



A brave, post–COVID-19 Europe

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Salome Samadashvili

Abstract

This article addresses the challenges to the EU's future posed by the novel coronavirus disease (COVID-19). Its main argument is that if the EU finds the political will and resources to address these challenges, the crisis posed by COVID-19 can be turned into an opportunity to strengthen the Union. To develop this argument, the article responds to the criticisms of the EU's response to COVID-19 voiced so far. It assesses how justified these criticisms are, as well as how they have been manipulated for anti-EU propaganda purposes. It reviews how—given the economic, political and institutional structures of the EU—COVID-19 presents a unique challenge, and what the EU's response has been thus far, from the financial and economic, as well as security perspectives. In particular, focusing on the newly published *EU Security Union Strategy*, the article reviews how the novel coronavirus disease has impacted European thinking about security. The article suggests that the way forward is to address the institutional gaps which have limited the EU's response to the challenge of COVID-19 and to invest more resources in countering propaganda efforts that focus on this response with the aim of undermining the Union.

Keywords

COVID-19, Euroscepticism, European security, Security Union, EU Global Strategy, COVID-19 propaganda, EU response to the pandemic

Introduction

In a world where conventional threats to public safety and international security are increasingly taking a back seat, the novel coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic has opened a new chapter in the discussion on how to address modern security challenges. Developing an analytical framework for addressing the challenge that COVID-19 presents to the world is difficult. There are no good analogies. While this is certainly not the

Corresponding author:

S. Samadashvili, 5 Vladimer Gabashvili Street, Apt. 25, Tbilisi, Georgia, 6210.
Email: Salome.Samadashvili@gmail.com



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first pandemic facing the human race, neither the Great Plague nor the Spanish Flu, nor any other recorded pandemic in mankind's history, has taken place in a world which looked anything like the one we live in today. Modern economic, technological and social structures have both their advantages and disadvantages in facing the socio-economic consequences of the pandemic.

A clear advantage is the cyber world, which has, to a large extent, sheltered society from the economic and social consequences of the pandemic. Online education, work, access to services and socialising have quickly and effectively replaced the normal physical environment where the same activities take place under regular conditions. This has made social distancing both more feasible and a less burdensome experience. It has also saved at least some industries and jobs from the economic disaster brought on by the pandemic. As global experience has made clear, those countries which have been able to enforce the strict social-distancing rules have been more successful in limiting the spread of the pandemic. If online and IT-based technologies had not been in place, social distancing would have been much less successful. The economic consequences of the pandemic might also have been more devastating. The level of scientific knowledge needed for the development of the vaccine and treatment is also a reason for hope.

In terms of disadvantages, the world had never been more mobile than it was in the winter of 2019/2020 at the time of the outbreak. Travel, a luxury reserved for the wealthy and select few at the times of the other known pandemics, has become a massively consumed good, both for business and leisure. Yet travel has proved to be conducive to the wider spread of the virus. In an increasingly mobile world, the immobility brought about by the pandemic has changed life as we know it. Without a vaccine and effective treatment, we do not know when, or even if, the world will return to anything approximating the pre-COVID era. Thus the industries linked with travel and tourism, transportation, entertainment and so on, which constitute a very large part of the economy in many countries, face an uncertain future. Many might never recover from the blow. Many are likely to disappear, with the resulting economic and social consequences.

This is why in analysing the policy response to COVID-19, there is no good historical reference we can rely on. In a way we have to invent the 'brave new, post-COVID-19' world. And the EU needs to consider its role in that world. In a 1959 speech, John F. Kennedy famously said: 'When written in Chinese, the word "crisis" is composed of two characters—one represents danger and one represents opportunity' (Kennedy 1959).

Like other crises, COVID-19 has revealed both the shortcomings of the EU's capacity to respond to the crisis posed by the pandemic and subsequent economic collapse, and the resilience of the Union. This article argues that if the EU follows through on the European Commission's July 2020 *EU Security Union Strategy* (European Commission 2020c), focusing on the many security aspects linked with COVID-19; pursues a policy of solidarity towards its neighbours; and learns the lessons on how to make its budgetary and financial rules more flexible, the crisis of COVID-19 presents an opportunity. The

EU's institutional and budgetary capacity will require strengthening to address this challenge. If the EU finds the necessary political will, there is an opportunity to strengthen the Union internally, as well as increase its geopolitical dimension. This article reviews the main criticisms of the EU's response to COVID-19 and how the European public has assessed this response. It then proceeds to analyse the actual policy decisions taken in response to the crisis and whether or not these justify the criticism received by the Union. Finally, it looks into the policy options for the future, specifically focusing on the security dimension of the EU's response, and highlights the opportunities to use the response to COVID-19 to strengthen the EU's geopolitical dimension, countering the efforts of Eurosceptics to use the pandemic as yet another excuse to attack the Union.

