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THE EU RESPONSE TO THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

ACHIEVING RELEVANCE, MOBILISING SOLIDARITY AND PREPARING FOR THE FUTURE

On March 27th, 2020, the EU's School of Transnational Governance gathered eighteen reputed social scientists, public health experts, and policy makers¹ in a virtual workshop to discuss the short and medium-term implications of the COVID-19 pandemic on the European Union (EU). The crisis' impact already reverberates deeply and widely in the European political sphere, social fabric and economic architecture. In spite of health being an exclusive Member State competence, EU institutions have been asked to respond to the immediate health threat presented by the contagion and to foresee and address consequences for the European economy and key policy areas of the Union, from the monetary union to the free movement of people.

This policy brief documents the contributions of the participants to the workshop, starting with an exchange on the acutely unfolding health crisis, moving onto a broader analysis of the situation from various policy and disciplinary perspectives and ending with a discussion of operative recommendations. The proposals included in this brief, however, do not necessarily reflect the opinion of all participants and were not formally endorsed at the workshop.

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The opinions of the authors represent personal opinions and do not represent the position or opinion of the European University Institute

¹ See list of participants at the end

PART 1: THE UNFOLDING HEALTH CRISIS

The discussion kicked off with a wide-ranging discussion on the efforts and shortcomings of the European response in containing the COVID-19 pandemic, starting with the outbreak of the crisis in Italy in late February. In this initial phase, EU Member States and institutions seem to have underestimated the crisis, holding on in public to the narrative of an “Italian problem” and life as usual.

A workshop participant familiar with EU discussions stated that even after health ministers of several EU Member States had acknowledged the gravity of the unfolding crisis, they were unable to overcome the reluctance of their respective governments to start cancelling mass events or limiting public mobility in densely populated areas. The unfolding crisis further underscored the lack of agreement on the sharing or joint procurement of protective personal equipment (PPE), ventilators, and diagnostic kits. The initial response at the political level, both nationally and EU-wide, underscored the absence of a unified chain of command, the lack of a communication strategy, a persistent underestimation of the evidence already available (“optimistic bias”, in the words of one workshop participant).

Public health experts had predicted such scenarios and warned of a lack of preparedness on the national and international level based on the experiences of the SARS pandemic in 2002/03, the pandemic flu of 2009 and the outbreak of MERS in 2015. The assessments popularised by U.S. philanthropist Bill Gates in 2015 reflect widely-held views among virologists and related expert communities. His proposals – from intensification and coordination of research and data collection, to political coordination, from improving the risk assessment to building a supply infrastructure for urgently needed medical goods – offer to this day the most comprehensive blueprint for national and international responses to

a pandemic contagion.²

However, the record of the COVID-19 contagion in terms of coordination among European and national scientific and crisis response authorities has not been satisfactory. More promising is the global interaction, as testified by the now weekly exchanges among some EU and non-EU scientific advisors and the scientific advisor to the White House, Kelvin Droegemeier, which are including a growing number of participants from countries worldwide. Information-sharing at this level is not only useful to update on progress on anything from testing to clinical trials and a timely reporting of progress. Scientific advisors in this phase also play a crucial role in harmonising the political response and building public awareness and support on the need for drastic actions that appear socially unacceptable.

While a more effective cure for COVID-19, and prophylactic treatments, might be available in the coming months, a vaccination is not likely before the winter of 2021. Against this background, only strict social dis-

tancing measures such as those implemented by South Korea, Taiwan, Singapore and Israel, combined with a substantial scaling up of testing and tracking of the contagion can prevent excessive pressure on public health systems and allow a certain degree of economic activity to continue and return to at least some normal form. Given the danger of repeated waves of infection effective, coordination among countries in their exit from the stricter containing strategies is key.

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² Bill Gates, Innovation for Pandemics, in: *The New England Journal of Medicine* (378) 2018, 2057-2060 (URL: <https://www.nejm.org/doi/full/10.1056/NEJMp1806283>), and Bill Gates, Responding to Covid-19 - A Once-in-a-Century Pandemic?, published at: *nejm.org* on 28 February 2020 (URL: <https://www.nejm.org/doi/full/10.1056/NEJMp2003762>)

PART 2: ANALYSIS OF THE EU RESPONSE

The analysis departed from a threefold observation. First, despite health not being an EU competence, public opinion across Europe was critical of the EU's present role (especially so in countries currently hit the hardest by the crisis, like Italy

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Second, a perceived lack of solidarity among EU Member States in the face of a symmetric external shock is undermining confidence in the EU, which itself appeared ill-equipped to react to a crisis that requires rapid responses. Third, the lack of reliable and comparable data complicates evidence-based and coordinated decision-making.

