

INTERVIEW WITH MANUEL QUINTANA

Interviewed by: Dino Ljubić¹

Manuel Quintana, 21, is Portuguese and currently a law student at the Universidade Nova de Lisboa. He is interested in history, philosophy and politics and in particular the current events in Europe as well as the political landscape of his country and recent developments in public policy. He is active in a number of issues and initiatives, among others he is currently the Vice-President of the World Youth Alliance Portugal chapter.



Has your country seen more benefits or harm from joining the European Union from today's perspective?

Since Portugal's adhesion in 86, the European Union has affected my country greatly. On the one hand, we obtained funding for structural changes, especially with regard to infrastructure and services. Roads and airports were modernized, investments were made in schools and universities, dams and wind farms were built with European investment.

The ability to travel and the possibility of working in any country in the union were facilitated after Portugal joined the communities. All these are positive aspects of the membership, as Portugal has chronically been a net exporter of workers and has always had difficulties in obtaining external financing at reasonable interest rates, given its economic weakness. Economic advantages are all

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in all the main factor that made 91% of the Portuguese people say that they have a “favourable or very favourable image of the EU”. On the other hand, we suffered a lot. The textile, agricultural and fishing sectors especially. Decisions from Brussels imposed spurious and disproportionate procedures and imposed quotas and production targets without regarding the Portuguese reality. The eurocrats ended up causing my country high levels of dependency of imported goods from European and foreign countries. This is the biggest negative effect of membership, which is still felt in many small cities and villages today. The loss of national sovereignty in these realms led to high levels of unemployment among farmers, fishermen and workers, which led to a desertification of the interior of Portugal and great pressure on our urban centres. This caused very serious social problems, namely criminality and great pressure on the rental market, which for a long time did not manage to find supply for so much demand.

To illustrate my point, right now to rent a house in the centre of Lisbon, the average citizen has to spend 84% of their monthly salary. Of course, there are other factors that explain this phenomenon, but the pressure on urban centres caused by the adhesion to the communities is not negligible.

Overall, the Portuguese are in favour of the idea of the European Union. Although historically Portugal has never had any relevant connection to the continent or to the project, the economic component wins over the idea of Portugal that prevailed from the discoveries until the beginning of the 20th century. An idea of Portugal as an intercontinental platform and a centre for dialogue with other Portuguese-speaking countries such as Brasil, Angola and Moçambique.

How important do you consider the principle of subsidiarity, i.e.

keeping the autonomy of the jurisdiction over internal affairs for the Member States (e.g., education, culture, freedom of the media, etc.) for the future of the European Union?

The principle of subsidiarity, in accordance with the treaties that led to the establishment of the Communities and then to the European Union, is the cornerstone of the entire European system. When the member states, with their normal division of the state through their governmental, administrative, and judicial structures, can give an effective and adequate response, they should be the ones to regulate the matter. If there is a need for coordination at an interstate level and the member states are not capable of providing such an effective response, it will be up to the European Union to intervene.

Regarding education, this is a clear aspect in which the EU does not have competences, and until now in Portugal there has been no type of influence from European authorities in the matter.

As for culture, the budget provided for it in the multiannual financial framework of 2.5 billion euros seems to be tied with a highly bureaucratic process that makes it difficult for Portuguese people to have access to it. The framework also leaves many people unprotected. For instance, Brussels does not take into account several aspects and realities of Portugal, such as bullfighting as a form of cultural expression.

As for the media and its freedom, the problem does not exist. Portugal has a free press, although during the pandemic attempts by the government to condition it were made, either directly or indirectly, hence complaints to the CJUE were drafted, even though none was formalized.

What is your personal preference: the European Union as a federal state or as a confederation of sovereign nation-states, and why?

I prefer an Europe of sovereign states. The Portuguese people are very proud of their independence for many reasons. Portugal is the country of Europe who has the oldest defined borders, and we take pride in its uniqueness and history. Wanting to make the European Union a state is an unpopular idea, even though the founding fathers of the Union never hid that this was their ultimate goal.

The idea of Portugal being a federal state of a federal union would never work. Portuguese people do not recognize authorities in Brussels. Only a few people in Portugal, even in law courses, know the difference between the European Council, the Council of the European Union, and the Council of Europe. I can count with my left-hand fingers the people who know who the president of the European Parliament is, and nobody knows how many judges there are in the European Court of Justice.

