

## *Colloquium*



# L'Unione europea tra pandemia, nuove crisi e prospettive future

A cura di Denise Milizia e Alida Maria Silletti

ISSN 2281-9290  
ISBN 978-88-5513-097-4

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*LED* Edizioni Universitarie di Lettere Economia Diritto  
Via Cervignano 4 - 20137 Milano  
Catalogo: [www.lededizioni.com](http://www.lededizioni.com)

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La Commissione europea sostiene la presente pubblicazione  
mediante risorse attribuite a Europe Direct Puglia

Cofinanziato dall'UE



**EUROPE DIRECT**  
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Denise Milizia - Alida Maria Silletti

## Interview to Stanley Johnson

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7359/097-2023-misi>

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*The Editors of this volume were keen to discuss with Stanley Johnson some past, present and future core issues around Brexit and how the UK has handled the coronavirus pandemic.*

*The interview started in May 2021 during a conference on the platform Microsoft Teams, titled “Post-Brexit political discourse at the time of COVID-19”, of which the Department of Political Science at the University of Bari Aldo Moro holds the video.*

*Two years on, we asked our guest to continue the interview and give us some updates, after the several events that have occurred in the UK and in the world. The Editors want to thank Stanley Johnson for accepting a few more questions. The second set of questions was answered in writing in April 2023.*

*Denise Milizia* – Mr Johnson, before starting asking you the questions we have prepared today, let me first say that it was not as easy to prepare an introduction for you. Should I introduce you first as a writer, and this is what we read in your profile, or an animal rights activist, or an environmentalist? We know that you set up an organization called Environmentalist for Europe. Or would you rather be introduced as a politician, Member of the Conservative Party, who was Member of the European Parliament and, most importantly, a fervent European who fought very hard for the UK to stay in the EU and voted Remain in 2016? And this is actually one of the main reasons why we have invited you here today. As a matter of fact, we have invited you here not because you are the First Father, as it were, a proud dad of the current British Prime Minister, Boris Johnson, who managed to get Brexit done at any cost, come what may, do or die, no ifs no buts, as he said on several occasions, but because you have always been a true believer in the European project. We know that in 1973, when the UK joined the EEC (European Economic Community), as it was called back then, together with Ireland and Denmark, you were one of the very first British people to be appointed to the European Commission. And then, in 1979 you were elected to the European Parliament, and you were there for 20 years.

*Stanley Johnson* – Well, I joined the Parliament in 1979 and I stayed there for 5 years, then I went back to the European Commission, so on the whole you could say I had at least 20 years between 1973 and 1994, when I was thoroughly engaged both in the environment and in the European venture.

*Denise Milizia* – I like the word ‘venture’, I think it collocates very well with European, as we also read in the Preface of the ill-fated European Constitution, indicating a project which is exciting and yet difficult.

Mr Johnson, we know that Altiero Spinelli, who is regarded as one of the fathers of today’s European Union, influences you most, am I correct? We know that you were very committed, very engaged, and I am not going to ask you how upset you are, or how upset you were, or where your heart lies now, after the referendum outcome. But I am wondering, what relationship do you expect there will be now, and what relationship are you hoping for, between the UK and the European Union? As you can imagine, we linguists look at language first, even before politics, so my question is, if you were to choose an adjective next to ‘relationship’ and ‘partnership’, which one would you choose? In our classes we have carried out such an investigation using spoken political corpora, and relying on a software for linguistics analysis, the words that emerged next to ‘relationship’ and ‘partnership’ were awkward, odd, difficult, long and fraught (Geary, Lees 2016), turbulent, erratic, hard, tough, on the rocks (Milizia 2023), troubled, uneasy and uncomfortable (Maccaferri 2019). It seems that in these 43 years of marriage, if you want to borrow the divorce metaphor (Milizia, Spinzi 2020), the couple, i.e., the UK and the EU, was not really happy together (Berberović, Mersina Mujagić 2017).

*Stanley Johnson* – Well, I think that is a little bit of a pessimistic view of what happened.

*Denise Milizia* – Yes, absolutely, but that is exactly what emerged from our corpora.