The analysis presented by participants can be divided in five main areas: health policy, economic policy, the role of the State, the EU and the contributions of social sciences.

2.1: Health Policy

Several participants stressed that the current health crisis was aggravated by the rationalization measures with which some European states had trimmed their public health systems. The outsourcing of PPE production, cutting back on health personnel and reduction of hospital capacity created vulnerabilities that were not compensated by building an adequate emergency response infrastructure.

At the same time, while some specific needs in the current crisis, such as for the simultaneous availability of ventilators in great numbers, were difficult to foresee, sound planning, if the risk had not been ignored until too late, could have prepared ways in which additional health personnel could be trained and mobilised at short notice, hospital capacities increased and production capacities freed to supply essential medical equipment and medication. In addition, the export bans and confiscations of medical equipment imposed by Member States disrupted the supply of critical goods and risked aggravating the health crisis.

The efforts by the European Commission to lift such measures within the EU have mostly been effective.

The individual problems that countries are facing today seemed to suggest that health planning should aim for an optimal scale of autonomy in terms of ensuring sufficient emergency supplies and production capacities on the national or EU level. In this respect, information gathering, joint acquisition of certain medical equipment reserves and coordination on the European level should facilitate division of labour and a rational use of available resources that can increase national resilience to emergency health crisis.

Given the risk of returning waves of infection with SARS-CoV-2, steps in which countries will emerge from the lockdown and gradually restart public life, mobility and economic activity need to be coordinated.

2.2: Economic Policy

There was widespread recognition of the extraordinary and quick measures taken in the EU by Member States and EU institutions since the outbreak of the crisis. These included the temporary suspension of the free movement of people, the public debts ceiling, and the stability pact. Further measures included the European Central Bank (ECB) action to guarantee liquidity, notably through its 750 billion euro Pandemic Emergency Purchase Programme (PEPP)³, and the setting up by the European Commission of a Corona-Response-Investment-Initiative freeing a total of 37 billion EUR from other EU budget lines.

At the same time, participants were clear that these initiatives could only be part of a broader EU response to the economic crisis that will unfold. The very nature of this crisis could fundamentally change people's behaviour, economic patterns and trade relations. To countries that depend heavily on tourism, like Spain, Italy, Portugal or Greece, limits to free movement pose a systemic threat to a large part of their economies and require long-term risk mitigation measures. Furthermore, in highly indebted countries, the current national fiscal efforts will prove to be unsustainable.

Only days after nine EU Member States had promoted the idea of issuing so-called "Eurobonds" but which had been rejected at the European Council by the other heads of state and government, workshop participants discussed the issue of debt mutualisation. It was recognised that the commitment undertaken by the ECB goes a long way to guarantee Member States' access to the markets at favourable conditions and, de facto, involves a form of shared risk and solidarity in the Euro area. The resources of the European Stability Mechanism (ESM) also work in the same direction.

However, views were not unanimous on the effectiveness of the ESM, at least without reforming it so as not to impose conditionality in current circumstances and/or its current 2% GDP limit on the financial support it can give to Member States.

Some participants argued that the nature of the current crisis required the EU to undertake transfers in the form of grants instead of simply helping Member States to assume further debt. From this perspective, the EU should develop an ambitious financial assistance programme directed to companies and citizens (without increasing State debts). A first step would be an unemployment insurance mechanism.⁴ This would very likely require a much more ambitious Multi-Annual Financial Framework than what seems to be on the cards. Using the EU's enhanced cooperation mechanism to issue "Eurobonds" was largely rejected as ineffective (due to a lack of support from countries like Germany) and as deepening cleavages among Member States rather than demonstrating solidarity.

Many participants stressed the need for the EU to design economic instruments that will assist Member States effectively in confronting the economic consequence of the crisis. Uncoordinated measures that reinforce pre-existing imbalances will inflict lasting damage to European economic integration. Hope was expressed that Member States could coalesce around some form of European insurance fund to which Member States could contribute in symmetric ways, while releasing money asymmetrically to those economies in greatest difficulty to recover from the crisis.

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³ See the ECB's dedicated website, URL: https://www.ecb.europa.eu/home/search/html/pandemic_emergency_purchase_programme_pepp.en.html.