Why was the EU criticised for its response to COVID-19?

Article 2 of the Treaty on EU inscribes the notion of solidarity as a fundamental principle of the EU. The EU Charter of Fundamental Rights and Article 222 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the EU address the same principle. Thus, it is fair to say that the response of the EU to any crisis, including the COVID-19 pandemic, should be evaluated through the lens of solidarity. In this respect, the response of the EU has been much criticised. The supposed lack of solidarity in the EU's response to the challenge has been seized on as an opportunity for anti-EU propaganda by the Russian and Chinese media. For example, Russia claimed that Italy requested its help in the face of a lack of EU solidarity during the pandemic and made a show of providing this assistance. According to EU vs. Disinfo, a European watchdog against fake news, pro-Kremlin media outlets such as the Sputnik news agency and Internet 'troll factories' have been key in circulating false information about the pandemic (van der Made 2020). As part of its assault on the EU, Russia has clearly perceived the outbreak of the pandemic as an opportunity to weaken support for the EU and NATO in Europe.

Populists in the EU have also spotted an opportunity to trump up, for their own political use, accusations that the EU lacked solidarity in responding to the pandemic. Since the pandemic has exposed the fragility of open borders,

COVID-19 offers a chance for populist leaders to utilise extended state powers in a way that undermines the rule of law and democracy. The solution(s) these populists will advocate is a return to strict border controls . . . it represents an opportunity for populist parties to become more popular within their respective countries as their rise mirrors the increasing number of border closures on a scale not seen since the Second World War. (Mason 2020)

Since the populist and Eurosceptic political parties are often generously supported by Russia (Klapisis 2015), COVID-19 has provided ample ground for both to advance their interests.

Indeed, developing a coordinated response based on the principles of solidarity has not been an easy task for the EU. It has required member states to coordinate on many key aspects of policy. This response has not only included access to medical supplies and medical care, but also freedom of movement across borders, repatriation of EU citizens,

mitigations to limit the economic consequences of the pandemic and so on. It is no surprise that the EU has been more successful in some areas than others. The varied levels of success have often been due to the objective reality facing the institutional framework of the EU. The EU's response to the pandemic has been hampered by the fact that the Union has very limited treaty-based powers when it comes to health policy—health is primarily a national competence—so the bulk of the responsibility for the EU's response has inevitably fallen on the member states. In some areas—such as health-sector management, disaster relief and business regulations—the EU simply does not have the capacity for a unified or solidarity-based response. It is simply beyond the EU's statutory powers. In other areas, while the Lisbon Treaty has strengthened the competences of the EU, the Union lacks the cohesion, rapidity and flexibility which can be provided by national governments. Finally, budget constraints are another handicap on the EU's rapid response to disasters such as the COVID-19 pandemic. This constraint is due not only to limited funds—after all the EU budget is only 1% of the EU's total gross domestic product—but also to the way the budget process works, which is a lengthy, bureaucratic procedure that determines the budget for a seven-year-long cycle. The complicated decision-making process, which involves negotiations between member states and often requires a consensus-based approach, has not made coordinating the unified EU response to the challenge of this pandemic any easier.

However, the public has little, if any patience for explanations as to why the bureaucratic machinery of the EU cannot deliver a rapid response to a disaster. This only strengthens negative public attitudes towards the EU. The most recent surveys conducted by Eurobarometer show that the majority of EU citizens (52%) who were aware of the EU response to the crisis were not satisfied with the measures that had been taken so far. Nearly 7 out of 10 respondents (69%) want a stronger role for the EU in fighting this crisis. In parallel almost 6 out of 10 respondents are dissatisfied with the solidarity shown between the EU member states during the pandemic. Around two-thirds of respondents agreed that the 'EU should have more competences to deal with crises such as the coronavirus pandemic.' The strong call for more EU competences and a more robustly coordinated EU response goes hand in hand with the dissatisfaction expressed by the majority of respondents concerning the solidarity between EU member states in fighting the coronavirus pandemic: 57% are unhappy with the current state of solidarity, while 22% are 'not satisfied at all' (Eurobarometer 2020, 21–22).

