

European View

The Great Reset: What COVID-19 Means for Europe

EDITORIAL

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Mikuláš Dzurinda

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Mikuláš Dzurinda

COVID-19 has profoundly impacted Europe in the past months. Battling the multiple waves of this pandemic, all EU member states have faced many challenges. Simultaneously, the EU has had to grapple with long-standing trends in the world—both those that have intensified and those that have remained unchanged since the outbreak of the virus but are still pressing. We do not know when the crisis will be over, and yet we must face the consequences of the pandemic and learn its lessons.

This issue of the *European View* reflects on the time of the COVID-19 pandemic up until now: the challenges that the EU and countries around the world have faced in this time of crisis, and the lessons that can be drawn from these challenges. Before I highlight the analyses and conclusions of the expert contributors to this issue, I will share some of my personal insights on how the pandemic has reshaped Europe, how it has highlighted new priorities and new challenges, and the lessons we can draw from the EU's response to the crisis thus far.

Since the pandemic struck Europe in March of this year, it has disrupted the world as we know it. It has made us aware that we are all fundamentally vulnerable, whether rich, poor, old or young, and that this is equally true in all EU member states. The ensuing crisis revealed that the future of work is already here. In various sectors, a widespread transition to working from home took place to limit the spread of COVID-19, and ensured many people kept their jobs during the crisis. Furthermore, challenges in battling the pandemic brought to light the need to reduce the West's dependency on China when it comes to, for example, the pharmaceutical industry and technology. Each of these changed paradigms underscores the fact that we ought to invest in a fundamentally different post-COVID Europe, rather than restoring Europe to mirror pre-COVID times.

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The EU, after the pandemic, ought to have learned from the challenges it has faced during the crisis. One of the major lessons the pandemic has taught us is that we need to think globally, but act locally, relying on effective cooperation. Solidarity and subsidiarity remain the basic pillars of the EU and should be highly regarded under any circumstances. Furthermore, we need to reform decision-making in order to make decisions faster and more effectively in the future, especially in those areas which are best dealt with at the EU level, such as foreign policy, defence, security and the most pressing elements of irregular migration. Additionally, we need to learn from COVID-19's sudden detrimental economic impact by implementing structural reforms to our national economies, based on digitisation, automation, robotisation and AI. To achieve this, we need to build an effective and relevant infrastructure. Providing structural reforms and promoting the EU's values will make for a strong and durable post-COVID-19 EU.

The expert contributors to this issue of the *European View* each reflect on the COVID-19 pandemic and its consequences for the EU. Their articles propose directions for effective responses in future crises, strengthened relationships with other states and regions, and a durable approach to long-term challenges.

Multiple articles in this edition of the *European View* argue that COVID-19 could serve as an opportunity for positive change in the EU. Margherita Movarelli, for instance, argues that it could have beneficial effects for EU democracy. Her article discusses how the pandemic has weakened populist forces in the EU and emphasises the importance of good communication between the EU and its citizens. Eva Palacková sees the crisis as having created momentum for ensuring the EU's recovery benefits the environment as well. Goran Bandov focuses on Croatia's EU Presidency in the first half of 2020, discussing the challenges it faced due to the unexpected outbreak of COVID-19 and highlighting the achievements of the term despite these challenges. Constantine Arvanitopoulos reflects on how the pandemic has changed transatlantic relations and explores the possible benefits of strengthening cooperation on common challenges.

Other contributors to this issue consider the possible outcomes of the pandemic. Pepijn Bergsen notes that a trend towards a more protective state is emerging across both Europe and the political spectrum, and argues that the crisis caused by the pandemic represents a turning point. Salome Samadashvili presents the idea of a post-COVID-19 Europe that emerges stronger from the crisis on the condition that it addresses the institutional gaps that inhibited a successful initial response to the pandemic. Henri Vanhanen proposes in his article that the Finnish tradition of ensuring supplies for emergencies could serve as the model for an EU-level security of supply, making Europe better prepared for future crises. The article by Nad'a Kovalčíková and Ariane Tabatabai draws lessons from the infodemic that arose as a result of the pandemic and provides clear proposals for how states can respond to the disinformation threat now and in the post-COVID-19 EU.

COVID-19 has also deeply impacted developments outside of the EU, as well as the Union's relationships with other states and regions. The article by Héli Slim reflects on electoral processes on the African continent during the pandemic and the consequences of

their outcomes for EU–African Union relations and elections elsewhere in the world. Magnus Norell analyses the effect of the pandemic on the Middle East and North Africa region. He concludes that the conflicts in the region that preceded the outbreak of the virus remain ever present, and will therefore continue to affect Europe for the foreseeable future. Nikolaos Tzifakis looks at the emergency measures implemented in the Western Balkan countries and concludes that the ease with which the region’s leaders limited the checks on their power could be a cause for concern. Andrew Glencross examines the possibility of the negotiation of a UK–EU health-security relationship and argues that the politicisation of health security problematises the post-Brexit EU–UK relationship.

While the pandemic has left a significant mark on Europe and beyond, it has not halted other developments that are not directly affected by the crisis. Garvan Walshe analyses recent and pre-COVID-19 shifts on the world stage and argues that there is a more active role for the EU to play in ensuring security in its neighbourhood through the development of a unified strategic culture. Eloïse Ryon proposes the extension of the concept of strategic autonomy to the European energy sector. And Richard Whitman shows that EU–UK foreign, defence and security policy has been neglected in Brexit negotiations.

The conclusions of the authors in this issue of the *European View* not only highlight the problems that the EU faces during the COVID-19 outbreak, but also offer us a glimpse of the challenges that member states will have to cope with in post-pandemic times. They signal that the issues of self-sufficiency and reforms to critical infrastructure and political decision-making will take centre stage, and offer clear directions for an EU that is able to withstand future crises.

Author biography



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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

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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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A new political economy for Europe post-COVID-19

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic has led to unprecedented economic support measures from governments across Europe. With this, the crisis has provided an occasion for a significant demonstration of the ability of states to implement policies and deliver services. This could create expectations among electorates of permanent changes to the macroeconomic regime, towards one characterised by a more protective state and a rebalancing between the state and the market. Significant political barriers to such a shift remain. The article argues that, in contrast to the aftermath of the two previous economic crises in Europe, many new ideas are floating around and support for a more protective state is emerging across the political spectrum. The current crisis might thus represent a turning point.

Keywords

COVID-19, Europe, Political economy, Industrial policy, Fiscal policy

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has shocked European health systems and economies. So far it has not led to any political shocks. A crisis of this magnitude is unlikely to pass by without significant political consequences, though, particularly as it comes at the tail end of a decade of economic crisis in Europe that has not led to a fundamental shift in either the political or the economic regime.

The global financial crisis of 2008–9 and the subsequent crisis in the eurozone had already led to demands for changes to the economic settlement. This backlash came in the form of a number of ultimately largely unsuccessful protest movements, including

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Occupy Wall Street in the US and the Indignados in Spain, but also through a shift in views on economic issues. The theme of inequality was put on the agenda through widely publicised research by the French economist Thomas Piketty (2014). However, economic policy in response to the crisis largely followed existing prescriptions, with the aim of getting back to a more stable and robust version of the pre-crisis situation. As a result, one of the main political implications of that crisis was the strengthening of populist forces across developed democracies which were already disenchanted with the impact of globalisation (Manow 2018, 16–18).

In contrast, the effects of the economic crises of the 1970s, particularly the combination of high unemployment and high inflation, contributed to a change in the macroeconomic regime. The retreat of the state in economic life and the increased primacy given to the market following this shift in the late 1970s and early 1980s is unlikely to be directly undone. However, this article argues that the COVID-19 crisis could provide the trigger for a fundamental rethink, the ideas for which have recently been floating around more prominently than they were in the wake of the previous crisis. It first looks at the economic impact of the crisis, followed by an exploration of what this shift would look like. It then discusses what its impact would be for individual economies and for the organisation of the European economy as a whole, and what that would mean for European integration.

The economic impact of COVID-19

To control the spread of the coronavirus, European governments put large parts of their economies into something like an induced coma. In order to enforce social distancing, workers were told to work from home, and businesses where this was not possible were temporarily closed, with wages in most cases paid at least in part by the state and businesses receiving support through subsidised loans. The support for specific sectors subsequently moved to stimulus measures to support the recovery once economies started to open up in the summer. Meanwhile, central banks provided ample liquidity to financial systems and governments. In all, in response to the economic impact of the health crisis, state support has been unprecedented. This has differed somewhat in size between countries: whereas by early August the German government had adopted direct fiscal stimulus measures worth 8.3% of 2019 gross domestic product, the measures announced in Italy only amounted to 3.4% of its gross domestic product. But almost everywhere governments have provided a significant fiscal stimulus (Anderson et al. 2019). Possibly reflecting a shift in attitudes, the stimuli have also been accompanied by announcements that, in contrast to the experience following the global financial crisis, they will not be followed by a rapid return to fiscal consolidation. To this end, the EU has suspended its fiscal rules until at least the end of 2021, meaning that until then there will be no pressure from Brussels on member states to limit their budget deficits (Brunsdon and Fleming 2020). The large-scale fiscal response also sets the current experience apart from the previous crises, when it fell mainly on the monetary authorities to support the economic recovery.

Nevertheless, despite these measures, the economic damage of the crisis is likely to turn out to be significant. The International Monetary Fund expects the world economy

to shrink by 4.9% in 2020, compared with a contraction of just 0.1% in 2009, the high-point of the global financial crisis (IMF 2020). Last time around the economic impact was limited for some by increased demand from around the world; with the developing world now also being hit and China limited in its stimulus options due to the debt overhang from previous efforts to stimulate its economy, this way out is no longer available. For Europe this means a forecast contraction of 10% for the eurozone economy. A rapid return to normal looks unlikely, even if a vaccine is available soon. A long period of demand shortfall and disruption to a large number of sectors is likely to have lasting economic consequences due to high unemployment and large fiscal deficits, which would contribute to existing dissatisfaction with the macroeconomic regime in Europe.

A pandemic-induced regime change

The pandemic and the policy response to it have highlighted the power of the state in directing economic life as governments have let go of previously dominant restraints on fiscal policy and debt sustainability (Bergsen et al. 2020). This demonstration of state capacity and of the state as the ultimate guarantor of the economy could change attitudes towards the role of the state among European electorates, following a long period of generally hostile views of state intervention in the economy. Although the economic impact is almost certain to vary by country, governments from across the political spectrum have taken similar measures and thereby set similar precedents.

Beyond the economic damage, the measures have also had other side-effects, the most striking and potentially politically meaningful being the exacerbation of existing economic inequalities (Bonaccorsi et al. 2020). It has generally been those lower down the income scales whose employment has been hit hardest by the lockdown measures, as these groups tend to work in low-productivity service sectors and have fewer opportunities to work from home.

