ASOS JOURNAL

The Journal of Academic Social Science

Akademik Sosyal Araştırmalar Dergisi, Yıl: 9, Sayı: 114, Mart 2021, s. 161-168

ISSN: 2148-2489 Doi Number: <http://dx.doi.org/10.29228/ASOS.48957>

Yayın Geliş Tarihi / Article Arrival Date
19.01.2021

Yayınlanma Tarihi / The Publication Date
28.03.2021

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EU'S TEST WITH COVID-19: CAN ITALEXIT EVER BE POSSIBLE?

Abstract

Having originated in Wuhan city of China before its global spread overcrossing the borders in a flash by triggering a domino effect, the Coronavirus is now described as a pandemic by the World Health Organization (WHO) and through the deep wounds created in Europe, the virus has left negative impacts in all aspects of life ranging from health, education and economy to social domains. Italy in particular together with Southern European states was most exposed to the severe drawbacks throughout pandemic and due to inadequate healthcare services and already-existing negative financial conditions, huge crises have broken out in a number of member states. Covid-19, accompanied with the latest consecutive financial crises, populist politics and increasing popularity towards anti-refugee trends cumulatively pushed the EU that was already striving hard to manage adverse impacts from Brexit process to the brink of a crisis beyond comparison. Among all member states Italy has been the country stricken most during the entire turmoil in the whole process. Against the unmanageable misery of Italy each new day, EU could literally offer nothing more than leaving Italy with its own fate and in consequence anti-EU protests in Italy gained impetus thus making Italexit a hot topic of discussion. It is thus the aim of our study to analyze the way how EU failed to pass this test faced during the adverse conditions stemmed from Covid-19 pandemic via diverting from the values it advocated and in addition this study seeks to shed light on the way Italexit discourse developed as a side effect of the pandemic.

Keywords: Italexit, Covid-19, EU, anti-EU, Disintegration.

AB'NİN COVID- 19 SINAVI: ITALEXIT MÜMKÜN MÜ?

Öz

İlk olarak Çin'in Wuhan şehrinde görülen ve daha sonra sınırları aşarak domino etkisi yaratan ve tüm dünyada hızla yayılan, Dünya Sağlık Örgütü (WHO) tarafından pandemi olarak ilan edilen koronavirüs, Avrupa'da da derin gedikler yaratmış, sağlıktan eğitime ekonomiden sosyal hayata kadar her alanı olumsuz yönde etkilemiştir. Özellikle İtalya olmak üzere Avrupa'nın güney kanadındaki ülkeler pandemi sürecinde ağır darbeler almış, yetersiz sağlık koşulları ve hâlihazırdaki olumsuz ekonomik şartlardan ötürü bazı üye ülkelerde ciddi krizler patlak vermiştir. Covid-19, son yıllarda artarda gelen finansal kriz, popülist siyaset ve mülteci-karşıtı eğilimlerin yükselmesi ile Brexit sürecinin yarattığı etkileri kontrol altına alma çabası içinde olan AB'yi benzersiz bir krizin eşiğine getirmiştir. Üye ülkeler arasında bu süreçten en çok etkilenen ülke İtalya olmuştur. İtalya'nın her geçen gün artan çaresizliği karşısında AB, İtalya'yı kendi kaderine terk etmekten ötesini yapmamış, bu durum da İtalya'da AB karşıtı söylemleri harekete geçirerek Italexit'in güçlü bir şekilde gündeme gelmesini beraberinde getirmiştir. Bu çalışmanın amacı, AB'nin Covid-19 salgını ile yaşadığı olumsuz süreci ve savunduğu değerlerle çelişerek bu sınavı başarıyla veremeyişini ele almanın yanında salgın ile birlikte Italexit söyleminin nasıl bir gelişim izlediğini tartışmaktır.

Anahtar kelimeler: Italexit, Covid-19, AB, AB Karşıtlığı, Ayrılma.

INTRODUCTION

Covid-19 pandemic caught Europe and the whole world offhandedly in its true sense. European states, Italy and Spain at most, became the epicenters of pandemic and immediately closed their national borders and by forsaking the term of cooperation and spirit specified in the founding agreement, they were numb to put pacta sunt servande into action. In Europe, because of dissimilar health service capacities and varied methods adopted in coping with public health crises as well as other variations caused divergences in their fight against Covid-19. Financial outcomes in the aftermath of public health crisis have escalated to destructive levels. Since the Great Depression of 1929 there has not been such a full-scale crisis ever.