⁴ In the meantime, the President of the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen, has presented the so-called SURE initiative, a solidarity instrument that mobilises up to 100 billion EUR to support workers and businesses whose income has come under threat, see the Press Release on 2 April, URL: https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/IP_20_582.

Many speakers underscored that it was high time to prepare an exit strategy not only from the health crisis but also from the economic lockdown. There is need for plans on when and how to get people back to work, guarantee their safety and re-ignite economies. Further consideration was needed of the difficult task, and moral dilemma, of weighing acceptable levels of health-risk prevention against the value of restoring economic activity.

Economists and social scientists had not yet been systematically included in the scientific advisory machinery on which governments as well as public discourse relied at the moment, but they have an important role to play in designing socially acceptable economic exit strategies and recovery plans.

2.3: Role and Future of the State

One participant described the events in recent weeks as the strongest display of public power peacetime Europe had ever seen. A number of implications were discussed linked to the assertive role governments had taken on in enacting emergency measures.⁵

“Events in recent weeks have shown the strongest display of public power in peacetime Europe”

On the positive side, a successful crisis management in Europe could affirm the strength of the social insurance and national service approach prevalent in European countries (in contrast

to the tradition of a small state e.g. in the U.S.). In those EU countries where public trust in politicians tended to be low, such state action could have a “convincing effect”.

In terms of states losing more and more control to markets and sharing power with entities removed from democratic oversight such as transnational corporations (TNCs), the crisis could once more lead to a “comeback of the state”, similar to what Europe had witnessed in the wake of the sovereign-debt and banking crisis or the migration crisis in 2015.

On the downside, however, the severity of the

measures seemed to elicit a revival of nationalist sentiments, expressed in politicians’ appeals to national unity and even national solutions to the crisis. While calls for national unity, especially in times of crisis, are not negative per se, national governments can easily succumb to narratives of blaming Europe. Even more serious is the danger that the crisis pushed certain European countries further down an illiberal path, as demonstrated by the emergency measures recently approved in Hungary.

Finally, the current situation pitched democracies in direct competition with authoritarian regimes. States like China appeared to be more effective in combating the crisis drawing on an arsenal of social and administrative controls. Despite doubts about the accuracy of the information provided by the Chinese government on the spread and consequences of the virus, to some observers the Chinese social credit system may suddenly seem advantageous. Europe needs to find a suitable narrative that boosts the value of keeping the delicate balance between freedom and security and counter China’s narrative of “generosity”.

⁵It is worth taking note, however, that relations between central governments and governments on the regional and city level have at times been adversarial in some countries thus showing also limits of power of the central government.

2.4: EU Measures and the Crisis' Impact on European Integration

The conundrum of high public expectations and the absence of formal competence for the EU in the field of health was a returning theme at the workshop. So was the phenomenon that Josep Borrell, High Representative of the EU for Foreign and Security Policy, has recently described as “global battle of narratives” in which different global political actors indulge in self-appraisal and heap criticism on others.⁶ Under these circumstances, the EU has to contribute to the solution of acute problems as well as defend the achievements and values of European integration.

Among the most immediate measures the EU could take is enhancing its role as a knowledge hub and learning platform. The haphazard crisis responses of governments offer laboratories where one can observe best practices as much as failure and mistakes. The experiences each Member State is accumulating can be put to work for the community that faces similar challenges.

Related to this and drawing on its rich experience in technical and scientific cooperation, the EU should assume a leading role in collecting data linked to epidemiological risks and crises. The workshop also tabled institutional adjustments that could prove helpful in areas of civil protection as well as in the field of crisis foresight and monitoring. Last but not least, the EU's potential for providing policy guidance and the EU's role in diminishing negative externality effects of national decisions and enhancing positive ones was stressed.

Seeking a more fundamental approach to enhancing Europe's future resilience to systemic crisis, participants exchanged views on a treaty reform. Using this crisis to scale up the ambition of the “Conference on the Future of Europe” in this respect could provide an opportunity to review decision making in the EU, the distribution of competences and their democratic legitimisa-

tion. The goal could be to use the crisis to refresh the normative power of a democratic Europe. Naturally, much will depend on the actual EU response to the crisis and its perception by EU citizens. Not all were convinced that this would be the right opportunity for a new “constitutional” effort in the EU.

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It was widely shared that the COVID-19 crisis puts to the test some of the core values the EU is founded on, such as the rule of law, respect for individual rights, and protection of democracy.