In broad terms, there will be pressure to create a new economic settlement in which the state plays a more protective role and in which the balance shifts back from the market to the state. Much will depend on the extent to which existing and some new ideas find traction and political representation.

A new regime

It is impossible to predict the exact shape of the political settlement that might arise from these pressures. Blyth and Matthijs (2017) define the current macroeconomic regime as one that prioritises price stability, compared with a post-war regime that emphasised full employment. This suggests a return to the post-war settlement. However, this situation was a result of the specific circumstances and institutions of the time. Rapid economic growth, as Western Europe caught up with the technological leadership of the US, allowed for wage restraint and full employment through a bargain between capital and labour that was facilitated by corporatist institutions (Eichengreen 2007, 90). However, we are unlikely to move back to any regime that suffers from the same tendency towards

inflation as that which had already, prior to its implementation, been prophesied to lead to the downfall of the full-employment regime (Kalecki 1943). Instead, any new regime, or new political economy, would be more likely to be visible in modest changes to fiscal, monetary and economic policy.

A more protective state, particularly of those groups hardest hit by both the current regime in the form of globalisation and now the pandemic, would require at the very least a stronger emphasis on government ensuring full employment through active fiscal policy (Sandbu 2020, 140–2). Concretely, this would be reflected in the decreased importance of EU fiscal rules and the running of larger deficits for longer, enabled by the current low-interest-rate environment, which would keep debt servicing manageable.

During the first half of 2020 the brakes on fiscal policy were released in order to deal with the crisis, and this included Germany letting go of its balanced-budget target. More supportive fiscal policy after the crisis would not just mean continuing with many of the crisis-fighting measures. In practice, beyond income support, it would mean more investment in infrastructure, health care, research and education.

Political obstacles to such a shift remain significant, in part because it would probably require a shift in the burden of taxation, from labour to capital in many cases. However, there is an appetite in Europe for higher corporate taxes and for European cooperation to achieve this. This is evident following frustration regarding some member states' accommodative corporate tax regimes flowing over into the discussion on the EU recovery fund (Khan and Fleming 2020). The difficult class politics of shifting the burden of taxation from income to wealth would, though, require more political support than currently seems to be available.

During the previous crisis calls were also heard for more fiscal activism, but these were largely ignored as most European countries moved towards fiscal consolidation while the crisis was still raging. Attitudes seem to be shifting now, as evidenced by the German rethink on both its own spending limits and on spending in the EU context. Recent years have seen the rise of influential new ideas in this area, such as those put forward by Modern Monetary Theory (MMT), a school of economic thought that posits that inflation is the only real constraint on government spending and thus that in the current low-inflation environment there is space to significantly increase such spending. While mostly prominent in the US, this theory could be seen as a harbinger of shifts in thinking about fiscal policy more widely.

MMT also envisages a large role for the monetary authorities, which would effectively enable fiscal authorities to increase spending at will. Monetary policy has already undergone significant changes in the past decade in response to the series of crises hitting the European economy. The idea of the independent central bank as an inflation-busting tool has much to do with the experience of the 1970s, when inflation was high despite high unemployment. In recent years, across much of the developed world the opposite has been the case, with inflation barely picking up despite several economies moving close to full employment. In response to their failure to push inflation to their mandated

targets, central banks have engaged in several forms of unorthodox policy, including large-scale and only moderately effective bond-buying programmes (Andrade et al. 2016). The mechanism of transmission to the real economy of these innovative monetary policy instruments has always been similar to that of traditional monetary policy, that is, the broad interest rate environment, and has attempted to respect the largely imaginary division between monetary and fiscal policy. Instead, under a new macroeconomic regime central bankers could aim to more directly influence the real economy, particularly if political authorities give them the mandate to do so.

The European Central Bank (ECB) has already developed some tools to do so, most notably its bank liquidity support mechanism, the so-called Targeted Long-Term Financing Operations. By creating a system of dual interest rates this mechanism could allow the ECB to support broader policy targets than just price stability, for instance encouraging lending by banks to finance sustainable energy investments (Loneragan 2020). This tool was used to support the financial system during the pandemic but has not yet been targeted to specific policy goals.

The main thrust of a new economic settlement would be delivered through changes to broader economic policy, though. This would affect industrial policy, labour market rules and welfare policy (Bergsen et al. 2020). Following the interventions by states during the COVID-19 pandemic, including in some cases taking stakes in companies, there could be an expectancy and acceptance of a more activist approach to industrial policy. This would follow French and German pressure in recent years to make competition policy in the EU more accommodating to creating European champions in strategic sectors to compete on a global scale (Chazan 2019). A push from policymakers to reshore critical supply chains in the wake of disruption to the supply of medical goods in the early phase of the pandemic did not lead to immediate results but is indicative of an increased willingness to apply industrial policy (Abboud and Peel 2020). Labour market and welfare policy is not just likely to incorporate crisis-time innovations such as the short-time working schemes put in place by most European governments but could look to create more labour protections. Furthermore, experiments with direct payments to citizens and increases in benefits could create a change in the public mindset and expectations, leading to these becoming difficult to remove and possibly even expanded into something resembling a universal basic income. In other words, in all of these policy areas the state would increase its involvement in the economy, in many cases at the expense of market forces.

European impact

The shift in the macroeconomic regime described above would not just be felt on the national level but would also have implications for the EU. A re-evaluation of the balance between the state and the market runs the risk of clashing with European integration as currently constituted, which has aimed to curb national governments' ability to intervene in market processes (Bergsen et al. 2020). If large gaps open up between different member states over the extent to which this balance should shift, the EU strictures could become problematic as they will be harder to change.

That there is potential for some of the limitations created by the current EU rules to be overcome was demonstrated by the agreement of EU leaders to the creation of a recovery fund to support the countries and sectors hardest hit by the pandemic (European Council 2020). This represents the green shoots of new thinking about fiscal policy in the eurozone economy. The common borrowing the fund represents was often put forward as an idea during the eurozone crisis, but remained unthinkable due to German opposition. This changed in May, when German Chancellor Merkel together with French President Macron established the foundations for the plan as agreed by the European Council. Although it is designed to be a one-off, it could nevertheless form the basis for future common fiscal responses to economic crises (Bergsen 2020a). Nevertheless, the difficulty encountered in agreeing to the plan, in particular the objections from a group of smaller, northern member states, suggests that the same divisions over fiscal risk and burden sharing could hold back any changes in these areas (Bergsen 2020b). A return to fiscal orthodoxy, including strict enforcement of the fiscal rules, thus remains possible and would make the other changes embodied in the regime shift described above difficult to achieve.

Conclusion

The COVID-19 crisis and its economic implications have the potential to lead to a shift in the political economy or macroeconomic regime in Europe following over a decade of crises. This would not be about a return to the post-war regime but about specific changes and the implementation of new ideas in several policy areas. Many of the ideas are there, and it is possible that the current crisis will provide the trigger, but significant political obstacles remain, not least the lack of political representation of many of these ideas in Europe. Despite this set of ideas largely revolving around the stronger hand of the state in the economy, many of them have found support across the political spectrum. This means that a shift in the macroeconomic regime would not necessarily require a change in political leadership, as it did in the late 1970s. The lack of direct political representation also creates a risk that the political momentum will dissipate following the crisis and, as after the other two recent crises, not much will change.

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Two birds with one stone: Greening the EU's post- coronavirus recovery

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Abstract

If there is a silver lining to the ongoing pandemic, it could be its potential to change people's behaviour and policymakers' attitudes in favour of more sustainable models. The article focuses on the global struggle with the coronavirus and the resulting economic crisis, amid the ongoing crises of climate change and environmental degradation, and argues that returning to business as usual is not an option. Instead, it suggests learning from the experience, harnessing the momentum and embracing new ways of doing things to achieve green growth. The EU's post-coronavirus recovery package has this sort of transformative potential for the economies and societies of the member states. If it is implemented well, it could turn the crisis into an opportunity, and people will reap its benefits for generations to come.

Keywords

COVID-19, Coronacrisis, Climate change, Pollution, Green recovery

Introduction

The ways in which human activity is affecting the environment and climate became painfully visible as most of the world locked down on account of the global coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic. Plummeting greenhouse gas emissions and pollution levels gave a glimpse of the greener future that can be achieved if the right policies are put in place and people's behaviour can be adapted to fit with a sustainable development model.

This article will first examine the fragile coexistence between man and nature, explain the causes of climate change and air pollution and explore how the two are

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interlinked, outline the current policies and analyse their results. It will then argue that a successful approach will need public acceptance and awareness, and that the coinciding climate and economic crises might serve to bring about both. It concludes that the recovery plan for Europe, adopted by the EU leaders in July, could have a transformative potential for society and the economy if implemented effectively, inclusively and without reservation.

Fragile coexistence

The COVID-19 crisis exposed many known truths about our world, including the impact of human activity on the environment and climate. The complex relationship between man and nature became strikingly evident during the pandemic.

COVID-19 is thought to have originated in the traditional Chinese open-air market-places. These ‘wet markets’ had already been considered a time bomb for epidemics due to the conditions in which they sell perishable goods such as fresh meat, fish, seafood and produce, and in some cases wild animals (Briggs 2020). The pandemic has cast a spotlight on the consumption of live wildlife and the global wildlife trade as one of the major drivers of species extinction.

Preventing the spread of the virus has also had consequences for the environment. In recent years, policymakers around the world have aimed to crack down on plastic pollution and have adopted various bans on single-use plastics, with the Council of the EU reaching a breakthrough agreement at the end of 2018 (Council of the EU 2018). The COVID-19 outbreak has caused the waste from personal protective equipment, including disposable face-masks and plastic gloves, to pile up, and conservationists are already sounding the alarm about this (Kassam 2020).

Even more significant is the interplay regarding emissions. The World Health Organization has estimated that, prior to the outbreak, smog caused 7 million premature deaths globally per year (WHO 2020). In the EU, about 400,000 people died in 2016 due to exposure to air pollution (European Environment Agency 2019). The link between COVID-19 and poor air quality appears to be threefold (Carrington 2020): first, death rates are higher in patients with chronic illnesses linked to exposure to air pollution; second, pollutants inflame the lungs, which become more susceptible to catching the virus; and third, particles of pollution might even serve as a vehicle to carry the virus further.

By the same token, greenhouse gas emissions and air pollution levels fell dramatically as the world came to a standstill amid the lockdowns imposed to halt the spread of COVID-19 (European Environment Agency 2020; European Space Agency 2020), while nature flourished in places long suffering from degradation. Businesses and economies, on the other hand, suffered hugely and are now eager to reopen. Mankind finds itself at a watershed moment and, if done right, the post-COVID-19 recovery could tackle two crises at once.