Italy has been the European state most seriously stumbled by the Covid-19 pandemic. Only after twenty-one days after the first deaths due to pandemic in Italy could European Commission come up with preventive measures. By acting in quite an independent manner without having awareness of each other and unwilling to support or assist every one another, almost all of the countries claiming that being a member of the Union alone would be the solution for every problem had then failed to portray a united stance in the face of this pandemic. Particularly speaking, against the increasing desperation of Italy and Spain every new day, the EU did or could do nothing except leaving Italy alone with its fate and blame the country for neglecting to take required precautions in time.

Italy, in all respects, had to cope on its own with its means and management capacity to fight the pandemic. With the outbreak of Covid-19, there was a great fracturing witnessed in the Union during the process and a good number of EU member states, led by Italy and Spain,

began to literally discuss the prospects of EU if there were any. In the pandemic process when the earliest signs of the divergent path that the relations with the Union take became apparent as Italexit slogan became foregrounded and a new party that supported Italy's exit from the Union was founded. Within the framework of this study, tough process that EU experienced due to Covid-19 pandemic and last stage in matters of Italexit after pandemic have been discussed. In this study that was patterned under two main headings impacts of Covid-19 on the EU were investigated and subsequent to current state in the aftermath of the outbreak, it was aimed to unveil if Italexit, as seen in Brexit case, could ever be viable.

IMPACTS OF COVID-19 ON THE EU

Covid-19 led to a full stop in the financial and social life all over the world and it not only imprisoned people at homes but also triggered a number of fractures in the political arena. EU is among these arenas in which the said fracturing was most evident. EU, which was then deemed to be a global role model for regional integration movements and supposedly having a major effect on member states had exhibited quite a weak performance in the fight against the said global crisis; in contrast to expectations EU fell short in giving an efficient and immediate reaction. Lack of coordination, major troubles faced in the procurement of health equipments and miscellaneous outcomes were the primary indicators of EU's failure in managing the pandemic (Bozaslan, 2020: 249).

Although EU's failure against Covid-19 pandemic could be explained by reasons such as negligence, lack of coordination and inadequate healthcare services the most critical mistake that Brussels made in coronavirus case was its false assumption that for a while then Europe had remained as a safe haven in a far distance from global risks and threats. So much so that, Europeans as well had viewed coronavirus pandemic as if it were a trouble inflicted upon remote corners of the world and a disaster that struck areas which deserved pitying. Even though high-ranking European diplomats avoided publicly denouncing the virus as "Chinese virus", it can reasonably be argued that Brussels falsely assumed that it would safeguard the Union by labeling those beyond its borders as the other. In other words the fact that borders in modern age are now transitional and just right because of that reason it is no longer feasible to reserve soft-tough security threats within a restricted scope was the reality that had been ignored by Brussels (Güney, 2020: 47).

In the midst of an existential test against the Covid-19 pandemic that caught them off-guard, the EU is now facing a period in which Euro zone, Schengen zone and Common Market are threatened by a large-scale crisis. German Prime Minister Angela Merkel stated that the Union had never experienced such a challenging test since its establishment and described Covid-19 crisis as a common "symmetrical shock" for the EU (Özcan, 2020). Presently the EU is face to face with great risks from many different aspects. Briefly stating Pandemic poses a risk for the financial stability and welfare of the Union, its domestic coordination and position in international relations. A detailed look at its impacts reveals that an average of 7,5% shrinkage is expected in total gross national product (GNP) in 2020-budget of EU and this ratio, on accounts of being the biggest shrinkage rate of the last 70 years, is worthy of attention. In the Commission it was agreed in principle to effectuate a "recovery fund" by 1,5-2 trillion Euros but member states of the Union are yet to agree on a common resolution in matters of tiny details like the amount of credit or grant that would be catered for their country (Bodur-Okuy, 2020).

Unlike nation states the EU having a supra-national structuring failed to take quick action at the early stages of crisis and as the crisis further deepened in Europe, its devastating impacts in economy exponentially grew despite the precautions taken lately. Europe's debt crisis and Covid-19 pandemic that emerged in the Union during a time when its economy was severely harmed and recovery process in its early stage then had indeed seized the EU at its weakest and idlest state. During this process when pro-integration advocacy was numbed, Covid-19 pandemic in a short while later evolved into a crisis of which health-borne economic and political outcomes began to threaten the very existence of the EU (Öztürk and Günar, 2020: 154-155).

