

Interview with Former Italian Prime Minister Enrico Letta on the European Response to COVID-19

On May 28th, Former Prime Minister of Italy Enrico Letta sat down for a virtual talk with former director of the Jackson School of International Studies, Resat Kasaba, to discuss the European Response to COVID-19. JSJ Editor Priya Sarma, had the opportunity to interview him beforehand, addressing the topics of Italy's response to COVID-19, its economic impact and the future of multilateralism with regards to the European Union.

Jackson School Journal: Let me start with the obvious. As Coronavirus has hit many countries, government responses have been vastly different. I presume that you've been staying in Paris during this pandemic. Would you mind comparing the governmental response to the outbreak in France and Italy?

Letta: During the lockdown, I was in Rome. I left Paris when the University closed in mid-March. As a result, I was able to see the ways in which the Italian government, the French government, and European authorities managed the response to the Coronavirus. European countries like Italy, Spain, France, and Germany were quick enough in their response and reaction in comparison to other countries such as the U.S., Brazil, or the U.K. That probably would not have been the case in the European Union ten years ago. During previous crises such as the financial crisis of 2008 and 2012, it took countries almost four years before coming to any kind of solution. Frankly speaking, the way in which authorities managed this unprecedented and unpredictable crisis was good. It was

by no means perfect, but it was almost right. There are still plenty of lessons to be learned, but my evaluation is definitely positive.

Jackson School Journal: Thank you! I think more specifically, if we look at Italy, some allege that the government instituted partial solutions to combat the pandemic such that it appeared that the policies were following the pandemic as opposed to preventing it. Given the aggressive nature of the virus and how it rose exponentially, unforeseeable for people, do you think the Italian government could have actually responded differently?

Letta: In Italy, the difficulty we encountered stemmed from two completely different situations. One for Lombardy; Lombardy was, in a way, the world's epicenter of the virus. The worst figures were in Lombardy. But in the rest of the country, we had very few cases, and the situation was manageable. Therefore, the major challenge was how to implement the same rules around the country for two very different situations.

I also have to say that the government managed the situation well. In Lombardy, both the government and local authorities had to deal with an incredible situation. But the lesson I learned — and the lesson I think we have to learn collectively — is that our countries, our institutions, and our governments are unprepared to face big crises or big threats because we don't have a threat prevention mentality. We don't have alternative scenario planning. If Option A fails, no one knows what Option B will be. We all focus on immediate responses in a relatively normal situation. States, nations, and national institutions organize for the period of normalcy; they do not arrange for a crisis period. And that is maybe the lesson we have to learn. We need to think about how our states are able to face threats and prevent threats. As you have correctly mentioned, prevention is the key. We are not good at prevention. We have to put prevention at the center of our institutions and the center of our strategies. That's a sort of revolution for our public organizations.

Jackson School Journal: Do you think that we could have learned more from countries such as South Korea, Vietnam, Thailand, or even the Wuhan region in China where a lockdown was immediately instituted such that movement was not allowed? Granted that in Western democracies, people are more unwilling to sacrifice personal freedom, but do you think these lessons could have been learned earlier and used to help with the prevention methods?

Letta: I think it is too early to make a comment because we need to know the true figures. We need to know how these countries will manage a second potential wave. I think we first have to beat the virus and then have a global evaluation to understand what works. You mentioned Vietnam, the Wuhan region, and other countries. They seem to have the right model, but I would like to be sure that it is the right model. Again, I think it's maybe too early to say that today.

It is important to note that in the past, we never had a sort of deal or balance between human life and the economy. In the previous pandemic, we had millions of deaths during the last century because the price of death, the sacrality of death and the importance of human life was not as it is today. And I have to say that we are to recognize that we faced the decision to choose between economy and life and the choice was for life. We lost a lot of money, and it will have many different consequences. But at the same time, that sacrifice resulted in a limited number of deaths. I think we have to consider that achievement for our culture and our society. It's an important achievement!

Jackson School Journal: Right, I agree! It is an important achievement!

In the post-pandemic world, do you think that populist sentiments will rise even more and that the idea of anti-globalization will be more prevalent? Do you think this has the potential to affect immigration policies

or even economic interdependence?

Letta: I think that it is dangerous if we allow people to think that this pandemic will be the end of globalization. I do not agree with them. This pandemic is not the end of globalization. It is the end of one kind of globalization. But globalization exists because of digitalization and interconnectivity. For instance, we are now talking through Zoom. You are in Seattle, and I'm in Rome. And we are doing something I had initially planned to do by taking a plane and then arriving in Seattle after 18 hours of travel, which results in a lot of carbon wastage and costs. I'll give this talk next week by Zoom. So, it's a change, but it's a new form of globalization because of digitalization. And digitalization will help us with this new globalization.