Air quality in tandem with climate action

Air quality and climate change are closely interlinked: through the physical processes and human activities that drive them, as well as the policy measures aimed at mitigating them. Reducing greenhouse gas emissions is a central part of the fight against climate change, with the primary target being carbon dioxide (CO₂), whose greenhouse effect warms up the atmosphere with devastating consequences for the planet. The EU is determined to reduce its CO₂ emissions and has aimed to achieve this through a wide range of policies including the trading of emissions in energy-intensive industry sectors (the EU Emissions Trading System), national targets for sectors outside the system, emissions standards for vehicles and rules on fuel quality, boosting energy efficiency, improving the labelling and design of products, promoting the use of renewable energy sources, and spurring innovation and investment in low-carbon technologies. On the international level, it adheres to the Paris Agreement and has committed to reduce CO₂ emissions by 40% by 2030 and to become climate neutral by 2050 (European Commission 2018).

Since greenhouse gas emissions and air pollution often have the same sources, tackling climate change would improve air quality, which is just as acute a problem, with direct benefits to human health, biodiversity and the climate as a whole. Air pollutants are different from CO₂, and rather than piling up in the atmosphere, they negatively and directly affect the air we breathe. The substances most harmful to human health are dust-like particulate matter, nitrogen dioxide, sulphur dioxide and ground-level ozone. Their existence is primarily caused by road traffic, shipping, agriculture, domestic heating and power generation. Air pollution is currently regulated both at the international level, by the UN Gothenburg Protocol, adopted in 1999, which sets binding emissions-reduction targets, and at the European level, by the Ambient Air Quality Directives (European Parliament and Council 2008; European Parliament and Council 2004), which set standards for the quality of the air we breathe. The EU also oversees the National Emission Ceilings Directive (European Parliament and Council 2016), which obliges member states to reduce total emissions of certain air pollutants, alongside other sectoral legislation.

Despite these comprehensive rules, the European Court of Auditors' (2018) report on air pollution noted that while air quality has been improving, most member states are still not compliant with the EU's air-quality standards. The European Commission faces limitations in monitoring and enforcing the rules. At the end of last year, it had 71 open infringement cases regarding air pollution (European Commission 2020b) and these cases could take up to 8 years to resolve. The report nevertheless concluded that citizens' health remains insufficiently protected. As for climate change, scientists are warning that the planet is warming up faster than ever before (NASA 2020), and that to keep global warming to well below two degrees Celsius requires urgent climate action. So how can we advance from the status quo?

EU environmental standards and climate targets have played a pivotal role in reducing air pollution and lowering greenhouse gas emissions in Europe, but there are limits to the

effectiveness of regulation. It is also evident that over-regulation is not the way to go. At the same time, we cannot deny the urgent need to act, from both ecological and health points of view.

Old habits do not have to die hard

What is needed is a paradigm that will shift attitudes towards a new ‘normal’. And the COVID-19 crisis might serve as the right trigger for this much-needed synergy between public support and political action. People were able to comply with the stringent lockdown measures because they understood the logic behind them. The key now will be to advance from compliance with set rules to a commitment to make better choices.

Research shows that greater immersion in the environment might change our attitudes towards its preservation (Kasriel 2020). In lockdown, people sought solace in nature—walking in the parks, gardening or just listening to bird-song on the Internet. Moreover, they observed the direct impact of their (in)activity as the clearer air, quieter roads and expansion of nature into urban environments brought into focus the normally invisible threat of climate change and environmental degradation.

This newfound appreciation for nature and raised public awareness should now be used to secure some of the new habits we have adopted as a society. But as important as individual efforts can be, effective climate action needs commitment from policymakers and businesses attuned to the bigger picture.

Never let a good crisis go to waste

It is estimated that CO₂ emissions fell by 8% during the lockdown period (Lombrana and Warren 2020). The International Energy Agency says that the world will use 6% less energy this year—equivalent to losing the entire energy demand of India (McGrath 2020). The European Environment Agency (2020) and European Space Agency (2020) both reported large decreases in air pollution, in some cities by more than 50%. But as encouraging as these statistics are, turning off the economy hardly constitutes a viable climate policy. It is certainly not enough to affect the amount of CO₂ that has been piling up in the atmosphere for over a century. Researchers estimate that even a 10% drop in emissions in 2020 would still translate into an increase of two parts per million in the concentration of CO₂ (Lombrana and Warren 2020).

The economic impacts of the crisis appear dire. It is forecast that COVID-19 will trigger the deepest recession in the EU’s history (Valero 2020). In July, the European Commission (2020c) corrected its initial 2020 economic outlook from 7.4% growth, estimating that the EU’s economy will now contract by a record 8.3% due to the severe economic impact of the lockdown.

The collision of the COVID-19 pandemic and the climate change emergency requires a coherent response that integrates solutions to both of these crises. Rather

than restoring the old economy, there is an opportunity to invest in a more sustainable one. The choices we make now will shape the global economy for the next decade. At the same time, it is the most critical decade in terms of climate action, when any further delays will be detrimental in terms of not being able to avoid the devastating tipping points. But is restarting the world's economy compatible with the need to halve our emissions by 2030? Christiana Figueres wrote in the *Financial Times* (Figueres and Zycher 2020) that it is not about whether we can tackle both at the same time, but whether we can afford not to do so.

The policymakers do not have to find themselves faced with a binary choice: creating jobs and growth versus preserving the environment and combating climate change. The post-COVID-19 economic recovery presents a landmark opportunity to steer the world's economies towards more sustainable and resilient models. The clean energy transition should continue to be part of the process. Prioritising investments in energy efficiency and renewable energy over fossil-fuel subsidies will create resilient jobs fit for the future. The timing could not be better, as the prices of onshore wind energy and solar photovoltaics have fallen by 70% and 89% respectively during the past 10 years. Energy storage technologies have also advanced significantly (Erlanger 2020).

But not all governments have the same priorities. Wary of the rising unemployment figures and slumps in industrial production, many politicians would argue in favour of postponing the introduction of environmental regulations and focusing on the economy. Negative oil prices (for the first time in history) could make the use of fossil fuels attractive. In the US, the Environmental Protection Agency announced a sweeping relaxation of environmental rules in response to the pandemic. Some EU member states also explored the possibility of back-tracking on their climate commitments (*ERR News* 2020).

The proposed €750 billion recovery plan, Next Generation EU (European Commission 2020a), is focused on a green and digital transformation and shows the way forward. The European Commission foresees that financial support for investments and reforms to boost sustainable jobs and growth will bring prosperity and resilience. Special emphasis has been placed on research and innovation by significantly augmenting the Horizon Europe programme. The most vulnerable regions will benefit from the Just Transition Fund to alleviate the impacts and achieve an inclusive green recovery.

The European Green Deal (European Commission 2019) is the centrepiece of Europe's resilient post-corona economic recovery, with concrete, incremental initiatives that will work towards achieving the long-term goals of climate neutrality and net-zero pollution. By the end of 2020, the European Commission envisages a revision of the 2030 emissions-reductions targets, and gradually proposing strategies on the renovation of buildings, climate adaptation, forests, farming, sustainable finance, offshore renewable energy, the smart sector, the circular economy, consumers,

biodiversity, chemicals, hydrogen and on low-carbon mobility, including in the aviation and maritime sectors.

As member states tap into the massive EU recovery fund, they can help their manufacturers bounce back and, at the same time, tie the support to investment in low-carbon technologies. Policies can be put in place to enable the energy industry to move towards renewables and hydrogen. Sustainable mobility and improved air quality in cities can be explored. Refurbishing the housing stock will improve energy efficiency in buildings and create jobs for the newly unemployed. Any bailouts of the traditional sectors should come with green strings attached. Electrification, artificial intelligence, the 5G network, machine learning, smart production and data management will all play key roles. Sustainability should be mainstreamed in all EU policies, including finance and investment, promoting research, innovation, education and improved public information. On the global level, the EU should advocate for a clean post-COVID-19 recovery in all international fora.

Local and regional governments have a pivotal role to play. As EU leaders outline plans for massive public investment and fiscal measures to aid industries struggling due to the COVID-19 crisis, these lower levels of government should not miss the ecological opportunities to achieve sustainable growth and provide resilient jobs in their communities. Strategies to create a cleaner environment should be supplemented by the efficient and transparent use of available EU funds. People in rural areas should have access to affordable cleaner fuels to heat their homes. In cities, local governments should promote more sustainable forms of transportation. Many mayors have already begun to add to cycling infrastructure and enlarge public spaces as a step towards deconfinement while maintaining social distancing. Where feasible, employers should enhance the opportunities to work from home, which will reduce traffic peaks. In general, improved digitisation of the workplace could cut emissions as well as companies' costs. Raising public awareness will empower citizens to make informed individual choices to opt for environmentally friendlier alternatives.

Conclusion

The EU's post-COVID-19 recovery fund has the potential to tackle two crises at once—jump-starting the economy while embedding sustainable development across all policy areas. A responsible and pragmatic approach to climate and environment policy focused on innovation and targeted investments will enable businesses and individuals to make smart choices while creating added value for the economy. Public acceptance and awareness will be key to the success of the green recovery. To achieve the desired effect, taxpayers will need assurances that their money is accessible and being well spent. An efficient and transparent system of checks and balances must deter (or detect) fraud, yet not discourage honest applicants by creating red tape. Sharing best practices and reporting on the achieved results will further motivate others to contribute to the sustainable transition—within the EU itself as well as on the global stage. A healthy planet, thriving nature and a prosperous society are the ultimate goals and the best shield against any future threats.

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COVID-19 and European security of supply: Growing in importance

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic struck the world hard in early 2020, and we are still coping with the ramifications of the ongoing crisis. The most acute concerns deal with the gloomy economic impact of the pandemic. However, the crisis has also revealed severe shortcomings in the EU's approach to the security of supply. Many member states initially found themselves dealing with the crisis alone or lacking essential medical resources. Since the early stages, it has become evident that while security of supply has so far been a matter of national decisions, the EU needs a comprehensive strategy to improve its crisis resilience. Finland has a long tradition of making a coordinated effort to ensure an adequate supply of items needed for emergencies. Thus, the Finnish model could provide the basis for a more inclusive and integrated EU-level security of supply.

Keywords

COVID-19, EU, Resilience, Security of supply, Finland

Introduction

Infectious disease was listed as one of the 10 most impactful risks in the most recent World Economic Forum Risk Report (World Economic Forum 2020). During the early days of the COVID-19 outbreak, the virus was labelled a 'black swan' event—something that comes as a surprise and has a major effect on the given system. When the pandemic reached its peak in Europe in early spring 2020, many EU member states seemed unprepared to deal with the crisis. Deficiencies in preparedness and a lack of material resources led to panic reactions in many member states in the early stages. National interest was

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placed before wider European solidarity. There were, for example, news stories about member states being unwilling to export face masks to other countries (Marlowe 2020). At the same time, countries badly devastated by the pandemic, such as Italy, felt left alone.