For the Portuguese, Europe is a distanced and strange reality. We do not identify with Brussels or the North, we have more in common with Morocco and Brazil than with Finland or Estonia. We don't share the same language, we don't share the same history, we have different experiences and sensibilities, we have different and rich cultures that we don't want to see diluted in a blue flag. For the Portuguese, the flag is green and red and it will remain so. As I said in the first answer, the Portuguese relationship with Europe is mainly an economical one. We don't feel the need to have a centralized government in Brussels, we don't want a European army, we don't want to become part of the United States of Europe. We are a sovereign nation that has given some of its sovereignty to the European institutions on very specific terms and conditions. The idea of a federal state is a step too far.

Given that the European Court of Justice may give a different judgment than the entire legal order of a Member State, is the

judicial sovereignty of the Member States lost in this respect?

In Portugal the problem in general does not arise in these terms. The EU court of justice usually does not rule on matters of domestic law, as the enforcers of the law, the Portuguese judges, are very aware of their responsibility. Questions submitted to the CJUE, through the proceedings concerning references for preliminary rulings are very rare, and this is the primary mechanism through which the court could rule on matters of domestic law and eventually conclude that the decisions by our superior courts would be incompatible with the law of union.

So far there have been no problems. However, the truth is that in the world of Portuguese law, there are several voices that speak out against the excessive influence that the court of justice has in the life of the union, as they see it as undemocratic and a very politically activist body. Several basic principles of the Union's legal order derive not from treaties or the free will of states, but rather from the jurisprudence of a court that, in the silence of the treaties, creates principles such as the direct effect of European legislation and its primacy, which are somewhat strange and mysterious.

Is the common currency suitable for all EU members, and how has the introduction of the EURO affected your country's economy?

Quite shortly, no. In the confederation there are different sovereign nations who face different economic challenges. I see the single currency as a way to favour the big economies, especially Germany and France. Countries that have weaker economies who adopted the euro have all faced extreme difficulties and hardships. The control over monetary policy is very important for economic growth, and even though there are advantages in having a common currency in terms of travelling, foreign investment and the pro-

motion of trade, the rigidity of the monetary policy promoted by the European Central Bank is not good for Portugal, but that is my personal opinion. Most economists would say otherwise, that even though the adaptation period was complex and caused an IMF intervention in Portugal, now the Portuguese people have “learned how to live with the euro”. In my perspective, I would rather live in a poorer country than in one in which I cannot have control over monetary policy.

What are most resources coming from the European funds used for in your country?

Since 86, Portugal has received something like 9 million euros per day from the European Union distributed between grants, loans and subsidies. Most of them were used to modernize our economy in terms of infrastructures. 3 out of the 5 biggest current projects are for public transports. From the other 2, one is for public universities scholarships and the other is for advanced formation of phd candidates. There is also some investment in agriculture through the European Agriculture Fund for Rural Development which amounted to 4 billion euros.

The reality that the common Portuguese sees though is that every time a big project is approved corruption sets in. Transparency was never a reality within the Portuguese government, and neither within the EU. Even though we may have access to this information, the levels of bureaucracy to get it are just insane. There is no way for the common citizen to have access to the information to scrutinize the execution of the EU funding and that, off course, creates a climate of suspicion that should not exist.

How was the migration crisis perceived in your country, and do you think the EU had an appropriate political and legal re-

sponse to the situation?

In all honesty it did not affect Portugal. One of the perks of being a poor western country is that the attractiveness of our reality for migrants is low. Even though we are part of the EU, and we have a social state, the truth is that we cannot compare to other countries within the confederation.

There were some attempts made by the government to open Portugal to refugees and to create social programmes to integrate them in the Portuguese society, but we so far only received 551 refugees and migrants. We would have the capability to absorb much more, but most of the refugees and migrants who come to Portugal, do not stay and the EU cannot do much about it, since the programs for them exist.

Did the Brussels administration have a good or bad response to the corona crisis, and how did your country position itself on this issue?

I think they tried to do the best they could with the information they had available. Of course it was a very hard task because the legislative system within the EU is very complex and in times of trouble that is a disadvantage since decisions need to be taken rather quickly.

But all in all, the decisions that needed to be taken were taken, the React-EU funds were approved, and we can hope for the normalization of the situation.

This is one of the aspects in which the EU is relevant. When it comes to issues that do not know member states borders, such as this virus we're facing, an intergovernmental approach to the issue is necessary to ensure the basic principles of the union, especially the free movement of people and workers.