We have to face and fight against those thinking that this pandemic is an excuse to raise new walls and borders, close our countries, and continue this idea that the "we" is more important than others. No, the "we" is a collective "we." And my feeling is that interdependence among human beings will continue to be more important in the future because we understand that everyone depends on each other. Something happening far away will influence my own life. So, it is in my own interest to help people far away to solve their problems and not leave them with their problems. It's a revolution. I think it's a great revolution. It's a mental revolution.

Jackson School Journal: So maybe the

borders are more in our mind rather than in actuality. We're not actually blocking that connection with other countries, but we're thinking we can.

Some economists are suggesting that the current economic downturn is temporary since it's been triggered by an external factor rather than fundamental economic problems and that economies will recover soon. Do you share that optimism, or should we be more cautious since reopening countries itself will take a while?

Letta: My experience here in Europe and Italy, which is reopening, is that the process is very gradual. It depends on the fact that people are scared of the possibility of having a new resurgence of the pandemic. We need to know that true recovery will be a balance between demand, supply, and supply chains. Because one can have a perfect supply chain after reopening, but if there is a lack of demand or trust of the consumers, this reopening is useless. So, we have to deal and manage this balance, knowing that it will be a slow and complicated period. It is impossible to have results immediately. And we know that this period will be a very tough one for public finances and for our economies. So, I think we have to be cautious, knowing that it will be gradual and slow.

Jackson School Journal: Right, that makes a lot of sense.

I was reading on the E.U. website the statistics about how E.U. members are

helping each other by sending medical equipment or even sending teams of doctors. I read this statistic that France has donated 1 million masks; Germany has delivered seven tons of medical equipment, and Poland, Romania, and Germany have sent teams of doctors to Italy. However, there still seems to be somewhat of resentment towards the E.U., particularly France and Germany. Why do you think that's the case?

Letta: There is a big contradiction in this matter where there is a perception that the E.U. is not competent for healthcare because of the member states' past unwillingness to grant E.U. competencies on social and healthcare. There are many issues where the E.U. is not competent at all. Education is one of them. Social and healthcare is another one. It was because of the British. The British always wanted to veto any improvement of the European competencies in these kinds of fields. Now that the U.K. is no longer a part of the E.U., I think we have to take advantage of this pandemic to take some steps.

Until now, we understood that people were expecting Europe to be successful and effective in these fields. But, people don't know that the European Union doesn't have the competencies in that. So, there are mixed feelings and contradictions. I think it can be one of the consequences of the crisis — to learn the lesson and to create some competencies.

Jackson School Journal: So, do you think

that countries that are part of the E.U. now would be more interested in strengthening it and putting resources/money into places such as healthcare and education?

Letta: Yes, I hope so. I hope so because this experience is showing us that it is important, it is good for the countries and it is also possible for all of us and I hope that will be the case.

Jackson School Journal: A liberal school of thought in international relations would suggest that strong international organizations help prevent hegemonies and international conflicts. However, as you've mentioned in an earlier interview, I.O.s, such as the U.N., have been hit hard by nationalism. Following this pandemic, do you think globalization will be reinvented in a way where national identity and belonging to a multilateral organization can coexist?

Letta: Multilateralism was under attack before the pandemic. It was under attack for many reasons, and the U.N. system was in crisis before the pandemic. The only working and effective multilateral organization was the European Union and is the E.U. I think this pandemic is showing that multilateralism is very important and that at the same time, the pandemic has shown us that the multilateralism of today is destroyed. Even the W.H.O. and W.T.O. today are under attack.

So, I think we have to rebuild a new multilateralism. This concept is why I pledge for a more united E.U. because

it can be the engine to push for more multilateralism. At the same time, it also depends on the U.S. and the internal choice of the next president. But that is not in our hands to decide. But we wait for this decision as to the most important political decision maybe in this decade.

Jackson School Journal: Absolutely, we here in the U.S. are waiting for the next election with bated breath. The elections in November will be a pivotal moment for domestic politics as well as international relations.

I'll end by asking a light-hearted question! Have you picked up a new hobby during quarantine?

Letta: Very good! No, I haven't, I spent all my time with my iPhone on Zoom. I had a great improvement in the digitalization of my personal life. That was my hobby!!

Jackson School Journal: We'll count that! Thank you so much for your time! We really appreciate it. Take care, and stay safe.

Letta: Very good! Thank you!