Since the initial shock, member states have come to each other's aid and provided, for example, nursing staff and health care equipment to those in need. Among others, France has provided face masks, Germany has sent medical equipment and supplies to Italy, Luxembourg has received intensive-care patients from France, and Czechia has donated protective equipment to Italy and Spain. Finland has also provided assistance by repatriating 10 EU citizens on flights from other parts of the world (European Commission 2020a). As early as February, EU countries began preparing for the procurement of common protective equipment through the EU's centralised procurement mechanism.

This article argues that while security of supply is mainly the responsibility of member states, an inclusive EU-level approach is necessary. The pandemic has revealed weaknesses in the common approach to managing crises that affect the Union as a whole. Security of supply needs to be viewed and treated as part of the EU's common security interest, and thus as a key instrument of the Union's resilience.

Finland has a long tradition of organising its security of supply from whole-of-nation and whole-of-government perspectives. In the future, as the EU draws lessons from the pandemic and considers ways to improve its security of supply, it should view the Finnish model as one basis option.

An unprepared Europe

There is no one universal definition of security of supply. The concept and related actions are understood differently in different states. Generally speaking, security of supply refers to the ability to maintain the basic economic, critical infrastructure and other societal functions that allow the continuation of normal life in the event of major disruption. The difficulty in finding a universal definition is also partly due to the fact that states differ in their internal and external characteristics, such as energy self-sufficiency, natural conditions, political situation, security-policy solutions and logistical connections.

Therefore, there can be no 'one-size-fits-all' approach to the problems stemming from the COVID-19 pandemic in terms of the EU member states' security of supply issues. However, the ongoing crisis has highlighted the lack of preparedness in emergency supplies among individual member states as well as the need for a common EU-level approach to preparedness. At the very least, the pandemic has taught us that there is still work to be done regarding joint EU-level preparedness and supply security.

Pandemics are by their nature challenging crises for multilateral actors such as the EU. Dealing with diseases such as COVID-19 comes under the umbrella of health policy, which, in accordance with the EU treaties, is primarily the responsibility of the member states. For example, the organising of health care or the implementation of restrictions on

public life are national decisions. When the responsibility for obtaining the required resources and imposing the necessary constraints lies with the individual member states, joint coordination is, in principle, challenging. Cooperation has also been greatly hampered by the varying pace of the effects of the crisis in the member states.

The lack of an EU-level approach to the security of supply became evident when the COVID-19 pandemic hit the continent in the spring of 2020. Although, after a slow start, the EU has excelled in providing mutual assistance, the pandemic has exposed shortcomings in joint crisis management, especially in the field of emergency supplies. These shortcomings are largely due to the fact that EU countries have not seen the need to maintain stocks of emergency supplies at sufficient levels during normal times. This deficiency of maintenance was based on the belief that the equipment and materials that are important for the functioning of society would be available on the world market even in times of crisis.

The EU's security of supply has also been undermined by the fact that many critical products are no longer produced in Europe. Security of supply refers to the capacity of a society to maintain the basic economic functions necessary to ensure the livelihoods of the population, to maintain the functioning and security of society, and to safeguard the material conditions of national defence in the event of serious disturbances and exceptional circumstances.

The coronavirus has highlighted the Union's dependence on external actors (Hackenbroich et al. 2020), such as China. Also, while many countries depend on China for supplies of masks, tests kits and other antiviral gear, India remains the world's top exporter of 'generics', such as paracetamol and the anti-malarial drug hydroxychloroquine, which is being tested as a possible treatment for COVID-19 (US National Institutes of Health 2020). The EU, on the other hand, does not have a strategy for producing essential goods to maintain supplies within the Union. In the spring, when the arrival of critical supplies came to a halt, many European states were suddenly lacking sufficient material resources to provide health care. The upcoming EU pharmaceutical strategy, which is expected to be published towards the end of 2020, seeks to reflect and learn from the experiences of the coronavirus pandemic and thus propose specific actions to secure supplies (European Commission 2020b).

Furthermore, while the EU's strategic guidelines emphasise the importance of the security of supply, the EU's current influence over the issue is rather limited, as matters associated with security of supply do not to any great extent fall within the current scope of EU legislation. At present, EU countries largely make their own national arrangements as preparedness and developing security of supply have not previously been on the EU's agenda. The exception to this is the security of supply of petroleum products, which is guided through directives: member states are required to store them in quantities equivalent to 90 days' consumption (Council of the European Union 2009). Generally, energy products have been the focus of the EU's policy regarding the security of supply and the protection of critical infrastructure (Campos 2017).

The Finnish model: a potential example for the EU

The concept of guaranteeing the supply of items needed for emergencies can be said to be imprinted in Finland's societal approach. Finland's cold climate, remote location, dependence on maritime transport, energy-intensive economic structure and long transport distances are special features that affect the security of supply objectives and the choice of means. The majority of Finland's goods, both imports and exports, pass through the Baltic Sea. In addition, the majority of Finland's external data traffic is also carried by submarine cables, making the Baltic Sea an essential supply channel for Finland's societal functions. The idea of voluntary emergency preparedness sets Finland apart from a large number of other Western European countries (Mikkola 2016).

In terms of coping with risks, the Finnish strategy is based on the assumption that preparedness is part of common day-to-day operations. Finnish security of supply stems from cooperation between the public sector, business and civil organisations, through which market-based and regulatory-based preparedness are coordinated. Companies usually prepare without a legal obligation, on a contractual basis and from their own business starting points. The pillars and methods of cooperation are built into processes during normal times. It is undesirable that during a disruption, management relationships or responsibilities would be unclear or undergo changes. Thus a special feature and strength of Finland's system is securing these vital functions through the efficient and comprehensive use of the resources of society as a whole. Security of supply in Finland is organised through a comprehensive cooperation network involving government, industry associations and companies that are critical to the functioning of society.

For certain critical infrastructure however, legislation also imposes contingency planning obligations on economic operators. This is to ensure that the necessary resources, processes and functions are available for both the operation of the company and the vital functions of society, even in the event of disturbances. For example, importers of crude oil and petroleum products are obliged to store an amount equal to the two-month average of imports, while in the wider network telecommunications operators are obliged to maintain the mass communications network in such a condition that it can transmit emergency announcements. In addition, economic operators participate on a voluntary basis in the organisation of the security of supply and pool activities. Non-governmental organisations are also involved in preparedness activities, especially at regional and local levels (Aaltola et al. 2016).

However, the fact that preparedness must be implemented cross-administratively can also be challenging. No authority is solely responsible for Finland's security of supply. The decentralisation of operations as well as the division of production into networks shows the need for common objectives. In the case of Finland, the Security of Supply Centre (NESA) is the guiding actor in preparedness. It is an administrative department of the Ministry of Employment and the Economy and is responsible for planning and operational activities related to maintaining and developing Finland's security of supply. NESA's main tasks can be divided into four objectives: 1) to coordinate preparedness

cooperation between businesses and public administration, 2) to manage national emergency stockpiles, 3) to ensure the functioning of the necessary technical systems and security of the production of critical goods and services, and 4) to follow international developments and guidelines, as well as keeping in touch with foreign authorities and institutions.

Finland is one of the member states that has strongly supported the deepening of the Union's Common Foreign and Security Policy in recent years. While the pandemic has put pressure on Finland's national security of supply, it has also offered an opportunity to promote the issue within the Union. Although serious shortcomings in Finland's own security of supply were also revealed in the midst of the crisis, cooperation between the Finnish authorities with the aim of achieving total security has been some of the most developed in Europe (Mikkola 2020). It has also received positive attention in the international media during the crisis. When the pandemic struck Europe in early spring, Finland had a stockpile not only of medical supplies, but also of oil, grain, agricultural tools and raw materials. The purpose of these stockpiles was to secure the livelihoods and economic activity of the population.

Security of supply relies on a functioning market and a competitive economy, but these may not always be enough to sustain the basic economic and technical functions of society in various exceptional circumstances. Despite strong international dependencies, the goal of ensuring security of supply is that most of the most serious exceptional circumstances can be addressed by national measures.

Conclusion

Since no EU member state has been able to deal with the ramifications of the crisis by itself, what can and should be done jointly eventually becomes the main issue. The solution should be approached from national and EU-level perspectives.

On a national level, Finland provides a good framework example of emergency supply and preparedness. Finland has a legal basis to maintain emergency stockpiles of goods and a framework for coordination between the relevant state and private-sector actors. The EU should consider more effective directives on ensuring security of supply in emergencies as well as forming political structures to guide and ensure the execution of these objectives. Despite Finland having a relatively good basis for the supply of emergency equipment, the pandemic was a serious wake-up call for better common preparedness. In the case of Finland, domestic stocks alone are not enough to ensure the maintenance of vital functions of society in a long-lasting crisis. The purpose of national preparedness is, above all, to give Finland additional time in the event of a disruption or crisis to ensure that the necessary international connections and alternative delivery routes can be made operational (Mikkola 2020).

From a wider EU-level perspective, it is clear that one of the consequences of the pandemic is the expansion of the EU's common security policy, as both health security

and security of supply are becoming important themes and will play a more important role in the Union's pursuit of strategic autonomy. The first steps have already been taken. EU High Representative Josep Borrell has proposed the creation of a common European security of supply pool. According to Borrell, this would make more sense than each member state maintaining its own national security stockpile as is the case currently (Euronews 2020).

Proposals have also been made to increase the EU's self-sufficiency. However, the Union must not strive for full self-sufficiency, as this would undermine the functioning of the world market, which in turn would slow down recovery from the pandemic, both for the Union and the rest of the world. If major players were to pursue full self-sufficiency, this could result in a rapid rise in protectionism at the international level.

Few member states will be prepared to base their security of supply on the common EU stockpile proposed by Borrell, but supporting national stocks with a common EU supply could be a potential development. An indicative model could be the EU Civilian Operations Repository in Sweden, established in 2018 and maintained by the country's Civil Contingencies Agency. It stores, *inter alia*, vehicles, IT and communications equipment, and defence and health equipment used by EU civilian operations.

If the idea of an EU-level security of supply stockpile gains popularity among political decision-makers, its implementation could also be considered in the framework of the Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) launched in 2017. This would raise the level of ambition of the project, as the EU countries belonging to PESCO have committed themselves to complying with a total of 20 binding criteria. PESCO already includes one security of supply project, which is a German-led central logistics network that aims to improve the availability of supplies for military operations and increase the joint storage of equipment used by them (Nováky and Vanhanen 2020).

If nothing else, at least the importance of security of supply should be identified in the EU's upcoming debates and discussions on strategic autonomy and crisis capabilities. The strategic debate within the EU has intensified in recent years, regardless of the pandemic. Related to this and as part of the German EU Presidency, the Union is about to launch a new strategic compass for foreign and security policy (which will extend into France's Presidency in 2022), and more broadly, a Conference on the Future of Europe will take place this year. Security of supply is also a matter of resilience, a concept that is gaining increasing attention within the EU. The new Security Union Strategy underlines the importance of supply-chain resilience; strengthening security of supply means strengthening the existing EU priorities on resilience.