*Stanley Johnson* – I’ll give you my personal history here. Yes, I was very lucky to be appointed to the European Commission, not as a commissioner but as a senior official, so that when Britain joined, as you rightly say, what was then the European Economic Community on the first of January 1973, together with Ireland and Denmark, so when the six became nine, at the same time because of the summit which had



been held in Paris in October of the previous year in 1972, the heads of state of government in Paris agreed not just of the regional policy and the environment policy. So, for me it was a very exciting moment, as it were, to be nominated and accepted by the authorities in Brussels, as the first head of the division which was, rather clumsily called, the Protection of Pollution and Nuisances Division. It was very interesting because during those first years for me in Brussels as a senior official, I was of course tremendously excited, as an environmentalist, at the thought of driving through policies, Europe wide, in the environmental field, and it was perfectly clear to me that in the environment field, certainly, you needed cross country collaboration, because rivers go to the sea, air blows from one country to another, products are traded from one country to another, and if you have different standards for those products, you have barriers to trade, whether it's lead in petrol or safety brakes on cars or whatever. So, on a technical level, I was very pleased to be where I was, because of course the Commission was this unique institution which had been created after the war and, of course, Italy played a fundamental role in that with the Treaty of Rome in 1957. But they created this extraordinary institution, which was the European Commission, which had real power. What was the most important real power? It was the right to propose. Do you see what I mean? And it was not only the right to propose, it was an exclusive right to propose. It was simply not possible for Member States to make a suggestion by itself, that had to be adopted by the Commission. So, it meant that the officials of the commission and the commission had great power.

So, what happened? In 1979 we have the first direct elections to the European Parliament. I have always been of the opinion that if you really want to get something done you can't avoid politics. You see what I mean? So, I decided I would stand to be elected to the European Parliament. I was elected. I became the Vice President of the European Parliament environment committee. Now this is where, as you mentioned, Spinelli, came into my life. Spinelli had already been a commissioner in Brussels. But he stood for election, like I did in 1979, and I had his book *The European Adventure* by Altiero Spinelli, it was actually published in 1972. I had studied it very carefully when I first joined the Commission. Now I had a chance to meet this man. And I think he spent many years in Bari. I don't think he was born in Puglia, but I think he certainly was a "Puglian" and I remember last time I was in Bari I made a little speech in Italian about how I had much wealth in working with Spinelli. Spinelli, of course, was absolutely crucial in the development of the community at that point, because Spinelli bril-

liantly set up the Crocodile Club. I was lucky to be the only British conservative member (there were nine of us that evening when we met together) and, by the way, Virgilio Dastoli is still the President of the Italian European movement, and I am still in touch with him.

The Crocodile Club was of course non institutional, but it caused a resolution to be passed in the European Parliament calling for an institutional committee to be set up. Spinelli chaired that committee, and eventually by 1984 we had produced a treaty of the European Union and, of course, other important developments happened. Qualified majority came in many different fields.

The one thing that made me attracted to the European project was that you would get things done. But then, to a country like Britain it became much more complicated. We went because the British people, in the end, were not ready to endure, what we might call, the loss of sovereignty (in a kind of primitive way), which being out voted in the council means, you know, of course that it is a loss of sovereignty. As far as I was concerned, it was always better to be a smaller fish in a bigger pond than a big fish in a small pond. I always thought that, but that is not the way that the British people have seen it.

So, coming to your question now, where are we now? What is the kind of partnership we are looking for? I think we have to say it was a very important time in our lives as a country. From my point of view, we put forward many things which are tremendously important both on the environmental side and on the political front, as well. Where are we now? We have to find a way of building a partnership which does not involve this such obvious loss of sovereignty as we had. Now you could say “Why do the British care about sovereignty when the Italians don’t care about sovereignty?”. I don’t know, I can’t tell you what the answer to that is. But all I know is that we have to look for a partnership which is, I suppose, ‘constructive’, and I see plenty of ways of doing that.

