

Editorial

“A Union that strives for more”

With these words, Commission President Ursula von der Leyen ambitiously titled her Agenda for Europe 2019-2024 at the end of 2019. On the one hand, she meant a Europe “that must... learn the language of power” actually in terms of military potency, that should generally play a more active role in world politics up to “responsible global leadership” and that's unity was “strengthened” even by Brexit.¹

On the other hand, a European policy should be introduced in which social inequalities are compensated and liberal constitutional values are protected.² “EU-sceptical citizens” should even be “reconciled with Brussels”.³ The Commission's ambitious goals are thus the realization of comparable minimum salaries, EU-wide unemployment reinsurance, fair taxation of corporations, a new anti-discrimination legislation and a new European gender strategy to finally realize the principle of equal pay for equal work and to open the labour market for more women, and the fight against child poverty through health care and education. These are all major social concerns of a “European Pillar of Social Rights”: “We must do more to fight poverty ... We need equality for all and equality in all of its senses.”⁴

What has become of it so far? Nobody expected that only a short time after the new Commission began its work, Europe, instead of “striving for more” at all levels, would confront the biggest health crisis since the Spanish flu and would have to fight to prevent the descent of large parts of the population into poverty. It has been shown that the prosperity of the global North is fragile, the social inequality among the various EU member states is still enormous, and the poverty gap within the states is also widening. Many people have lost their jobs; their livelihoods are threatened while others have even been able to benefit from their crisis-proof professions.

The pandemic has thus become a test for the ambitious goals of poverty reduction and “equality for all and equality in all of its senses”. But it is also an opportunity not only to assert solidarity within the Union, but also to put it into practice both solidarity between the Member States and solidarity between the various social classes.

Some EU states are prepared to show such solidarity, some are far less so. For example, the “Miserly Four” – Austria, Denmark, the Netherlands and Sweden – have drastically reduced the originally proposed EU Corona Fund. Their approach to the crisis is clearly influenced by accusing the states, which were hardest hit by the crisis, of only demanding the tax money of the hard-working northern Europeans. At least a compromise was reached, which provides for 390 millards euros in subsidies for states in the greatest economic difficulties, and another 360 millards euros in loans. Less suc-

1 Von der Leyen, Agenda for Europe 2019-2024.

2 Von der Leyen, Agenda for Europe 2019-2024.

3 Romann, Tagesschau (German Daily News) aus Brüssel, ARD.

4 Von der Leyen, Agenda for Europe 2019-2024.

cessful was the attempt to tie the aid-payments to basic demands under the rule of law; the resistance from Poland and Hungary has led to an extremely vague formula.

Solidarity between the EU states is facing a further and no less serious test: it is linked to refugees from countries where people are exposed to misery, oppression and war. A fair distribution of these people among all member states has long been lacking; it has been apparent for a long time that the poorest countries in Europe, above all Greece, bear the greatest burden in providing for refugees. With the fire at the Moria refugee camp, however, the situation has virtually exploded: Now the misery of the victims can no longer be suppressed, at least that is what we would like to believe. This expectation has, however, met with disappointment as only 10 EU member states are prepared to accept some of the victims. Others remain “cold-hearted”⁵ despite their high level of prosperity. The Union's goal, “to promote peace, its values and the well-being of its peoples” (Art. 3 TEU) has thus drastically lost credibility. Only a fair and humane migration policy would be a way out of this humanitarian catastrophe. Even if this were to cause temporary dissatisfaction among citizens in some states, the European Union would gain in confidence in the long run.

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5 From a recent Parliamentary discussion in Austria.