The platforms mentioned above provide an opportunity to discuss strategic initiatives that should include security of supply as it is directly linked to the EU's ability to act in a joint fashion. It would be hugely in the interests of the EU to have a better capacity to assist its member states in the future in the event of a possible crisis.

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Lessons earned and lessons learned: What should be done next to counter the COVID-19 infodemic?

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Nad'a Kovalčíková and Ariane Tabatabai

Abstract

As governments and citizens around the world have struggled with the novel coronavirus, the information space has turned into a battleground. Authoritarian countries, including Russia, China and Iran, have spread disinformation on the causes of and responses to the pandemic. The overabundance of information, also referred to as an 'infodemic', including manipulated information, has been both a cause and a result of the exacerbation of the public health crisis. It is further undermining trust in democratic institutions, the independent press, and facts and data, and exacerbating the rising tensions driven by economic, political and societal challenges. This article discusses the challenges democracies have faced and the measures they have adopted to counter information manipulation that impedes public health efforts. It draws seven lessons learned from the information war and offers a set of recommendations on tackling future infodemics related to public health.

Keywords

COVID-19, Infodemic, Democracies, Russia, China, Iran, Lessons learned

Introduction

Democratic governments face a distressing challenge that has been both a cause and a result of the exacerbation of the public health crisis: the COVID-19 infodemic. The World Health Organization (WHO) has defined an infodemic as: 'an over-abundance of information—some accurate and some not—that makes it hard for people to find

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trustworthy sources and reliable guidance when they need it' (WHO 2020, 2). Democracies have adopted several measures to address this rising phenomenon which impedes public health efforts. In this article, we seek to identify some of the early lessons learned from the COVID-19 infodemic.

Information manipulation is a relatively cheap and easy way to exploit a precarious situation. For authoritarian actors, such as Russia, China and Iran, manipulating information is a reliable tactic frequently deployed at home and abroad to undermine rivals or 'rewrite the present' (Lim 2020). Public health crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic create fertile ground for the deployment of manipulated information to undermine democratic systems. Indeed, falsehoods and conspiracy theories spread more quickly than public health officials and other relevant authorities can react. Making matters worse, several existing trends and challenges have created a favourable environment for manipulated information to be propagated in. These include a lack of trust in government, democratic institutions, experts and the independent press; disagreement about and the manipulation of facts, figures and data for political gain; and, fundamentally, shortcomings in education.

We argue that we can learn seven major lessons from the measures democracies have implemented to address the COVID-19 infodemic. These include the importance of resilience, a cross-party approach to health crises, transparent communication, the exposure of disinformation, the protection of democratic principles and processes, and growing trust through cooperation. Subsequently, we offer a set of recommendations to tackle similar challenges in the future.

Lessons learned

Lesson 1

Build resilience by piercing information bubbles, filling information voids, and coordinating institutional and national efforts. Malign actors exploit information voids to interfere in democratic discourse through manipulated narratives, which they utilise to shape public opinion in their favour, against their adversaries, or to suppress information. Crises create fertile ground for information voids as events can move quickly, leaving governments and the press playing catch-up. In the context of COVID-19, as scientists, medical professionals and public health officials were studying the cause and symptoms of COVID-19, and adequate measures to prevent and treatments to tackle it, falsehoods and conspiracy theories were travelling across the globe freely. Among others, authoritarian actors created and amplified manipulated information (Kovalčíková and Tabatabai 2020).

In response, the EU undertook an interinstitutional effort, demonstrating the importance of a proactive communication strategy at the European level to guide the member states. The European Council issued a joint statement vowing to 'resolutely counter disinformation with transparent, timely and fact-based communication on what [it is] doing

and thus reinforce the resilience of our societies' (European Council 2020, 2). It pledged to do so with the involvement of other key bodies, including the Commission and the EU's high representative for foreign affairs and security policy. This was later followed by a Joint Communication of the Commission and the High Representative to tackle COVID-19 disinformation (European Commission 2020). Though a good start, this effort would have benefited from two additional measures: prompt and more coordinated implementation, at both the EU and national levels; and a more geographically equitable engagement of European representatives in national media.

Recommendation. International institutions, national governmental bodies, public health experts, healthcare workers, academic and research institutions, and the media should 'speak and amplify the facts' and coordinate their responses across national public spheres to be more effective, keeping citizens well-informed and resilient to disinformation.

Lesson 2

Public health crises should not be partisan contests. Though hyper-partisanship in certain democratic societies, such as the US, predates COVID-19, the crisis has added an additional challenge as hyper-partisanship now has a public health impact as well as political implications. Many view basic apolitical issues, facts and data through a hyper-partisan lens. For example, among parts of the American public, masks have become a partisan symbol, rather than a politically neutral tool designed to help curb the spread of a global pandemic. In May and June, only 35% of Republicans reported consistent mask use. A potentially significant factor contributing to their resistance was President Trump's own refusal to wear one (Walsh 2020).

Likewise, in Spain, members of the opposition and some major regional authorities from the same parties have resisted coronavirus-related measures adopted by the government. They accused the prime minister of reacting too late to the crisis and of misleading the public regarding the availability of medical equipment supplies, thus prolonging the lockdown period. Such views were also reflected in the strong push from business leaders hit by the pandemic's economic downturn, who wanted to loosen restrictive measures (Gallardo 2020). The politicisation of the health crisis has contributed to the informational chaos and weakened citizens' capacity to filter out the most critical information pertaining to the virus in this time of uncertainty.

On the other hand, in Slovakia—one of the countries with the fewest coronavirus deaths in the European Economic Area since the beginning of the pandemic (Stewart 2020)—President Zuzana Čaputová has led from the front, wearing a face mask and gloves even during the new government's swearing-in ceremony (Serhan 2020). The images of the ceremony went viral on social media and her leadership has helped to normalise the use of masks from the very beginning across the country (Feldman 2020). Leaders in Europe and elsewhere, including Greece and Japan, have followed a similar

path. To raise public awareness and to counter manipulated narratives about the virus, they have sought to avoid confusion over the necessity of wearing a mask, preventing malign actors from casting doubts on the governments' policies (Timsit 2020).

Recommendation. National leaders should work across party lines and lead from the front to advance a coherent, unifying and effective public messaging campaign designed to avoid confusion and help mitigate the disease in a sustainable way.

Lesson 3

Clearly distinguish facts from opinion. Both traditional media outlets and social media channels are used to spread disinformation, especially during health crises. With mainstream media vilified in some democratic societies, many citizens have turned to hyper-partisan and even fringe outlets and social media content for information. Many such outlets and platforms see the extreme politicisation of all content as a means to increase ratings, leading to a more profitable information environment. In the US, some far-right media outlets and social media profiles with large audiences have dabbled in conspiracy theories and promoted falsehoods about COVID-19, leading their audiences to take the disease less seriously (Ingraham 2020).

Peer-reviewed studies have found that individuals consuming far-right content were more likely to believe conspiracy theories and falsehoods than those who received information from mainstream outlets, for example about possible treatments for the disease (Ingraham 2020). This stresses the importance of the role of traditional mainstream media in achieving two objectives. First, traditional media serve as a conduit between public health officials and medical professionals on the one hand and citizens on the other. Second, they fulfil another critical function as a fact-checking mechanism, promoting accurate information and debunking falsehoods. This allows readers and viewers to recognise false information and potentially serve as force multipliers, as these individuals can then spread accurate information and debunk falsehoods in their communities. Of note is a key upcoming EU policy, known as the European Democracy Action Plan, which aims to make clear the distinction between opinion and fact to protect freedom of speech while preventing the spread of manipulated information (*DW Global Media Forum* 2020).

Recommendation. Both traditional and social media play an important role in sharing and amplifying accurate, timely and relevant information, even more so during a global health pandemic. Media outlets should be cautious and clear when conveying messages to the wider public and should help their audiences to distinguish between what is reported as factual and what is an opinion. Social media platforms should fact-check content more proactively, flagging content that promotes falsehoods about the disease and its cure.

Lesson 4

Understand, expose and mitigate authoritarian actors' efforts to exploit existing cleavages between democracies. The EU and NATO have been among the top targets of the Kremlin's disinformation efforts (*EUvsDisinfo* 2020b). Manipulated and divisive narratives promoted by Russia, China and other actors have been designed to distract from their own failures, increase cleavages between NATO and EU member states, and undermine European unity (*EUvsDisinfo* 2020a). For example, 'Russian narratives' were shared in several Dutch social media groups, alleging 'European divisions and lack of mutual solidarity between countries in Western Europe with regards to Covid-19' (Pieters 2020).

Recommendation. Within the EU, at NATO and among democracies more generally, continued proactive, regular and timely communication and coordination to combat information manipulation is key, especially during public health crises that know no borders. Existing mechanisms in key institutions across the Atlantic can be used to enhance coordination efforts by democracies to empower and project a united approach to infodemics.

Lesson 5

Democracies should know better and not fall into authoritarian traps. Sometimes democracies fall into authoritarian traps and help to undermine their own systems and institutions. By echoing authoritarian narratives intended to undermine democracies and their capacity to tackle the pandemic, democratic representatives play into the hands of malign actors. For instance, in Romania, prominent politicians raised doubts about preventative measures and spread corona-sceptic and anti-vaccine messages on national television (Rosca 2020), while 41% of Romanians had already been identified as being susceptible to conspiracy theories about the virus (Euro Comunicare 2020, 10). Taking advantage of these tensions, the Russian website, Sputnik, repeatedly promoted content that undermined the Romanian government's efforts and amplified content on demonstrations opposing them (Rosca 2020).

Recommendation. Democratic governments, political parties and media outlets should not embrace manipulated information. Disinformation should be exposed by authoritative voices. Actual assessments of the scope of public health crises should be presented at all stages of the crisis and regularly shared with the public by national broadcasters and other trusted and widely followed sources. This is not just critical for transparency and accountability—both key to the proper functioning of democracies and to distinguishing them from authoritarian regimes—but also to governments' ability to effectively mitigate the spread of epidemics and pandemics.

Lesson 6

Prepare for safe elections. The safety of citizens comes first, always. Holding elections is more challenging during public health crises. Failing to make adequate preparations can not only further exacerbate public health crises, it can also delegitimise elections, undermine democracy and lead to an election meltdown. To prepare to hold elections in a safe and secure manner, a number of steps can be taken at the local, regional and national levels.

During the 2020 US presidential primary elections, the state of Georgia experienced a number of challenges, some stemming from or exacerbated by the pandemic. Among these, inadequate preparations by state officials led to a lack of proper support for rolling out the state's new voting system, and local officials' failure in at least one county to recruit a sufficient number of poll workers resulted in long queues as some polling locations were closed due to the pandemic, leading to their consolidation (Fowler 2020).

