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**Cooperation in Europe, difficulties and solutions**  
**(in pursuit of a fairer, more supportive and inclusive world)**  
*by Elisa Ferreira, European Commissioner for Cohesion and Reforms*

**European cooperation – born in crisis, growing through crises**

Ladies and gentlemen,

**Our European Union arose from the ashes of the second world war.** “Never again” was the motto, and Europeans came together and made a commitment to peace, a commitment to democracy, and a commitment to cooperation and solidarity.

These core values were built into our foundational treaties, our decision making, our foreign policy, in short into our DNA.

Cooperation and solidarity, more than an option, or a political choice, are a real necessity in a polity, such as the European Union. For any Union is as strong as its weakest link.

Fragmentation, disparities, cracks, if left unaddressed can pose existential risks to the entire construct. This is why, very early on, we had to devise policies and mechanisms, to help us to preserve unity and cohesion.

For example, we realised that the mere functioning of a free market, at the European level, could lead to some very uneven outcomes. That

there would have to be some mechanism for rebalancing, at the European level.

**This is my job, as European Commissioner for Cohesion and Reforms.**

European Cohesion Policy is there to ensure that with each spin of the wheel of fate, and with each new throw of the economic dice, no region is left behind, and no place in Europe feels forgotten.

The challenge changes over time. But our commitment remains to cooperation and fairness. Over the years, we have tackled the local impacts of various waves of industrial restructuring, whether textiles or heavy industry. We have tackled the local impacts of the move to the single market and the single currency. And we have managed the accession of Central and Eastern European economies.

Each of these events has provoked challenges which fall particularly in certain places. Managing each challenge, has been a long term process of investment and applied solidarity, and we have had to adapt our methods and learn new tools of cooperation.

**The results are slow but sure, and the World Bank has nicknamed Europe, the “convergence machine”,** because we take disparities and slowly iron them out.

For example, Lithuanian GDP/head, adjusting for purchasing power, went from 49% of the EU average in the year 2004, to 84% of the EU average in 2019. So effectively, from living standards just under half the European average to well above three quarters of the European average, a halving of disparities over the space of 15 years.

In my job, I am very conscious that every crisis and every long term change is a test of our solidarity, a test of our cooperation.

Sometimes we struggle. **In the financial crisis of 2008**, it took Europe 4 years to find a coherent response. The “whatever it takes” only came in 2012. Although in the end, we emerged with a banking union, with common resolution schemes, and common supervision in the banking sector.

Sometimes we ace the test. **The black swan of Covid** is arguably the biggest challenge we have faced as a Union. We learned the lessons from previous crisis and in less than 4 weeks we had emergency support on the ground.

Under Cohesion policy we have enabled the flexibilisation of all unused funds to cater for the immediate needs. More than 20 billion euros of emergency support were mobilised so far, for emergency medical support, emergency grants and low-interest rate loans to nearly 1 million small and medium-sized businesses, to keep these businesses afloat; emergency support for short time working arrangements, to keep workers in their jobs.

**There is also the story of the vaccines**, how Europeans worked together on joint procurement of vaccines building capacity together, rather than competing with each other over a limited stock. In addition, we are working to provide vaccines to the rest of the world, and I will return to that in a moment, when I discuss the future.

We have also taken the historic decision to go together to the financial markets, to make a once-in-a-generation investment in solidarity with

the most impacted Member States for a joint recovery and a common transition to a new economic paradigm.

**This is the story of Europe.** A series of challenges. And in each crisis, we have had to work together to cooperate. Sometimes, this is not the initial instinct of Member States. But time and again it became clear that we are tied to each other and that only together we can overcome the major challenges. The phoenix of better cooperation rising stronger from the ashes of each crisis.

But, there is no room for complacency, as the risk of cracks, fragmentation and division is always present. As I look to the future cooperation will be needed more than ever before. There are no issues where less cooperation is the answer.

So what is on our agenda for cooperation?

### Cooperation agenda within Europe

It starts with cooperation within Europe and between Europeans. They say that charity begins at home.