Some of the current emergency measures even have the potential to damage core EU achievements like the single market and the freedom of movement. Participants therefore stressed the importance of building a European narrative based on the notions of reciprocity and solidarity. If the EU seemed to be on the defensive in the battle of narratives, it was high time to develop a comprehensive and pro-active communication strategy for the short- and medium term to push back both against resurgent nationalism and a perceived weakness compared with authoritarian states.

Widening the perspective to global security policies, the battle of narratives held important implications also for Europe's position in a global great power competition with the main actors being China, the U.S. and Russia. Europe has to stand up against EU-critical spinning that seeks to weaken the EU's legitimacy internally as well as the EU's position as foreign policy actor.

As a concrete step, the EU should start preparing an adequate response to the humanitarian crisis

⁶ Josep Borrell, *The Coronavirus pandemic and the new world it is creating*, 24 March 2020, URL: https://eeas.europa.eu/delegations/china/76401/eu-hrvp-josep-borrell-coronavirus-pandemic-and-new-world-it-creating_en.

foreseeable in the developing world.

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It was recommended to review the EU's strategy on Africa in order to take account of the conse-

quence the global COVID-19 crisis will have on Africa as well as on its cooperation with Europe. It is also noteworthy that on 31 March, France, the United Kingdom and Germany officially confirmed that INSTEX, a mechanism set up in January 2019 to allow for the continuation of legitimate trade between Europe and Iran, has concluded its first transaction by facilitating the export of medical goods to Iran.⁷

2.5: Social Sciences and the Policy Making Process

While the hard sciences are presently at the forefront of the political response to the COVID-19 crisis, social scientists had an important mission in, as one participant put it, "enlightening public policy". Social scientists and institutions like the European University Institute should be in the position to put a series of reflections and analytical tools helpful to confront the crisis⁸ at the disposal of politicians and citizens.

Among the first tasks of social sciences should be to promote long-term thinking in spite of the present necessity of urgent responses. In a moment likely to trigger profound changes, long-term thinking could lay the ground for building a more sustainable eco-system for emergency response mechanisms. It could better prepare political decision-making by advising on processes or assessing long-term consequences. It could provide education for decision makers to better understand the complexities of the systems they are dealing with, such as agriculture, under the condition of globalisation.

The current crisis also raises several questions that social scientists should seek to confront. Comparing, for example, the pandemic crisis with the climate debate, it remains puzzling why people seem able to accept a complete shutdown better than making comparatively small habitual adjust-

ments for the sake of climate protection. Similarly puzzling is why governments find it easier to agree on an ad-hoc basis on a national lockdown than reaching consensus on climate goals in cascading rounds of international negotiations.

Among the first tasks of social sciences should be to promote long-term thinking in spite of the present necessity of urgent responses.

Of more immediate relevance was the widely shared view that social scientists have several communicative functions in the current crisis. Social scientists have developed

a whole of field of studies around types of crisis and how governments and society learn in a crisis and through a crisis. They can formulate and appraise policy options in the domain of risk regulation as well as other policies. They should contribute to the social acceptability of drastic measures by explaining them to the public. They can also add differentiation or reveal misinformation where ideological, populist or other propagandistic narratives entice public opinion. There was also a discussion on the extent to which social scientists should avoid the use of certain language to describe systemic crises (e.g. as being "existential" for the Union) as such language can, itself, contribute to and aggravate the crisis.

⁷ Press Release of the German Federal Foreign Office, 31 March 2020, URL: <https://www.auswaertiges-amt.de/en/newsroom/news/instex-transaction/2329744>.

⁸ For an example of a project supported by the School of Transnational Governance of the EUI, see the online platform "Covid-19 Research Conduit", URL: <http://www.covid-19-research-conduit.org/>.

Most concretely, however, participants identified a broad need of knowledge on people's sentiments, attitudes and expectations. Rich narrative analysis, ethnography and public opinion research can tell us what people expect from whom, how and why in terms of crisis management.

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Social science research can also tell us how people discover and live practices of crisis management and solidarity during these days. This would be crucial with a view to determining what people understand or expect as European solidarity.⁹ Granular knowledge is also needed among people that are in a situation of lockdown. Their experience can provide valuable insights for the preparation of future emergency responses. Their views on the public administration, national government and Europe, in turn can help us understand the political costs, risks and opportunities of current crisis responses.