At the moment we are in that phase where a ‘velvet divorce’ has happened, and we are all a bit sensitive, but quite soon, I hope, we are going to find a proper way of working together. And this would really mean working with the pan-European institutions, because we are still together, and I am talking about the Council of Europe, I am talking about the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe, I am talking about this kind of things, and there are also the Italian-UK dialogues, and these are very important.

*Alida M. Silletti – Avec nos élèves, nous avons analysé la Déclaration d’Emmanuel Macron à l’Assemblée Générale des Nations Unies du*

22 septembre 2020. Le Président de la République française avait rappelé à cette occasion le rôle décisif et peut-être inattendu de l'Union européenne, dont il est dans son discours en quelque sorte le porte-parole. Il y projette une représentation collective du "nous" (Amossy 2010) pour exprimer la voix de l'UE dans sa réponse commune à l'égard du coronavirus (Lefebvre 2021) et de la distribution équitable des vaccins – il suffit de penser à l'initiative COVAX, qui a été entre autres promue par la France et par l'Union européenne. Ces propos ont ainsi mis en avant les divisions qui avaient concerné d'autres grandes puissances mondiales qui siègent à l'Assemblée Générale des Nations Unies, comme Emmanuel Macron le précise lorsqu'il fait référence à la Chine, aux États-Unis ou à la Russie, et qui sont comparées avec l'action concertée de l'Union européenne. Que pensez-vous de cette réponse commune de l'Union européenne? Pourrait-il s'agir d'une réponse fédératrice pour répondre, entre autres, à la crise du processus d'intégration européenne qui avait été, d'une certaine manière, interrompu par le Brexit?

*Stanley Johnson* – Well, I do think that there are some absolutely key areas where we still have to work together in a really close way. No, I don't think the vaccination was necessarily one of those areas, my understanding is that even countries that were part of the European Union were actually entitled to have their own vaccination programmes. Most of them chose to go with the European Commission's plan, but nothing would have stopped them from having their own programme, either, and I think that was true for Britain, even if Britain had stayed in the European Union, there would have been nothing illegal in Britain pushing ahead with its own vaccination programme. Anyway, on the wider issue, I think for example, if you get climate change, where I am very heavily involved now in the run up to COP26, which is the meeting that we are going to hold in Glasgow, I think it is absolutely vital that we stay closely linked with the European Union. If you think how important the European Union was in the run up to the Paris Convention of December 2015, basically it made a huge difference, and I think Britain has to be careful. There is one issue, for example now, which is tremendously important, and that is carbon taxes and carbon border taxes. The European Commission, as you know, is just about to launch its own proposal for carbon border taxes. This is perfectly obvious that you have to have them, you can't have systems for emission controlled in your own countries and no formal protection against import from countries that have not got systems of

emission controlled. So, here is a classic example where we have to work very closely together, not just the UK and the EU, but of course other major industrial countries. So, in a nutshell, I think it is an exciting and challenging time which lies ahead, and speaking not for Britain but about Britain, I am surprised that, post-Brexit, we have been absolutely concentrating on the environmental issues without proposals on climate change. I think Britain has promised to go rather further, rather faster than any other country in Europe, and of course we are also pushing very hard on something which you, Denise, mentioned, and that is the animal welfare issues which seem to be so globally important, but are quite important to the people, as well. So, that is where we are now, and I don't think I want to play vaccine politics and say the EU stopped countries from going ahead, I don't think that is really true. I think if countries had wanted to go further and faster, they could have done it, and of course Britain is also a major contributor to COVAX.

*Denise Milizia* – Mr Johnson, don't you think that, going back to the Brexit debate, leaving the EU without a deal was reckless and hazardous, a leap into the unknown (Milizia, Spinzi 2020), as it were, because we all need rules to follow and abide by. We can think of the climate crisis, as you just mentioned, bearing in mind that the conservative party is not called "conservative" only, but the full title of the party is "conservative and unionist party", a "one-nation party", which really strongly believes in the precious bond between England, Wales, Scotland, and Northern Ireland.