Having emerged in a time when the EU was entrapped into a great many of crises such as Euro crisis, refugee crisis, Brexit and rise of populism Covid-19 pandemic has been a great test that can shake the very roots of EU to an unprecedented level. It is indeed a test that can alter the very roots EU. Because the period of 2019-2024 coincides with the formation stage of EU institutes there was a delayed valuation on the size and might of the pandemic and the fact that health policies were at the exclusive control of member states and lacking essential corporate authority and resources in crisis management as well as separations within the Union itself had fueled the discussions related to the existence of EU (Kaymakçı, 2020).

EU failed to adopt a common fight ideology against the crisis and even to present date the Union has not been able to draw the image of an actor that can control the crisis singlehandedly in a coordinated manner. While some members resorted to immediately closing their borders to foreigners, a few others like Austria and Slovenia initially chose only to empower their border security controls. As seen in Sweden case, some of the member states adopted fight against the pandemic strategies that diverted from the recommended methods of the World Health Organization while in other members states ruling governments wasted no time in declaring a state of emergency and decided to empower their authority under the mask of 'efficient fight against the crisis' (Aydın and Akgül-Açıkmeşe, 2020).

The EU paid a high price for its lack of coordination particularly in matters of Schengen system and Economic and Monetary Union policies that were heavily damaged and it is clear that further steps that the Union will take in such matters would determine its fate. Throughout its developmental history, EU has managed to overcome emergent crises while also turning them into an opportunity to promote integration. Now facing an existential crisis EU could either survive after this crisis by losing its power or rise as empowered even more but to ensure that it can survive even more powerfully after the crisis, it is essential to secure collaboration within the EU, protect the rules such as free movement in domestic market and support its members that are particularly in need of help. In short, the key point in overcoming the crisis is, as was the case in previous ones, related to empowering EU's common policies or else the EU will have to lose all that have been gained to date and may even face the danger of falling behind in the integration process (Nas, 2020).

AFTER BREXIT; IS IT NOW THE TIME FOR ITALEXIT?

With approximately 1,6 millions of cases and more than 55.000 fatality figures, Italy has very deeply felt the might of Covid-19 pandemic. As the nation strives to return to normalcy a new threat has emerged on the status quo. Once their country became the front European site of the refugee crisis in 2015, Italians began to lose faith against the EU. It is worth noting that in the last election, parties that questioned the EU gained ground (The Week, 2020). In recent

years Italy's EU membership has been a recurrent hot topic in the agenda of Italian political parties. Italy's desire to leave the EU (Italexit) was originally mentioned during the process of Britain's exit from the Union. Despite that public opinion polls and the idea of conducting a referendum among Italians received no approval among Italian media or public life due to reasons such as custom controls, checking border crossing and unemployment (Speak, 2020).

However in the most recent Covid-19 pandemic, it was only China, Russia, Cuba and Vietnam helping Italy at the beginning of its despair. As for the question "What about the EU, how did it help?" it is quite evident that when compared with China, the Union failed to offer help for Italy although it was naturally expected from its European neighbors. The said disease, based on death cases, most severely impacted two EU countries Italy and Spain. When Covid-19 disease began to rapidly spread in Italy, Italy asked for assistance via the established Emergency Action Coordination Center. Italy's EU resident representative Maurizio Massari declared that "We asked for medical equipment support and European Commission referred this appeal to member states, but it was good for nothing". Italian Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte also demanded from EU to offer 500 Billion Euro EU Emergency Crisis Fund to save Italy from the adverse economic impacts of pandemic but Italy's appeal was once again denied by the EU. Let alone forging cooperation, EU states had left Italy on its own by closing its national borders (Barnes, 2020; Bodur, 2020).

In a statement; "Through a strong pro-Europe spirit I sincerely wish that EU could overcome this crisis", Giuseppe Conte emphasized that if the EU failed to control this crisis, far-right parties in Europe would grow in popularity. Despite thoughtful remarks of the Prime Minister, Italian people complained that Russia, China, Vietnam, Turkey, Cuba etc. offered the long-awaited help instead of EU and they literally spilled out their hatred against the Union. Indeed many of EU flags in Italy were lowered while China and Russia flags were raised to the skies and Italian citizens, while singing Italy's national anthem, burned down EU flags and chanted slogans like; "We can on our own save ourselves" (Bozaslan, 2020: 248).

As has been illustrated above, during that challenging situation, a significant fall in national trust towards the EU was observed in Italy, being one of the most stricken European countries due to Covid-19 pandemic faced. That is because long-awaited support from the Union never arrived in a timely manner. In a survey conducted by Euronews among the richest EU states; Germany, France, Italy and Spain it was Italy that leaned favored exiting the Union (Euronews, 2020). With a mission to exit the EU a new political party named "Italexit" was founded in July. Established by Senator Gianluigi Paragone who was ousted from 5-Star Movement that was one partner of governing coalition party announced the new party in a press meeting held during the week. Full name of the party was declared as, "Say No to Europe for Italy- Italexit thanks to Paragone" (Pinar, 2020).

