

The Rome Declaration – An imperfect display of unity

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On 25 March 2017, the leaders of the European Union (EU) came together to celebrate the 60th anniversary of the Rome Treaties. The EU and its members had good reasons to celebrate. The European integration process has been the product of grand aspirations inspired by the imagination of pragmatic visionaries, born of the experience of two devastating world wars. In 1957, the founding member states embarked on a journey without a clear destination, but based on a commitment to work together and solve their differences within a common institutional framework in the hope of breaking Europe's century-old vicious cycle of violence and vengeance. Six decades later, the continent has overcome its deep historical divisions and cooperation among EU countries has become a lived reality that now constitutes part of Europe's collective DNA. The European integration project is far from perfect and its history is littered with crises. But despite many heavy blows, the project has always bounced back and emerged stronger than before.

But today's challenges are more fundamental. For many years now, the EU has been in the grip of multiple crises, which have undermined and at times threatened some of the major achievements of European integration. Despite some remarkable progress, none of the complex and interlinked crises that have rocked the Union and its members since 2008 have been sustainably overcome and the EU is suffering from the collateral and cumulative damage caused by the poly-crisis: fragmentation, increased divergence, social and political cleavages, external reputational damage, and widespread frustration with today's state of the Union, both among citizens and elites. Crisis mode has become the new normal and there are severe doubts whether this time the EU will emerge stronger. Instead, the European project faces the prospect of prolonged and constant agonies, while being confronted with the danger of a more regressive, illiberal and closed Europe propagated by radical and nationalistic populists.¹

Struggling to re-energise the European project

In this climate, with Brexit on the horizon and Trump in power in the US, the Rome Summit was first and foremost an attempt to display unity among the EU27. After a lengthy and at times cumbersome process, EU leaders agreed on a joint text underlining that "Europe is our common future" and that in the ten years to come they want a Union that is "safe and secure, prosperous, competitive, sustainable and socially responsible and with the will and capacity of playing a key role in the world and of shaping globalisation".

However, despite all calls for unity the EU27 are struggling to re-energise the European project. It is highly questionable whether the Rome Declaration will enter the history books as a watershed moment for the future of European integration. The distrust and divisions among and within the EU27 are profound and obvious. EU governments do not share a common analysis of today's problems, let alone a joint prescription with shared ideas of what to do to overcome the poly-crisis and further deepen their level of cooperation and integration. The EU27 do not subscribe to one of the five scenarios mentioned in the recent Commission's White Paper on the Future of Europe, neither with respect to the final destination nor the (differentiated) path to follow in the years to come.

¹ See also Janis A. Emmanouilidis and Fabian Zuleeg, *EU@60 – Countering a regressive and illiberal Europe*, European Policy Centre, Brussels, 2016.

Given these profound differences, the Rome Declaration is a watered-down document full of compromises reflecting the lowest common denominator, taking into account specific national interests and concerns with respect to the future route of European integration. Aware of their disagreements, the EU27 have in the process leading up to the Rome Declaration not even tried to find a compromise on the most contentious issues. 'Hot potatoes' related, for example, to the much-needed completion of the Economic and Monetary Union (EMU) or solidarity aspects related to the migration and refugee challenge were pushed aside.

Aiming to make the European Union “stronger and more resilient”, the leaders of 27 member states and of the European Council, the European Parliament and the European Commission have pledged to work towards a “safe and secure Europe”, “a prosperous and sustainably Europe”, “a social Europe”, and “a stronger Europe on the global scene”. But as expected from the outset, the document does not provide a clear indication of how these objectives shall be achieved. It does not include a binding and concrete to-do-list for the next phase of European integration. Given the rather poor track record of recent years, one has to doubt whether the EU27 will in the immediate future be able to fulfil their promise to implement the Rome agenda to “become tomorrow’s reality”.

Need for a Franco-German initiative

However, the final verdict is still out. There is a chance, that the European project will experience a boost at the end of the 2017 ‘super elections year’. A political window of opportunity might open after the French and German elections for more ambitious while at the same time pragmatic reforms. This opportunity should not be missed.

A new reform momentum will require, first and foremost, an agreement between Berlin and Paris, which presupposes that the new French president and the newly elected German federal government will be ready and able to overcome some of the major differences France and Germany have encountered in recent years on how to intensify cooperation, especially among the countries sharing the same currency. A Franco-German compromise is the indispensable prerequisite for obtaining support of other (key) member states in an effort to tackle some of the crises facing the EU, provided that Berlin and Paris will be ready to show the political courage required to once again enter uncharted territory to continue the journey of European integration, which started six decades ago.

The experience of recent years has proven that EU governments are not ready and willing to proactively support major structural reforms and show political courage if events do not force them to do so. Chances are high that 2017 will not be the *annus horribilis* some had predicted. But even if radical populists will not be able to claim victory in the Dutch, French and German elections, we can only hope that Europe will not (once again) revert back to complacency and inaction. EU governments should not continue to defensively muddle through without ambition as they have done in recent years. Only with courageous and forward-looking initiatives that are actually delivered by the EU27 or different groups of countries in different policy areas will future leaders and citizens throughout the Union be able to celebrate the 70th anniversary of the Rome Treaties in 2027.

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