What this data shows us is that the way the EU responds to the challenge in the coming months will determine whether or not it can turn COVID-19 into an opportunity to strengthen public support for the EU and silence its critics.

Economic and financial stability measures

The Union is not in a bad place to start responding to this challenge. If we look deeper, the EU's response to this challenge has not been all that weak, nor has it shown a lack of solidarity, and it has certainly taken a multifaceted approach, tackling the problem from various angles. In terms of financial and economic stability, the EU took quick and active

measures. It granted flexibility to the EU's rules, which made it possible for national budgets to support economies and respond in a coordinated manner to the impact of COVID-19. A temporary state-aid framework was created to expedite public support to companies, while ensuring the necessary level playing field in the single market. In addition there was an extension of the framework to cover support for research, testing and production relevant to the fight against COVID-19.

The key challenge was mobilising the funds quickly and effectively, which the EU addressed by involving all key players. The Coronavirus Response Investment Initiative allowed the EU to quickly mobilise €37 billion, making available the cash reserved in the European Structural and Investment Funds (European Cluster Collaboration Platform 2020). The European Central Bank took measures to support liquidity and financing conditions, and launched the €750 billion Pandemic Emergency Purchase Programme, among other measures (European Central Bank 2020). Budget rules were adapted to provide flexibility, and measures to ensure financial stability, such as the release of capital buffers, were taken. The EU Emergency Support Instrument was also activated to help vulnerable health care systems and €3 billion was released from this (European Commission 2020b). Through strengthening the activities of the European Investment Bank and creating the Pandemic Crisis Support and other measures, the EU provided assistance to companies facing the crisis. Special instruments were created to support member states that were protecting employment, including SURE—the European instrument for temporary Support to mitigate Unemployment Risks in an Emergency—providing up to €100 billion in loans on favourable terms to member states. The Recovery Fund was created to help kick-start the economy (European Commission 2020d). In all, the EU has provided an impressive €4.2 trillion to measures to mitigate the financial and economic consequences of the pandemic (EU 2020).

It seems that the EU needs to do a better job of explaining to the public what it has done. It should invest more in educating them about the measures it has taken, as well as the consequences that could have followed the absence of such a response. If the EU does a better job of explaining to the public how sources of assistance, such as unemployment relief or business support, relate to the assistance provided by the EU, this would certainly help to improve the image of the Union.

Rethinking European security: a new strategy for the EU Security Union

COVID-19 has also had an impact on the way the EU thinks about its security. The recently published document outlining the EU's approach to security—the *EU Security Union Strategy*—gives a lot of attention to COVID-19. The document states that the COVID-19 crisis has reshaped the notions of safety and security threats and the corresponding policies. It highlights the need to guarantee security in both the physical and the digital environments and underlines the importance of open strategic autonomy for supply chains in terms of critical products, services, infrastructures and technologies. Equally, it reinforces the need to engage every sector and every individual in a common

effort to ensure that the EU is more prepared and resilient in the first place and has better tools to respond when needed. The COVID-19 crisis has also underlined how social divisions and uncertainties create security vulnerabilities. This increases the potential for more sophisticated and hybrid attacks by state and non-state actors, with vulnerabilities exploited through a mix of cyber-attacks, damage to critical infrastructure, disinformation campaigns and radicalisation of the political narrative (European Commission 2020e).

The document outlines a number of priorities for a more integrated approach to security—such as building capabilities and capacities for the early detection and prevention of and a rapid response to crises—since Europe needs to be more resilient to prevent, be protected from and withstand future shocks.

It needs to build capabilities and capacities for early detection and rapid response to security crises through an integrated and coordinated approach, both globally and through sector-specific initiatives (such as for the financial, energy, judiciary, law enforcement, healthcare, maritime, transport sectors) and building on existing tools and initiatives. (European Commission 2020c, 5)

The strategy also states that the Commission will come forward with proposals for a wide-ranging crisis management system within the EU, which could also be relevant to security. According to the document, crisis response should be focused on results and needs to define and apply the right rules and the right tools. It needs reliable strategic intelligence as the basis for EU security policies. Where EU legislation is required, it needs to be followed up so that it is implemented in full, to avoid fragmentation and leaving gaps that could be open to exploitation. The effective implementation of this strategy will also depend on securing appropriate funding. The new strategy will link all players in the public and private sectors in a common effort.