By saying; "Other countries are willing to change the European Union while we are simply willing to leave it all behind", Paragone reported that their aim was to liberate Italy "by flying through the cage of the EU and Europe". Manifestation Italexit party is as stated herein: "Italians deserve to live within a powerful, liberated and independent Italy; they deserve to redeem an Italy having gained its freedom back" (Amante, 2020; The Brussels Times, 2020). Political analyst and poll expert Renato Mannheimer argued that EU's failure to respond immediately to Covid-19 pandemic that had burnt Italy angered and disappointed the locals while he also stated that he had no belief that Paragone's party could draw a follower mass large

enough to popularize Italexit propaganda. Mannheimer said that via a huge share reserved for Italy and 750 billion Euro recovery fund package approved by the EU leaders would eventually amplify confidence in EU (Aljazeera, 2020). Nonetheless this package was, by a majority vote, rejected in the European Parliament.

Upon rejecting 750 billion Euro recovery fund package in the European Parliament, European Commission declared a statement in September and announced that EU approved 44 million Euros of financial aid package to recapitalize large Italian companies that had greatly been harmed during Covid-19 pandemic (Dünya, 2020). Although this manifestation somehow indicated that EU took care of the harsh situation that entrapped Italy the truth is, during the pandemic process the Union paid not more attention to Italy than did non-European countries like China and Russia (Bodur, 2020).

It is absolute that Italy could not easily overcome its disillusionment with the EU and furthermore to help Italians restore their faith on the EU project Italy would, first of all, have to heal its wounds by itself. The disillusionment Italy experienced recalls Realists' principle: "we are all on our own in this world (self-help) and organized cooperation is nothing more than an illusion". That being said, this existing situation experienced in Italy would blend with the experiences of other member states and would, in the future, urge Europeans to question the meaning of EU. It is also deemed that the same questioning would also be performed by candidate states waiting at the front gates of the EU.

CONCLUSIONS

Global Covid-19 pandemic pressing the whole world has, in a noticeably short time, forced a wide range of unprecedented challenges on health systems and fueled dramatic socio-economic impacts in Europe as well as many other regions in the world. This reality left deep scars in the EU and especially during the first stage of coronavirus crisis, the Union truly failed to adopt the kind of policy that had long been expected. It became evident that EU, by failing to offer timely solidarity for Italy, Spain and other countries as the most overthrown ones by the crisis, was not in reality as strongly integrated as was deemed it to be. Truth to be told, Covid-19 crisis surfaced deep chasms that had already prevailed within the EU. Indeed, earlier Euro zone crisis and refugee crisis had further escalated separations and divergences among member states and this crisis once again proved that there were both losers and winners of the integration process.

This crisis evidenced that EU necessarily has to move forward uniformly and it was a must to forge harmony and cooperation across North and South as well as supra-national, national and sub-national levels. Moreover it was detected that EU should be more efficient in social policies which had long been neglected and support should be offered within the EU in general to the nations and groups in need. Doubtless to say that to achieve such missions, EU has to come up with new powers and higher budget but a closer look at domestic policies of member states reveals that there exists heavy barriers against realizing these objectives.

On accounts of being an unprecedented crisis Covid-19 enabled the EU and entire world to preview how the new age would take shape. It unraveled that globalization did not just correspond to a rise in data flow, capital flow or travel opportunity but rather it also presented another facet. In that process crisis management skills, adequate health systems and resilience of the economy and society have emerged as the most advantageous strategies. It is crystal clear

that in the post-pandemic world order there will be a new normal and EU will, as a whole, have to fight hard for survival.

Subsequent to managing this crisis it is obvious that a great number of EU states, Italy in particular, will take into account the lessons learnt from their past experiences and EU membership will be critically scrutinized in all aspects. Italexit party founded in one of the EU members which has been hit most hard by this pandemic is the most revealing sign of this skepticism. Although it is largely assumed that Italexit would take place in the subsequent stages on condition that EU manages to successfully recover from the whole process and forms cooperation in its truest sense and forges economic collaboration with states in need, Italy at most, this presumption could most likely change. Despite that it is also safe to argue that rising nationalism, inequality and withdrawal reflex could also turn out to be hindrances. That being the case EU could face the danger of authority loss as it may become the playground of mighty states such as China and Russia.

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