In Poland, the government intended to hold its recent presidential elections during the pandemic using the postal service, Polish Post, an entity which lacks experience in conducting elections. Concerns over potential data-privacy violations voiced by local and regional authorities led to a review of the security of such electoral changes. In turn, this contributed to confusion over the process in the early stages of voter registration and cast doubt on the government's handling of the adaptations (Wanat 2020). While the idea of using Polish Post was later abandoned and other measures were subsequently undertaken to ensure safe elections, better preparation could have helped to mitigate the mishaps that led to confusion. Indeed, such issues are commonly exploited by malign actors to undermine trust in democratic processes. For example, in February, prior to the US primaries, the Kremlin's network of state media highlighted conspiracy theories on social media about the malfunctioning and 'not properly tested' app used to tabulate and report results in Iowa (Corasaniti et al. 2020) and its alleged murky ties to certain candidates. Confusion around the newly created app and a lack of clear information created fertile ground to cast doubt on the integrity of the process (Brandt 2020).

Recommendation. Adequate resources and preparation are needed to conduct safe and secure elections. Substantial changes made to election procedures should be done in a timely and transparent manner to avoid any doubts about the legitimacy of elections that foreign adversaries could exploit in their disinformation campaigns.

Lesson 7

Enhance trust and resilience by implementing multinational and multi-stakeholder tools of cooperation. Developing interinstitutional relations, increasing transparency and creating collaboration between democratic actors are necessities for a healthy and safe society,

and may mitigate a crisis. In times of crisis, maintaining adequate levels of cooperation on public communication initiatives and security efforts to counter emerging challenges in cyberspace is key. This increases trust and is a viable solution to fighting disinformation in a sustainable way (OECD 2020, 4).

While Russia and China have used the COVID-19 crisis as an opportunity to present themselves as internationally responsible actors, they have also aimed to undermine democracies' capacity to tackle the pandemic adequately. Governments are not equipped to address the global health pandemic and infodemic on their own but together, and alongside other stakeholders who play a role in the fight against disinformation their effectiveness increases exponentially. For example, responses by local actors have been further amplified by NATO coordination mechanisms. The Euro-Atlantic Disaster Response Coordination Centre, NATO's principal civil emergency response mechanism in the Euro-Atlantic area, helped coordinate all allies as well as partners (NATO 2020), and facilitated deliveries of medical supplies. Raising public awareness of NATO's role and concrete actions during the crisis has helped to increase understanding of the Alliance's role and capacities and, consequently, public support for it (Vilnius National Foundation 2020). Also, as part of the newly established Paris Call Community on Countering Election Interference, the Canadian government, Microsoft and the Alliance for Securing Democracy have joined efforts in a multi-stakeholder approach, bringing together stakeholders from government, civil society and industry to counter election interference, including manipulated information. Through a series of community workshops, the process has led to a number of recommendations which have gained further relevance due to the additional challenges caused by the pandemic in the information space.

Recommendation. Sharing relevant, accurate and timely information with allies and partners can save lives at home and abroad. Multinational and multi-stakeholder initiatives should be further integrated into crisis-management portfolios for international emergencies in order to detect manipulated information and allow for a rapid, coordinated and systematic response. They should also be regularly assessed for potential expansion or adaptation to enhance societal resilience and trust.

Conclusion

COVID-19 is the most significant public health crisis that democracies on either side of the Atlantic have faced in decades. It has led to—and, in turn, been exacerbated by—an infodemic that is undermining trust in democratic institutions, the free press, and scientific and public health experts. We have identified seven key lessons to be learned from the COVID-19 infodemic and have provided recommendations for preventing and tackling analogous situations in the future. In addition to the steps suggested above, a number of other measures could help to mitigate public health-related infodemics in the future, and with this, their impact on democracies. Critically, a long-term and structural response is needed.

However, the right balance has to be struck between countering disinformation and protecting freedom of expression. Facts need to be distinguished from opinions, and necessary temporary restrictive measures have to be adopted. But in all this, citizens' safety has to be prioritised over partisan contests, and there can be no backsliding on democratic values and principles. The abundance of manipulated information could lead to an undesirable scenario in which citizens treat 'disinformation' as the new normal, and not as a real threat.

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Transatlantic relations after the COVID-19 pandemic

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Abstract

This article analyses how the COVID-19 pandemic has affected the relationship between Europe and the US, and provides suggestions on how transatlantic cooperation should be taken forward. The pandemic has increased public distrust of the US in Europe due to the way the former has chosen to respond to COVID-19. However, this article argues that the pandemic has mainly accelerated existing transatlantic differences rather than creating new ones. To restore the transatlantic relationship, Europe and the US should strengthen their cooperation on common challenges such as climate change, health security, China, terrorism and migration. COVID-19 has highlighted the limitations of nationalist and unilateral policies in confronting global challenges. It may, in the end, provide the impetus for a rejuvenated transatlantic partnership and build a renewed sense of transatlantic solidarity.

Keywords

EU, US, Transatlantic relationship, COVID-19, China, International relations

Introduction

The novel coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic has not outright caused changes in international relations. Rather, it has reinforced and accelerated fundamental characteristics of the international system that had already appeared before the crisis (Haass 2020a, 2). The same holds true for its effect on transatlantic relations.

The reputation of the US has declined sharply over the past year, even among its key allies and partners. For example, just 41% of the public in the UK express a favourable opinion of the US. In France, only 31% see the US positively, and in Germany only 26% (Wike et al. 2020). Never in the history of Pew polling has the US ranked this low. This

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decline has been the result of its handling of the pandemic and of concerns about racial injustice following the 25 May killing of George Floyd in Minneapolis, which led to massive protests in major cities of the US. Views of the administration of President Donald J. Trump have also deteriorated further, with a median of only 16% expressing confidence in him in the 13 countries surveyed (Wike et al. 2020).

Attitudes and public opinion aside, the pandemic is the latest in a series of mutual grievances between the two sides of the Atlantic over defence spending, trade, lack of consultation and much more. National responses to the pandemic brought about more grievances and tension.

In the face of medical supply shortages, both the United States and Europe turned inward. Washington ordered the 3M company to halt its export of N95 masks and to reroute its overseas production to the United States as part of a broader effort to meet domestic demand. The European Union banned the export of face shields, gloves, masks, and protective garments for the same reason. (Donfried and Ischinger 2020, 1)

This transatlantic disarray opened a window of opportunity that Russia and China rushed to exploit. China, in particular, saw a chance to improve its image, which had been tarnished by its disastrous initial reaction of denial and cover up that had helped to spread the disease. It engaged in a massive public relations campaign, sending medical staff, gloves and masks to many European countries.

This article argues that, although COVID-19 has affected the transatlantic relationship negatively, US and European positions on several major issues had been diverging even before the pandemic. These include policy disagreements over Iraq, the Kyoto Protocol, the International Criminal Court, the Paris Climate Agreement, the nuclear deal with Iran, tariffs, digital taxation and the relocation of the US embassy in Israel to Jerusalem (Brattberg and Whineray 2020, 2). Trump's unilateral withdrawal from the World Health Organization in the midst of a pandemic, and his refusal to join an international vaccine effort involving more than 170 nations has made things even worse. To restore the transatlantic relationship, Europe and the US should strengthen their cooperation on common challenges such as climate change, health security, China, terrorism and migration. Given that COVID-19 has highlighted the limitations of nationalist and unilateral policies in confronting global challenges, it may, in the end, provide the impetus for a rejuvenated transatlantic partnership and build a renewed sense of transatlantic solidarity.

The rest of the article is divided into four sections. The first provides a brief overview of transatlantic relations under the Trump administration. The second looks at how the transatlantic alliance oscillates between 'strategic dependence' and a future of 'strategic autonomy', even though the most sensible and mutually beneficial posture would be 'strategic complementarity'. The third looks at the increasing strategic significance of China, and how US and European policies towards Beijing shape the transatlantic relationship. The fourth and final section concludes the article.

Transatlantic relations under Trump

The Trump administration has widened the rift between the two sides of the Atlantic. Trump's offensive and divisive rhetoric has alienated Europeans. His comments on the EU being a 'foe' or 'competitor', Germany being 'very bad' and a 'captive of Russia', NATO being 'obsolete' and so many others have insulted European leaders and offended European public opinion. He is perceived as impulsive and unpredictable, making unilateral decisions such as the withdrawal of US forces from Syria or Germany without prior consultation with European Allies (Brattberg and Whineray 2020).

Europeans loathe Trump's transactional approach to foreign policy with its emphasis on making gains in short-term deals rather than in managing long-term relationships. They have a hard time understanding his antagonising of America's allies and dismantling of international institutions that were built under the leadership of the US and, for the most part, have served American interests well. His rhetoric and policies have sapped confidence in his leadership in general and his commitment to the transatlantic partnership in particular (Arvanitopoulos 2019).

His handling of the pandemic has further eroded trust in his leadership. The belief in Europe that the 'adults in the room', that is, the seasoned professionals that occupy key positions in the administration, would temper his erratic behaviour came crumbling down with the pandemic. Trump has shown total disrespect for science and scientists in his handling of the pandemic and thus has exacerbated the crisis.

Finally, the pandemic has highlighted the 'spillover effect' of Trumpism in Europe. Views of Trump are more positive among Europeans who have favourable views of right-wing populist parties. Consequently, positive ratings of America's response to the pandemic are linked to support for right-wing populist parties and political ideology within several countries. 'Those on the extreme right are more likely to think that the US has done a good job handling the outbreak' (Wike et al. 2020).

The Trump Presidency and the evolution of American public opinion have created significant political uncertainty in Europe about the future of transatlantic relations. European policymakers are trying to understand and assess whether these recent developments reflect a permanent change and divergence between the two sides of the Atlantic or whether they represent temporary trends. Differences on policy issues, quarrels over 'burden sharing' and clashes in the personalities of the leaderships have often appeared along the trajectory of the transatlantic partnership. They have not, so far, managed to create a permanent and irreparable rift between the two sides of the Atlantic.

The US reaction to the pandemic, however, has reinforced the notion that the direction of the Trump administration reflects a structural change in US foreign policy and American public opinion. The first to express this concern was German Chancellor Angela Merkel with her statement on 'taking our fate into our own hands' during the first skirmishes with the Trump administration and Trump's visit to Europe. Following

Trump's announcement of the US withdrawal from the Iran nuclear deal, Merkel came back with a stronger statement: 'it is not the case that the United States of America will simply protect us. Instead, Europe must take its destiny in its own hands. That is our job for the future' (Merkel 2018).

And so the concept of 'strategic autonomy' has become the focal point of European policy. EU member states have signed a new defence agreement for Permanent Structured Cooperation, a legally binding framework for the most willing and able member states to work on project-based joint capability development. In addition, they have established a joint European Defence Fund, for which the European Council proposed a €7.014 billion budget for 2021–7 in July. They have also created smaller EU Battlegroups to respond to and prevent crises (Nováký 2017).

