

## **RETURN TO THE FRONTLINES, TO THE FRONTIER – Mauro Ferrari**

**Please forgive me, but I believe that the priority now is to stop the pandemic. The priority is to save possibly millions of lives. It takes precedence over careers, politics, even the beauty of certain science. Please forgive me, but I believe in science at the service of society, especially when it counts the most. And now it does count the most, since it is only through science that Covid-19, and its successor pandemics, will ever be defeated.**

**My tenure as President of the European Research Council (ERC) has come to an end, as earlier today I tendered my resignation to President Ursula von der Leyen. My appointment was announced in May 2019, to take office on January 1, 2020. In the intervening 7 months I volunteered my time to the ERC, motivated by my enthusiasm for the great reputation of this world-leading funding agency, my commitment to the idealistic dream of a United Europe, and my belief in serving the needs of the world, through service to the best of science.**

**Those idealistic motivations were crushed by a very different reality, in the brief three months since I took office. Disquieting early warning, signs gave way to the painfully icy, cold recognitions of a world entirely different from what I had envisioned. The Covid-19 pandemic shone a merciless light on how mistaken I had been: In time of emergencies people, and institutions, revert to their deepest nature and reveal their true character.**

**As it became evident that the pandemic would be a tragedy of possibly unprecedented proportions, I moved that the European Research Council should establish a special program directed at combating Covid-19. I believed this was justified by the expected burden of death, suffering, societal transformation, and economic devastation, especially striking the less fortunate, the weakest in the societies of the world. I thought that at a time like this, the very best scientists in the world should be provided with resources and opportunities to fight the pandemic, with new drugs, new vaccines, new diagnostic tools, new behavioral dynamic approaches based on science, to replace the oft-improvised intuitions of political leaders.**

**The proposal was rejected unanimously by the governing body of the ERC, without even considering what shape or form it may take, and to such an extent that my presidency became fully opposed by them, in every respect. The rejection of my motion was based on the notion that the ERC funds “Bottom-Up” research: It does not specify focus areas or its funding objectives, nor does it consider beneficial impact on society as a funding criterion. In view of the transparency policies of the ERC, my motion and the responses of the governing body are in the domain of public information.**

**True, the European Commission does have “Top-Down”, focused funding programs, and several of those have been directed in part against the pandemic. However, they form a largely uncoordinated cluster of initiatives, with limited emphasis on blue-sky, breakthrough discovery. True, the ERC rightfully prides itself as the agency that funds the elites of excellence in the sciences, based on the investigators’ choices of what projects they wish to submit for funding. Yet, in my idealistic fantasies, I thought that at times like these, the very best should pick up their best weapons, and go to the frontier, to the front-lines, to defeat this formidable enemy. I argued that this was not the time for scientific governance to worry excessively about the subtleties of the distinctions between Bottom-Up versus Top-Down research, or whether all scientific sectors would**

**benefit similarly from a broad initiative on Covid-19. So, I was clearly disappointed, and deeply disturbed, by the unanimous rejection.**

**My disappointment was partially relieved, when President von der Leyen personally reached out asking for my input on how the pandemic might be addressed. Over a few days, I developed a plan, over several iterations, to which she contributed substantial directives. The very fact that I worked directly with her created an internal political thunderstorm. The proposal was passed on to different layers of European Commission administration, where I believe disintegrated upon impact. I have been extremely disappointed by the European response to Covid-19, for what pertains to the complete absence of coordination of health care policies among member states, the recurrent opposition to cohesive financial support initiatives, the pervasive one-sided border closures, and the marginal scale of synergistic scientific initiatives.**

**I am afraid that I have seen enough of both the governance of science, and the political operations at the European Union. In these three long months, I have indeed met many excellent and committed individuals, at different levels of the organization of the ERC and the EC. However, I have lost faith in the system itself. And now the times require decisive, focused, and committed actions – a call to responsibility for all those that have an aspiration to make a difference against this devastating tragedy. So, may I take this opportunity to offer my sincere, and humble gratitude for the opportunity to be part of the European system for this time period, which proved to be simultaneously too brief, and yet too long.**

**Now it is time for me to return to the frontier, to the frontlines of the fight against Covid-19, with real resources and responsibilities, away from offices in Brussels, where my political skills are clearly inadequate, and again at the true service of those who need new medical solutions. So far, despite my formal title, my real role has been to serve as an advisor to the European Commission. Following my departure, I will be honored and happy to continue to provide my most conscientious advice, in a public and transparent manner, for free, and without the need for misleading, high-sounding titles, if Europe or anyone else wishes to ask.**