

Sassoli: Democracy, freedom and the rule of law are not up for negotiation

Ladies and gentlemen,

One year ago, here in this room, we said over and over again that all the hardship, pain, waiting and worry that Europeans were experiencing would not be in vain, because the pandemic would make us better, more united, bring us closer, and that, with our Treaties, we would show democracy to be stronger than authoritarian regimes.

One year ago, many commentators were also arguing that, as in the aftermath of the Second World War, hardship would make us better.

Yet today we find ourselves at a critical juncture, and everyone around this table will be well aware of the gravity of the situation. At this juncture, the European Union needs the truth. And the truth is that we are getting no better.

A few days ago, the legal bedrock of our Union was challenged. This was not for the first time, of course, nor will it be the last.

But never before has the Union been called into question so radically.

I believe that you, and all of us, need to hold a frank and open discussion on the direction we want to give our Union.

The European Parliament has debated this matter in plenary, as you know. We listened very carefully to what Prime Minister Morawiecki had to say, but wish to stress that Poland wrote the European laws in force along with the rest of us. We made these rules together, so there can be no talk of them being imposed by the European Union. The European Union is based on everyone abiding by fundamental values and common rules, which we all voluntarily agreed to observe together.

The citizens of Europe expect us to uphold these principles, and the citizens of Poland have marched in large numbers in Warsaw to remind us of that.

We have together adopted an EU law that creates a close link between the protection of the EU budget and the respect of the rule of law. This law is in force and we believe that the procedure should now be launched in order to protect our budget and secure the respect of the rule of law. This is why, as you know, upon recommendation of our Legal affairs committee,

I have asked the Parliament's legal services to refer a case to the Court to ensure that legislation in force is duly applied. We do not intend to shirk our institutional role in defending the basic principles on which the European Union is founded.

With democratic experience comes the practice of continuous dialogue. We have followed that practice many times before, and I am convinced we have the capabilities and resources to steer our way out of this crisis and rediscover the path of unity. But we must be crystal clear that while our unity is indeed bolstered by our diversity, there is one aspect of our European pact that is not negotiable: our values of democracy, freedom and the rule of law. These values are hardwired into the European project, and we all chose to abide by them on joining the European Union. The European Parliament will stand very firm on this point and is ready to enforce these values, within the ambit of its prerogatives.

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In difficult times for our Union, our Treaties have enabled us to do what is necessary, to do a lot and to do it together.

We can be proud of the work we have done in tackling the pandemic. From a healthcare perspective, our continent is now ahead of the field on vaccinations, with over 75% of adults vaccinated. However, we know that this figure masks major disparities between Member States. These disparities are liable to undermine the recovery and the smooth functioning of our internal market, and hence we still have to take steps to address them. Viewed on a global scale, however, those disparities become enormous. We are well aware there can be no end to the pandemic until vaccination is available to all countries the world over, and especially the poorest. Only 4% of Africans are vaccinated and COVAX has only received 85 million doses, despite the European Union and the United States pledging over a billion doses. We must commit as of now to delivering on our promise to share vaccine doses through COVAX or via the European Union Civil Protection Mechanism, because we know that no one is safe until we are all safe.

Ladies and gentlemen,

We are also at a decisive juncture when it comes to the economic recovery. All the Member States are putting their recovery and resilience plans into effect, and we are deciding jointly on the major reforms and wholesale changes that should transform the face of our economies and societies.

We have decided jointly to adopt a three-pronged approach to this transformation: environmental sustainability, digitalisation and social justice.

In a few days' time, the COP26 will get underway in Glasgow. Parliament expects the European Union to reaffirm its leadership role and steer all the global partners towards clear and binding targets – revised upwards if need be – so as to remain in line with the Paris Agreement.

We know very well that being the best will never in itself enable us to bring about the change needed to reverse the course of climate change. We can only do this by working together, and the European Union must take the helm in this era-defining transformation. This also means staying fully true to our word, in particular by ensuring that developing countries receive the USD 100 billion they need to be at the heart of this transformation.

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We know that as we undergo these major environmental and digital changes, we cannot afford to leave anyone behind. We cannot afford to choose between social justice and the green transition. Energy prices are rising for various reasons, some relating to geopolitical dynamics and others to factors connected with the energy market. We must, as we have always maintained, address immediately the potential social impact of the green and digital transition we are launching, and immediately bring into play the solidarity mechanisms we have devised to tackle crises, particularly the Social Climate Fund, which will complement the Just Transition Fund we have already launched, so as to ensure that no one is left behind.

Ladies and gentlemen,

During this crisis, the European Union, with all of us working together, has managed to adapt the economic and fiscal governance framework to cope with the crisis and support the recovery. We know that the recovery will require still more major investments to be made to ensure the transformation we need takes place, and particularly the green and digital transition. But not all of these investments can be supported by the new multiannual financial framework and Next Generation EU.

I believe there is a need, in line with the commitments and timetable set, to proceed with the adoption of new own resources for the Union, including the Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism (CBAM), or the extension of the Emissions Trading System (ETS).

But in the phase we currently find ourselves, we must all consider whether we need to update our rules to adapt them to these new circumstances. I welcome the Commission Communication on the future of economic governance after the COVID-19 pandemic. I think we should indeed launch a public debate on the issues raised in this document.

In particular, we should together look at devoting more attention to the sustainability of public spending and encourage green investments so as to enable Member States to dedicate the necessary expenditure to the Green Deal and the green transition.

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I would like to conclude by addressing an issue central to your discussions – that of a European migration and asylum policy. We are well aware of how complex the debate around this issue is for all of us, but I nevertheless feel that the Union itself should step up to the mark and show some courage.

Our inability to decide on a common policy is showing our adversaries just how weak we can be. Faced with those who would use migrants as a hybrid weapon, it is not a sign of strength to consider erecting a wall at our external borders. Faced with the tragedy unfolding in Afghanistan and the geopolitical challenge now playing out in that theatre, it is not a sign of strength to offload responsibility for hosting migrants onto the other countries in that region without at least assuming some responsibility ourselves, as a great power should. Managing migratory flows in a unified manner and in a controlled and orderly fashion, in cooperation with our partners would, on the other hand, be a sign of our strength and of our political capabilities. The Pact on Migration and Asylum should be our instrument of choice if we are to be stronger and more united.

Ladies and gentlemen, dear friends, I thought it would be worthwhile sharing with you the reasons for our disquiet and the rationale for the relaunch and recovery of our Union.

I wish you every success with your work.