The *EU Security Union Strategy* stresses the notion of solidarity—in the first place this means more intense cooperation between member states, involving law enforcement, judicial and other public authorities, and EU institutions and agencies, to build the understanding and exchange needed to find common solutions. When outlining the strategic priorities, the document talks about protecting everyone in the EU, focusing on a future-proof security environment that includes aspects such as critical infrastructure protection and resilience. The EU's existing framework for the protection and resilience of critical infrastructure has not kept pace with the evolving risks. The Commission is looking into whether new frameworks for both physical and digital infrastructure could bring more consistency and a more coherent approach to ensuring the reliable provision of essential services (European Commission 2020c).

In addressing hybrid threats, the document makes clear that the COVID-19 crisis has produced more proof of the importance of responding to such threats, as several state and non-state actors have sought to instrumentalise the pandemic—in particular through the manipulation of the information environment and by challenging core infrastructures. These hybrid threats risk weakening social cohesion and undermining trust in EU

institutions and member states' governments. The EU approach to hybrid threats is set out in the 2016 Joint Framework (European Commission 2016) and the 2018 Joint Communication on bolstering hybrid resilience (European Commission 2018). Action at the EU level is underpinned by a sizeable toolbox covering the internal–external nexus based on a whole-of-society approach and on close cooperation with strategic partners, notably NATO and the G7. A report on the implementation of the EU approach to hybrid threats, which was published alongside the *EU Security Union Strategy*, and the mapping presented in parallel to the strategy will be used by the Commission and the European External Action Service to create a restricted online platform for member states to refer to on counter-hybrid tools and measures at the EU level (European Commission 2020c).

Explaining this complicated strategic communication to the public, and highlighting the concerns of EU citizens, will be crucial for rallying support for a stronger and more integrated post–COVID-19 Europe.

Geopolitical dimension

How the EU responds to the crisis on the global stage will also be an important measure of its success. From the very outbreak of the crisis, it was clear that the influential players on the world stage had started jockeying for their positions in the post-pandemic world. Pending the results of the next elections in the US, it is hard to judge whether the country's isolationist policy, which was taken to the next level by President Trump's decision to withdraw funding from the World Health Organization, will continue. But what is clear is that Russia and Turkey, as well as China, perceive the crisis as an opportunity to strengthen their geopolitical interests. Thus, how the EU acts under the circumstances will define whether or not the idea of a 'geopolitical Europe' (Von der Leyen 2019), as championed by the Commission's current president, Ursula Von Der Leyen, can be realised.

American absenteeism and its rivalry with China offer an opportunity for Europe, as do the domestic problems in Turkey and Russia, neither of which has the resilience of the European economy. As a multinational entity, the EU also has the opportunity to set the example of transnational cooperation as the right response to the post–COVID-19 world. While currently the European public, which is focused on its internal problems, has little interest in how the Union acts on the global stage, this should not permit European policymakers to miss an opportunity. As the countries in the European neighbourhood with their weak economies and social structures struggle with the post-pandemic recovery, how they perceive the role of the EU will be an important measure of the EU's capacity to project its power. So far the EU has been rather generous, setting aside €960 million for its neighbours in the east (*EU Neighbours* 2020) and €2.1 billion for those in the south (European Commission 2020a). However, how the EU responds to the challenges facing its neighbours will not only be measured in terms of the financial assistance it provides. As the economic crisis in many of these countries is likely to deepen political and social divisions, lead to more polarisation and possibly undermine the framework for

institutional governance, how the EU helps them to overcome these challenges through policy and political support will also be a measure of its success.

Conclusion

The post-crisis world could be a cold, lonely place. It could also be a place where the most noble human virtue—solidarity, which is also the foundation of the European project—prosper. The EU lifted the European nations from the ashes of the Second World War. It can now rise to the challenge of creating a brave, new post-COVID-19 Europe, for both its own benefit and that of the world. Some of the steps taken so far and the strategies outlined have made a good start, but they need dedicated and competent implementation for the success of post-COVID-19 Europe. Specifically, the EU needs to address the institutional and budgetary constraints identified by its response to COVID-19 and make the necessary changes to remove limits to its capacity to respond to cross-border threats such as the pandemic. Finally, it needs to invest more resources in highlighting its success stories in addressing the challenges in order to bolster public confidence that ‘more Europe’ is the only way forward.

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Author biography



Salome Samadashvili is a Member of Parliament for the United National Movement party in Georgia and deputy chair of the Committee on Foreign Relations. She is a former head of Georgia's Mission to the EU and a non-resident fellow of the Martens Centre, as well as a lecturer and Ph.D. candidate at the University of Georgia.