Strategic complementarity

The asymmetry in power between Europe and the US, the notion of the 'uneven barbell' in the defence area, created a European dependence on the US for its security during the Cold War which continues to persist. American pre-eminence was conceded by the Europeans in return for American nuclear protection. Both sides of the Atlantic benefited from this arrangement. The EU could not have sustained its pan-European dream without the American security guarantee, and the US could not have maintained a strong global reach without a powerful and self-sufficient Europe. European free-riding in defence was allowed because a united Western Europe was considered vital in the overarching American Cold War strategy.

The eclipse of the Soviet threat after the collapse of the USSR and the rise of China have led the US to increasingly abdicate its responsibilities for Europe and 'pivot to Asia'. Trump's hostility to NATO and the EU has sent Europeans back to the drawing board. The European vision of 'strategic autonomy', on the other hand, has raised scepticism in the US. 'US policymakers would prefer Europeans to spend more on military power within the confines of NATO, an idea that is based on the assumption that a more capable Europe would still follow the United States' lead' (Polyakova and Haddad 2020). It is unlikely, however, that Europe with a defence capability will blindly follow the US.

US policymakers face a dilemma: 'do they prefer to maintain a weak and divided Europe that is aligned with their interests and dependent on US power? Or are they ready to deal with a more forceful and autonomous partner that will sometimes go against their favoured policies?' (Polyakova and Haddad 2020). Aside from legitimate fears of unnecessary duplication with the NATO alliance, the Trump administration's negative stance towards European defence cooperation is counterintuitive. Increased European spending on defence addresses the 'burden sharing' issue, and the strengthening of European forces benefits both NATO and the EU.

The strengthening of European defence should gently situate the transatlantic alliance, which oscillates between a condition of 'strategic dependence' and a future of 'strategic

autonomy', in the sensible and mutually beneficial posture of 'strategic complementarity'. This outcome would be more easily facilitated by a new US administration. For many Europeans, Trump, with his 'America first' slogan and his antipathy towards the EU and NATO, has forfeited his ability to bring unity to the transatlantic partnership.

Pivot to Eurasia

There seems to be an additional reason for the growing psychological distancing between the US and Europe. Europeans are concerned that the eastern American establishment, which had traditionally been dominant in US policy formulation, is no longer in control. US foreign policy has shifted towards Asia, bringing to power people of political influence without a strong European orientation. This estrangement is not only due to high politics, but also to trends in demographics and public opinion. European immigration to the US is declining and, consequently, the role of Europeans in shaping the US political landscape is also declining (Ganesh 2020).

The lack of interest in Europe is a trend particularly evident in the falling interest in European studies at American universities. This declining interest in Europe has come about as a result of the fact that Europe is no longer the strategic theatre of geopolitics. The dissolution of the Soviet Union, its succession by a declining Russia and the rise of China have moved the geopolitical pendulum to Asia.

China poses a serious challenge to American and Western interests. It is not only challenging American geopolitical interests in South-East Asia, but with its grand geopolitical design of the 'One Belt One Road Initiative', it is trying to alter the balance of power in the Eurasian landmass. It also poses a challenge to the global economic system and the Western liberal order (Arvanitopoulos 2019).

The US 'pivot to Asia' preceded the Trump administration. It was a policy created under the Obama–Biden administration and will certainly not be reversed by a Biden Presidency. The truth of the matter is that since George W. Bush all presidents have followed a policy of disengagement from Europe that has differed only in scope and style.

Concern with Asia is not a new element of US foreign policy. There has always been a strong tradition of US involvement in Asia, dating all the way back to Andrew Jackson and Theodore Roosevelt. In 1906 Roosevelt was the first American president to be awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for his backchannel efforts to broker the Treaty of Portsmouth that ended the Russo-Japanese war. The US, a continental nation reaching from the Atlantic to the Pacific, has always kept one eye to the west, like the Roman god Janus. The shift to the Pacific is here to stay. The Quad, the new security forum formed of the US, Japan, Australia and India, is a response to the rising challenge of China. 'The call of Asia is too loud in Washington' (Ganesh 2020).

The US–China feud under the Trump administration has mainly been about trade issues. His withdrawal from the Trans-Pacific Partnership Agreement was a result of his

fixation on the idea that every transaction ought to be a zero-sum game, with a winner and a loser. Trump was eager to strike his own bilateral trade deal with China and sell it to his electorate in glowing terms. It was only after the COVID-19 pandemic hit the US that Trump's rhetoric towards China became bellicose. Now that the 'Chinese virus' was threatening his presidency, the rhetoric of his administration shifted to pitting the 'free world' against a new 'tyranny'. A Democratic administration is more likely to put values and human rights at the centre of its foreign policy towards China.

On the other hand, China's increased economic and political footprint in Europe has led to growing concern among policymakers. The absence of a unified policy approach has given China increased leverage on a bilateral basis with EU member states. The size of Chinese investments has led some critics to suggest that Chinese money could replace Russian energy as a source of significant influence in Europe. In response to these concerns, the European Commission promoted, and the European Parliament adopted legislation requiring transparency and screening of Chinese investments, more controls over potential Chinese dumping, and more scrutiny of China's offers to provide debt-based infrastructure financing and low-cost loans (*Congressional Research Service* 2019). In March 2019, the EU released a new EU–China Strategic Outlook, which stated that China is an economic competitor in the pursuit of technological leadership, and a systemic rival promoting alternative models of governance. This document requires all member states doing business with China to ensure compliance with EU law, rules and policies (European Commission and High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy 2019).

Europe will not strictly follow the US lead when it comes to defining its relationship with China. As Macron put it, 'we have the right not to be outright enemies with our friends' enemies' (*Economist* 2019). When Europeans were asked in a poll, which side, if any, their country should take in a US–China conflict, their overwhelming answer was neither (Ganesh 2020). At the same time, there is a security concern in Europe with respect to its technology base and its 5G networks. China's role in connecting billions of sensitive information and communication technology systems in crucial sectors has become a concern not only in the US but in Europe as well.

If security concerns in Europe and the US are one aspect of a common approach regarding China, the other is the issue of values and democracy. It is the alternative political model that China presents, and more importantly, the revenue it offers to struggling governments that give weak democracies the capacity to pull away from the West. This dynamic is most apparent in Eastern Europe and the Balkans, where China has made major infrastructure investments (Kendall-Taylor and Shullman 2018). This became particularly evident during the pandemic crisis, when China engaged in a massive public relations campaign by airlifting medical equipment to win the hearts and minds of the citizens of these states.

The defence of the Western ideals of democracy, freedom and human rights; a free market economy; and the security of the West are better served by a common approach

and a strong transatlantic partnership. The US may be pivoting to Asia, but China has been pivoting to Europe through a series of bilateral agreements with member states and heavy investments. The Belt and Road Initiative exceeds regional ambitions and is indicative of China's global aspirations. America's 'pivot to Asia' is a regional response to a global challenge that defies the geopolitical concept of Eurasia as an undivided space. To meet the challenge of China, the two pillars of the West, the US and Europe, need to form a unified response across Eurasia.

Conclusion

Since 1985, the world has faced a number of pandemic crises, from Aids, SARS and Ebola, to H1N1 and COVID-19. Despite the nationalisation of the immediate response to the current crisis, citizens and policymakers on both sides of the Atlantic increasingly realise that an effective response to the problem requires more, rather than less, cooperation. Europe and the US need to work together to tackle this and future pandemics. This cooperation must be based 'on an agreed transatlantic pandemic strategy that defines what constitutes a pandemic, explains protocols for early containment and mitigation, and details how to manage the outbreak collectively if it spreads globally' (Donfried and Ischinger 2020).

The US and Europe should work together to reform and strengthen the World Health Organization so that it can provide 'an early warning commitment not only by national governments but also by regional health authorities, research labs, and companies to report outbreaks of epidemic diseases' (Donfried and Ischinger 2020). Pandemics, however, are just one of the many global challenges that require enhanced cooperation between the two sides of the Atlantic. Climate change is becoming the defining issue of the twenty-first century, and one that no single country can tackle on its own (Haass 2020b, 192). Terrorism, cybersecurity and the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction are some of the other global challenges that we face today that require a strong transatlantic partnership.

Migration and refugee issues are becoming a serious problem in world affairs. Whether people leave their countries for economic reasons, to avoid conflicts and civil wars or, increasingly, because of climate change, the numbers are rising. Currently, there are some 250 million migrants in the world (Haass 2020b, 123). This is another global problem that requires increased cooperation. This holds especially true for the EU and the US, since they have the capacity to address the causes and conditions that lead to migration and it is in both their interests to do this.

The COVID-19 crisis has highlighted the limitations of nationalist and unilateral policies in confronting global challenges. The pandemic and the numerous other global challenges we face may, in the end, provide the impetus for a rejuvenated transatlantic partnership and 'build a renewed sense of transatlantic solidarity that can last through this emergency and beyond' (Donfried and Ischinger 2020).

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The importance of health security in post-Brexit EU–UK relations

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Abstract

This article examines the possibilities for negotiating the UK–EU health-security relationship after 2020. Health security, in the sense of measures to prevent and mitigate health emergencies, had played a marginal role in the UK–EU negotiations, but COVID-19 has greatly amplified this policy area's significance. At the beginning of the pandemic, Brussels introduced significant measures to promote public health sovereignty, notably joint procurement and stockpiling of personal protective equipment. The UK went against the grain by limiting its involvement in joint procurement at a time when other countries were rushing to participate. UK participation in some EU health measures is possible on existing terms, but not joint procurement. This leaves the UK facing an uncertain future because of the potential risks associated with not participating in EU programmes, notably in terms of access to personal protective equipment supplies and possible market distortion resulting from new EU policies promoting stockpiling and reshoring. The politicisation of health security thus adds another complication to the post-Brexit EU–UK relationship.

Keywords

Brexit, Health security, COVID-19, Health sovereignty, Stockpiling

Introduction

The EU has traditionally had very limited involvement in public health policy, with only supporting competences in what is a highly complex policy area where member states typically preferred maximum autonomy (Greer et al. 2019). Thus it is no surprise that health-related matters initially played a marginal role in the negotiations over the future

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UK–EU relationship. However, the COVID-19 pandemic has greatly amplified the significance of health security in a way that fundamentally intersects with policy priorities in the UK and the EU27. In particular, the EU response is defined by significant legislative and financial measures to promote what has been dubbed public health sovereignty or *souveraineté sanitaire* (Hackenborich et al. 2020). Hence this article explores the way health security—in the sense of measures to prevent and mitigate health emergencies such as pandemics—is destined to be an important and fraught dimension of the UK–EU relationship in the coming years. This is because the UK’s desire to regain control of policymaking is fundamentally at odds with the EU’s cooperative and increasingly solidaristic approach to health security.

The Political Declaration on the future UK–EU relationship agreed by the European Council in October 2019, which concluded the first phase of Brexit, specifically mentioned health security. It stated that ‘the Parties should cooperate in matters of health security in line with existing Union arrangements with third countries. The Parties will aim to cooperate in international fora on prevention, detection, preparation for and response to established and emerging threats to health security in a consistent manner’ (European Commission 2019, 21).