And since you have already managed to foresee the future on a number of occasions (*smiling*), what do you think will happen now in Scotland: do you think the Scots will be tempted to seek independence again? And, as far as the sensitive land border between Ulster and the Republic of Ireland is concerned, what could be the consequences now? It is being rightly said, more recently, that Brexit, i.e., a hard north-south customs control, risks upsetting the peace process reached with the Good Friday Agreement in 1998 (Milizia *forthcoming*). The so-called 'Irish backstop' was in fact a key reason why an agreement was never reached on Theresa May's watch. It seems, instead, that the thorny issue of the Irish border is not a huge dilemma for the Prime Minister, and that the government is not too concerned of leaving the Kingdom in pieces. Are you worried that the United Kingdom would become a disunited kingdom (cfr. Zappettini, Krzyżanowski 2019)?

*Stanley Johnson* – Well, talking of being a foreteller, it is true that way back in 1968 I wrote a novel called *Panther Jones for President*, and that was about a black man becoming president. There is another book I wrote, called *The Virus*, and then I wrote a novel, which has just come out, which is called *The Warming*. Anyway, you are of course absolutely right, it would be quite ironic if we come out of Europe and, at the same time, the United Kingdom breaks up. As far as Scotland is concerned, well I think five years ago they had a referendum and did not get a majority for independence. Now, Mrs Sturgeon is trying to have another referendum. Technically, she can't have a referendum without the agreement of the government of the United Kingdom. This maybe a little bit like Spain and Catalonia, I am not 100% sure. However, in reality, it could be that the pressure is there. Well, would the Independence Movement in Scotland win a referendum? Would the Independence Movement in Puglia win a referendum to separate Puglia from the rest of Italy? I don't know what the answer is, but I suspect it would not win, because in terms of sheer economics, the subsidy which the UK provides each year to Scotland is huge, and it was huge even at the time when Scotland had the revenue from the North Sea Oil, which was very large. That revenue has almost disappeared now. So, I think just in sheer economic terms, I cannot see Scotland actually voting for independence. I think the cost to Scotland would be too great. At least, they were convinced that they could rejoin Europe, you see. Then Europe would have to take a view of that, and there would be some people in the Council of Ministers, the Spanish for example, who might say "wait up, wait a moment, is it such a good idea to accept back into Europe a country which has just left, what kind of message would be sent to Catalonia?". That was just an example, so as far as Northern Ireland is concerned, this is an interesting one, because it is true that in effect we have a border now down the Irish Sea, but the answer here, I think, is not to become too worried about this, but to say "why do we have a border?". It is because the European Union fears that there may be a cross frontier traffic, and any evasion of taxes or whatever. Now, in practice, if we continue to move together, in a formal constructive partnership, both in terms of standards and in terms of industrial processes, then the underlying conditions for having a separate border would not necessarily be important. Do you see what I mean? So, in practice, I think that, as long as Britain moves in fairly close parallel with the European Union, the question of the fact that two countries are, one in the EU and one which is not in the EU, does not become so important. As for Wales, I don't think at the moment independence for Wales is a major issue. So, in a

nutshell, I think I'll be fairly confident in saying that for the foreseeable future, the United Kingdom is going to remain a "United" Kingdom.

*Alida M. Silletti* – Ma deuxième question reprend ce que vous venez de dire à propos de votre attitude à l'égard de l'environnement. Vous êtes un écologiste convaincu. Par rapport à cela, je voulais vous demander ce que vous pensez du plan de relance européen *Next Generation EU*. On sait bien que ce plan de relance est consacré en particulier aux jeunes, mais on sait aussi qu'une partie importante de ce plan était également consacrée à l'environnement, à la lutte contre le réchauffement climatique, et donc à la sauvegarde de la planète. En particulier, on sait que 30% des fonds européens seront alloués à la lutte contre le changement climatique. C'est un record par rapport à ce que l'Union européenne a fait jusqu'à présent. Quel est votre avis à ce propos? Est-ce que les mesures qui ont été mises en place par l'Union européenne sont à votre avis suffisantes?

