membership to be a good thing. However, the pandemic's devastating effects on people, the great challenges facing health personnel who have suffered public spending cuts, and the depth of the economic and social consequences already being felt may amplify the (perceived) lack of solidarity among EU members and ultimately hasten the end of naïve Europeanism, even in Spain.

The heat of discussion over the possible financial instruments for facing the costs of the pandemic has given glimpses of an underlying problem that could emerge once the health emergency ends. Italy and Spain have been hit hard by the virus, but despite having fewer cases, Portugal has also felt attacked by political declarations from northern Europe. The rhetoric of north-south confrontation has returned to EU politics, which risks eroding the trust of the few remaining Italian Europhiles and marking a turning point in Spain and Portugal. If naïve Europeanism mutates like the virus, the north-south divide will widen.

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Unconditional Europeanism has felt unreciprocated. EU support has not been as bidirectional as some southern capitals had hoped, and at the gravest point of the virus's spread the political language from some of these governments resounded with European disenchantment, to say the least. Discourse has hardened in Lisbon and Madrid about the lack of solidarity over a crisis that did not originate in the south and for whose consequences they do not feel they should bear the burden alone.

The good news is that the end of naïve Europeanism does not necessarily and automatically lead to Euroscepticism. Properly managed, it can become a critical Europeanism that goes beyond simple declarations. Hard work will be needed to forge alliances and coalitions, circulate proposals and prepare for the bargaining over any European financial arrangement. The Spanish proposal for a so-called Marshall Plan exemplifies the end of naïve Europeanism because a shift is notable from accepting the European Union as the solution per se and passively waiting for a response from Brussels, to shaping a specific idea of what the solution should be and actively take a stance on it, with uncritical Europeanism banished.

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It would be unfair to say that such coordination would contribute to widening the gap. The divide was already there. Regional alliances (such as the New Hanseatic League and the Visegrad Group) are long-established internal pressure hubs within the EU. There is no reason the south should not defend its interests in a coordinated manner with similar zeal. The existence of Eurosceptic radical right-wing parties in northern Europe cannot be blamed solely on the costs of financial solidarity, as some political and academic discourse maintain. There has been little solidarity to date, and Euroscepticism has grown and even taken hold in governments at all points of the EU compass, from Finland to Hungary and Italy. It is not merely an economic issue. Managing diversity in societies that are no longer homogeneous and the loss of national identity in the face of a globalised world, among many other factors, also erode the concept of European integration. Meanwhile, a lack of solidarity with the south fuels southern Euroscepticism, even in places where pro-European loyalty remained beyond question for decades. The south must now shift from the innocent unconditional Europeanism to constructive critical Europeanism; and in the interests of the common project, the north should listen and cease to worship at the altar of austerity as the only value. Practising active solidarity is the only remaining alternative for exiting this crisis together.