PART 3: OPERATIVE RECOMMENDATIONS¹⁰

Achieving Relevance: EU as Knowledge Hub in the Crisis

1. EU as learning platform: As one of the most immediate tasks, the EU needs to establish a mechanism for sharing among all Member States the experiences that countries are currently accumulating. This exchange could cover crisis management (early responses, crisis peaks, exit plans), economic measures, administrative experiences and public communication. It would include also a feedback cycle from Member States on the results of the measures taken. The EU could not only lead such exchange among governments and national administrations, but also support transnational expert networks and scientific coordination.
2. EU's role in data access and management: To enable evidence based, rational decision making, the EU should initiate a systematic collection and provision (as much as possible in compliance with the open access principle) of data and ensure the data's reliability, comparability, accessibility and its compliance with privacy settings. This could be done through enhancing the role of the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control (ECDC) or by defining other modes of data collection and management in cooperation with Member States and the relevant stakeholder communities.

⁹ The EUI's EUGOV Project will shortly run a public opinion survey that specifically includes questions the notion of European solidarity.

¹⁰ These recommendations do not necessarily reflect the views of all participants.

Mobilising EU Solidarity: Economic Measures for Crisis Mitigation

3. A strong priority is the need to guarantee Member States' continued access to appropriate financing in the markets and the need not to make that conditional on the rules that applied during the financial crisis. There are, however, divergent views on how to achieve that. Options vary from employing existing instruments and strategies (ECB and ESM with its current framework) to use the ESM but under reformed rules or to debt issued by the EU (EU Bonds).
4. As a concrete step to mitigating the economic consequences of the crisis, the EU should set up an unemployment insurance mechanism or, even more immediately, a temporary liquidity income assistance to help European companies to pay wages in relation to the losses they incur due to the crisis. Justification for this latter instrument can be found in the need to protect the internal market from the disruptions caused by the health crisis and its asymmetric impact on the economic sectors that must depend from mobility.
5. With view to the pending agreement on the EU's multiannual financial framework (MFF) the EU quickly needs to agree on how to relocate resources in order to prioritise recovery and growth from 2021 onwards. This needs to be followed by a renewed discussion on ways to create additional revenue to the EU, e.g. through taxation instruments (carbon tax, digital tax, financial transaction tax).

Orchestrating the Exit: The EU's Role in Laying Out Exit Strategies

6. Going hand in hand with the experience sharing among Member States at the EU level, the EU should begin mapping possible European and global exit scenarios, prepare guidelines for EU Member States to sequence their exit strategies and ensure as much coordination among Member States as possible. While there cannot be a “one-size-fits-all”, such guidelines could nevertheless outline various plausible pathways.

Preparing for the Future: An Institutional Set-up for Preparedness

7. The EU should reinforce the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control and enable it to systematically alert for systemic health and other risks. The ECDC, or any new independent institution set up to this end, could define current risk levels and prompt government action according to changing risk levels. Governments would react based on previously defined preventive plans.

8. The EU needs to increase its capacities to coordinate large scale civil protection measures. Following the model of the UN Global Service Centre, the EU Civil Protection Mechanism could be upgraded in order to have spare capacities ready in terms of manpower, logistics, procurement, communications and IT-services.
9. Drawing on its expertise as global regulatory power, the EU should play a leading role at the international level in promoting such regulations that facilitate international cooperation in global crisis foresight, crisis prevention and emergency responses.

Defending the EU-Values: Resilience and a Comprehensive Communication Strategy

10. The current crisis presents a further challenge to the European democratic model and to European integration. It is of utmost importance that the EU vigilantly defends its foundational values (e.g. the rule of law, respect for individual rights, protection of democracy) and EU core achievements (e.g. the single market, including the freedom of movement).
11. The EU response thus has to include a comprehensive communication strategy that pro-actively promotes the advantages of European integration in the resolution of crisis and combats narratives that picture integration as an obstacle to it. Such a communication strategy needs to offer alternatives to the emotional back-sliding into a nationalism. The EU should furthermore seek public opinion surveys (complemented by other forms of social scientific investigation) into the experience of people in lockdown situations and into current threat perceptions. It should equally investigate people's expectations and assessment regarding the role of the EU in the crisis management, including perceptions of solidarity or the lack thereof.

Defining a EU Foreign Policy Response: The Geopolitical Dimension of the Pandemic

12. A “geopolitical” Europe needs to be aware of the foreign policy implications the global COVID-19 crisis and the emerging battle of narratives. As a concrete step underlining the EU's ambition as impactful foreign policy player, the EU should start preparations for an adequate response to the humanitarian and economic crisis foreseeable in the developing world. One element of this should be reviewing the EU's strategy on Africa to better take into account the consequences the crisis will have in Africa.

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