*Stanley Johnson* – I am very encouraged by the steps the European Union is taking on this front. I am really encouraged. I think the messages the European Union has sent out, the "clean technology" messages, the "building a new Europe" messages, this is all exactly the right dimension, and I think the efforts also to incorporate, as you said, the "next generation" plan are absolutely vital. If there were one young lady, who I think deserves the Nobel Peace Prize, it would be Greta Thunberg. I mean, she has been absolutely an inspiration to a whole generation of people. She is a real candidate for the Nobel Prize. So yes, I am inspired, and I'll tell you, I continue to be inspired by the leadership the European Union is showing. Now, I am throwing the challenge back to all of you, I regard you Italians as the guardians of the Treaty of Rome. You know, frankly that is what you are, you created the Treaty of Rome. People like Spinelli were at the very heart of it. It is up to all of you, now that Britain has left, to be absolutely sure that this sacred flame, which is set out so clearly in the Treaty, which also includes democratic values, is absolutely maintained. I don't want to sound too heavy about this, but, you know, there are tendencies in Europe now threatening these central democratic values, and that would be very important to be sure that these tendencies are watched very carefully.

*Denise Milizia* – Mr Johnson, we have been wondering over the last few months if the Covid-19 virus has killed populism? We know that the main tenet of populist parties (Ruzza, Pejovic 2019) is "we don't need

experts”, “we don’t need knowledge”, “we’ve had enough of experts”, “people know what’s good for them”, “we don’t need other people to tell us what to do”, endorsing the ‘arrogance of ignorance’ (Wodak 2021b) as it were, thus appealing to common sense, simple solutions, and intuition. More recently, we have noticed that experts are needed. Doctors are needed, science is needed, knowledge is needed. Now that experts are back in fashion, do you think that the virus has killed populism?

*Stanley Johnson* – That is a very good question. What this virus has demonstrated is that even if it has made clear that experts are tremendously important, the problem is we have had this tremendous disagreement between the experts. Do you see what I mean? Even today, nobody really knows, in England anyway, what the impact of lockdown has been. First, there is the impact of vaccination, you have seen it, nobody knows enough. So, I don’t think the populists are ready to cede the ground to the experts, because the experts themselves have been fairly unconvincing.

No, I don’t think you can say the virus has killed populism, because in a way the NO-VAX people are populists.

*Denise Milizia* – Yes, absolutely, the experts themselves seem not to agree on several fronts, and that was and is confusing, but we perfectly know and understand that rarely is scientific opinion unanimous (Charteris-Black 2019). Obviously enough, unanimity of ideas would make our life much easier, but that is wishful thinking for everybody.

My question is, Mr Johnson, this reliance on experts during the coronavirus pandemic, this over-reliance, I should say, on ‘the best’ scientific advice, on science, which became ‘the’ science (*ibid.*; Milizia 2023), this reiteration that “we are following the science”, “we are being driven by the science”, and “we are guided by the science”, was it a strategy adopted by politicians to avoid blame (Wodak 2021a) and to abdicate responsibility for political decisions, thus justifying the draconian clampdowns imposed by the government?

*Stanley Johnson* – I think that is a justifiable conclusion.

*Denise Milizia* – My last question, going back to Brexit: Brexit day was officially January 31<sup>st</sup>, and of course here in the ‘continent’ we are wondering if you have seen any fruits of your decision, so far, over these two years. You have more often than not reiterated the nostalgia for a splendid and glorious past (Maccaferri 2019) and a desire to ‘take back



control' (Zappettini 2019). Do you feel like you have managed to take back control? And control of what, in particular? Did you find it easier to make any kind of decisions, from Covid-19 to the climate crisis and the war in Ukraine?

*Stanley Johnson* – At this moment I am fairly pessimistic. Both the main political parties seem determined to pretend that Brexit meant Brexit and they will not talk about the possibility of the UK rejoining the EU. That said, the economic realities may force us to rebuild bridges with Europe more rapidly than at present seems the case. I very much doubt if I will see the UK rejoin the EU in my lifetime (I am going to be 83 in August), but I much hope that my children and grandchildren will be alive to witness that great event.

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<sup>1</sup> All links were verified on April 5, 2023.



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