**We are particularly concerned by poverty.** Despite all our efforts, in 2019, around 91 million people, so 20% of the EU population were still at risk of poverty or social exclusion. And this is concentrated in certain places, pockets of poverty and deprivation, as well as among certain groups.

As Europeans, we are committed to equal opportunities for all regardless of their gender, sexual orientation, age, religion or belief, or racial or ethnic origin.

My department, cohesion policy, continues to invest in the development of all of Europe's regions, and every local area in need. Investing in local jobs, local infrastructure and local public services.

But there is also room for further cooperation in Europe's growing social economy, which already accounts for 8% of Europe's GDP, involving up to 2.8 million enterprises and contributing to 13.6 million jobs. Social economy organisations, faith groups, are a key element in local development, making a particular contribution to quality of life.

**We are looking for partners throughout the lifecycle of our actions:** those who will help plan and design programmes, as well as those who will propose or implement projects.

We need all the expertise we can get, as Europe and the world, embark on a transition to digital and green economy. We cannot allow the opening of a new digital divide. And as the needs of the planet require a different lifestyle, we must help every region succeed in a world of very different patterns of production and patterns of consumption.

### **Cooperation agenda across the globe**

But this brings me to global cooperation. The key issues of the future cannot be solved by any power acting alone. We live on a small planet, and our lives are increasingly interconnected. We in Europe are very conscious of the need for global cooperation.

**The first and most obvious cooperation these days is on vaccination.** We have worked together within Europe, already delivering over 700 million vaccines, already a feat of cooperation. But we have also

already provided over 1 billion vaccines to the rest of the world. No other country or bloc, has exported as many vaccines as Europe.

And Europe is one of the leading players in the COVAX accelerator, a global partnership to ensure that all countries have access to tests, treatments and vaccines. Team Europe has committed 3.2 billion euros and COVAX has already shipped over 200 million doses of vaccines to 138 countries, with many more to come.

Making sure that everyone is vaccinated is an ethical imperative as well as a sanitary necessity. COVID has taught us that no one is safe until everyone is safe.

**It is with the same spirit, that we approach a second area where global cooperation is a must: the environment.** If we want to continue living on this planet, then we all must live differently. We must change the way we produce and consume. Rich countries must take the lead in this, and Europe has taken a particular lead. We took the lead namely since the Kyoto protocol, and for us this is not just words, but deeds: we are showing the path with the European Green Deal and our commitment of climate neutrality by 2050. We are also leading on green financing. Europe is by now the largest issuer of green bonds.

**Third, we are key players in development assistance, for example in terms of our support for food security and agricultural stability in the most needy countries.** Earlier this year, here in Rome, the Director-General of the United Nations' Food and Agriculture Organisation applauded Europe's commitment to the cause, and our commitment to multilateral cooperation, called us "the reliable partner".

**Fourth, we will continue to strive for global cooperation to become the norm** and not the exception. Although, we see a return to great power politics, old rivalries and the emergence of new ones, Europe will continue to advocate for multilateralism and a more cooperative world order.

**And this is what we in Europe will seek to be. A reliable partner, responsible global actor,** cooperating on a host of issues, from peace and development to fairer corporate tax systems, from a cleaner planet to regulation of the new digital economy, including artificial intelligence.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, Europe was born in crisis, and has grown through cooperation in crises. So it is in our DNA to deal with crises, with cooperation and solidarity. This DNA comes from many places, including our civic and humanistic values, which to a large extent are shared with this community of believers.

In future, this DNA of cooperation must spread throughout the world. And we must all learn how to use each crisis as an opportunity to grow in cooperation. Because whether you are a believer or a non-believer we are all in the same boat. We cannot say to others: your end of the boat is sinking. And if we are to successfully confront the challenges of the coming years, artificial intelligence the climate emergency, poverty and hunger, the spread of democracy the rule of law, to successfully manage all these challenges, we are going to have to work together.

Inspiration and not domination. Cohesion and not coercion. Cooperation and not confrontation. Europe is ready!