Yet the aspiration to cooperate in this area did not feature in the UK government’s Draft UK–EU Comprehensive Free Trade Agreement, or in drafts of separate agreements for specific sectors, published at the start of 2020. By contrast, a chapter of the EU’s *Draft Text of the Agreement on the New Partnership with the United Kingdom* was devoted to this topic under the broader rubric of ‘thematic cooperation’ (European Commission 2020a). UK and EU negotiators have discussed thematic cooperation since the beginning of the second phase of Brexit talks in March 2020, albeit with only one slot reserved for this topic in any given round of talks—an indication of its low-priority status. The notion of health security as an afterthought of Brexit, a loose end to be tied up after a hard-fought trade negotiation, is less and less plausible because of the lasting implications of the COVID-19 pandemic, not least when it comes to building resilience against a future epidemic. Nevertheless, the true effect of EU withdrawal on health security in the UK will only be revealed after 2020, at which point policymakers on both sides will need to be prepared for tough decisions.

Health security during and after the Brexit transition

Health security does not fit neatly in the classic delineation of EU decision-making in terms of supranationalism or intergovernmentalism. Impetus for policymaking in this area comes from the Commission, which has the independent authority to declare a ‘public health emergency’, and the European Centre for Prevention and Disease Control (ECDC) based in Stockholm, whose work and budget are overseen by the European Parliament (Bengtsson and Rhinard 2019). The ordinary legislative procedure can be used under Article 168 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union to take direct measures to promote public health, as in the creation of the Health and Security Committee (HSC) in 2013 to prepare and coordinate national responses to serious

cross-border threats to health (Greer et al. 2019, 86). In practice, health security in the EU system revolves around networked coordination between EU and national authorities as well as experts, which has collectively shaped the securitisation of public health (Bengtsson and Rhinard 2019). The international aspect of health security is also a mixed bag because the Commission is responsible for negotiating trade deals that may have a health component, which member states need to ratify unanimously if a deal intersects with national health competences, while the ECDC has a variety of partnerships with third countries.

During the post-Brexit transition period, as per the 2019 Withdrawal Agreement, the UK has benefited from a special status meaning it could participate in EU health-security measures on the same terms as EU member states. This arrangement has allowed the UK to retain full access (overseen by Public Health England) to the Early Warning and Response System (EWRS), administered by the ECDC, for the prevention and control of communicable diseases. Moreover, UK representatives could attend meetings of the HSC. The UK also had the opportunity to participate in joint procurement programmes launched by the Commission in March 2020 for ventilators, protective personal equipment for medical staff (PPE) and COVID-19 testing kits. There was fairly extensive press coverage in the UK of Westminster's decision not to participate in these bulk-buying initiatives (House of Commons Library 2020). Less well known is the fact that, in May 2020, the UK received a delivery of PPE via the EU's Emergency Support Instrument, to which the EU allocated €2.7 billion to support member states' health care systems during the early months of the pandemic (British Medical Association 2020). According to the British Medical Association (2020, 1), 'the UK requested access to the scheme and had been selected based on a formula which considered "epidemiological data, needs of the countries and the access to equipment"'.

In the absence of a new UK–EU agreement covering health security, the UK stands to lose the ability to participate in the above institutions and programmes. Currently, full access to the EWRS and other information-sharing systems of the ECDC is reserved for EU and European Economic Area (EEA) member states. EEA countries (Iceland, Liechtenstein and Norway) provide approximately €1.5 million per annum to the ECDC budget, in sums calculated in proportion to their gross domestic product. Other countries may be allowed temporary, ad hoc access to manage a health emergency that poses a cross-border threat in Europe (as provided for in the EU's draft of the UK–EU partnership agreement), but third countries do not have routine access to the full range of ECDC health coordination systems (Greer et al. 2019). Switzerland, despite extensive bilateral treaties with the EU, is not a full member of the ECDC. EEA countries, plus Turkey and Serbia, have official observer status within the HSC. This status is available to EU candidate countries as well as other third countries 'where it is in the interest of the Union that such country is involved in the works of the HSC, in particular based on an international agreement, an administrative arrangement or EU legislation' (European Commission 2013, 1).

Hence there is legal scope after the transition period to find an agreement over UK partial participation in the ECDC and to obtain observer status at the HSC within the

existing rules. The same is not true of the EU's Joint Procurement Agreement (JPA), which currently covers 37 countries including the UK. The JPA is a voluntary scheme that has existed since 2014 and allows signatory states to pool resources when tendering for medical counter-measures (vaccines, antivirals, PPE and assorted equipment). In effect, it is a buyers' club that negotiates collectively to benefit from economies of scale and to avoid competition for scarce resources among purchasing states (Greer et al. 2019, 82–4). Each participating state has the option, on a case-by-case basis, of associating themselves with a particular joint procurement procedure until the publication of a call for tenders.

The need to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic breathed new life into this initiative, resulting in four calls for tenders by the end of March 2020. The pandemic brought about a flurry of new signatories, with 12 countries joining since February 2020. For instance, Norway, which did not sign the JPA when it launched in 2014, rushed to become a member of the scheme in March 2020 but was too late to participate in the first tender (Eliassen and Melchior 2020). For its part, the UK opted not to participate in the four initial tenders launched between April and May 2020 worth €3 billion, a decision justified by Cabinet Minister Michael Gove on the basis that 'there's nothing that participating in [the JPA] scheme would have allowed us to do that we have not been able to do ourselves' (House of Commons Library 2020, 18). Instead, the UK organised a separate initiative for procuring ventilator equipment that met with limited success. The JPA is only available to EU, EEA and candidate countries. Thus if the UK wanted to remain a participating state, it would need to negotiate a new arrangement without precedent. Switzerland, which does not fit existing categories for membership, is not able to participate in the JPA. Moreover, the JPA is subject to EU law, which means the UK would have to accept involvement of the Court of Justice of the EU in the event of disputes over procurement processes. In addition to the theoretical problem of the sovereignty implications of the JPA, the UK also faces more practical challenges resulting from the knock-on effects of EU moves to improve the health sovereignty of the EU27.

EU health sovereignty and the challenge for Brexit Britain

Traditionally, the EU's direct involvement in public health policy was legally and politically structured as a complement to national measures, notably via the work of two bodies: the ECDC and the European Medicines Agency (Greer et al. 2019). COVID-19 has changed all that by putting health at the centre of the ongoing conversation on the future of Europe, overlapping neatly with the idea that EU legitimacy can best be enhanced by policies that protect citizens in their everyday lives. This desire helps explain the new raft of legislative and financial measures to fight the pandemic and improve future EU preparedness. These include joint procurement for medical counter-measures, PPE stockpiling, a Pharmaceutical Strategy aimed at reducing direct dependence on raw materials sourced from non-EU countries and export controls on PPE. In May 2020 the European Commission prepared a programme called EU4Health with a proposed budget of €9.4 billion provisionally allocated for 2021–27 to respond to the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. Yet the hard-fought negotiation over the EU's multiannual financial framework reduced the available funds for this programme to €1.7 billion.

Despite the pared-down financial ambitions, two features of the EU response to COVID-19 stand out for their potential implications for the UK after transition. The first concerns EU-wide export restrictions like those imposed by the European Commission on 14 March 2020. This regulation placed binding restrictions on exports of certain types of PPE outside the EU, the European Free-Trade Association countries and a host of micro-states/EU overseas territories. Under this regulation, exports of five types of PPE were subject to export authorisation by national authorities (spectacles and visors, face shields, mouth–nose protection equipment, protective garments and gloves). The worry was that without such measures the EU might not have sufficient stocks of PPE for its own needs; the restrictions, which were legally binding on the UK, were lifted by the end of May 2020. During this time, 95% of export licence requests were approved by national authorities within the EU (*Reuters* 2020).

The second emergency measure undertaken by the EU is the development of an emergency medical stockpile, including PPE, under the RescEU programme nested within the EU's Civil Protection Mechanism (CPM). Prior to 2020, RescEU reserve capacities only applied to forest-firefighting planes and helicopters. In March 2020, the European Commission announced it would fund up to 100% of the costs for the development and deployment of stockpiles designed to offer emergency supplies during the COVID-19 crisis and future health crises (European Commission 2020b). A sum of €380 million was earmarked from the Emergency Support Initiative to pay for these stockpiles, which started with Romania and Germany ordering masks that were subsequently distributed to Italy, Spain and Croatia. The CPM is not exclusive to EU member states: Iceland, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Norway, Serbia and Turkey all take part in it. The wording of the CPM's rules for participation specifies that, beyond EU and EEA countries, 'other European countries when agreements and procedures so provide' can participate in this arrangement (European Parliament and Council 2019, art. 28).

During the transition period, as explained above, the UK is shielded from any market distortions resulting from the two measures described above. Conversely, after transition, EU public health policies may affect the cost and availability of medical counter-measures, notably PPE, for the UK. Traditionally, the EU has been an important source of PPE for use in the UK, although the proportion of EU imports fell in March and April 2020 (Bevington 2020). Based on the March–May 2020 precedent, UK imports of PPE and medical products or equipment sourced from the EU could be subject to export controls in the event of a severe second wave of COVID-19 or another pandemic. Even if such measures do not result in quantitative restrictions, export licensing adds a bureaucratic impediment that could delay the importation of EU-sourced supplies in an emergency situation. Reduced access to EU-sourced PPE will inevitably make the UK more dependent on China for these supplies, as occurred during March and April 2020.

Equally significantly, EU-organised joint procurement and stockpiling could limit supplies to the UK—or at least increase the cost of bidding against the EU on the global market, which is dominated by Chinese producers that supply 40% of the global PPE market (Bevington 2020). As the world's biggest trader in pharmaceutical and

medicinal products, the EU's COVID-19-related policies to promote stockpiling and reshoring will undoubtedly impact global markets. The greater the scale of the EU's joint efforts in purchasing and stockpiling, the more market power it will have in comparison to the UK government. This fear of exclusion explains the rush of countries that joined the JPA in 2020 as the pandemic struck Europe and countries worldwide sought to block exports of essential medical supplies. The European Commission's intention to provide more funds for stockpiling and facilitate the development of EU-based PPE manufacturing, matched by similar ambitions for the pharmaceutical sector, only amplifies the risk the UK faces as a third country when trying to go it alone.

Conclusion

As demonstrated above, the UK faces an uncertain future after transition if it neglects to negotiate on the subject of health security with the EU. The negative consequences of a broken health-security relationship will also be felt in Europe. The loss of UK participation in the ECDC will impair the surveillance and tracking of cross-border disease threats amongst highly integrated and mobile populations. The EU has suggested accessing the EWRS on an ad hoc basis, which should be the minimum level of participation sought by the UK, alongside obtaining observer status in the HSC, which current rules permit. In addition, the EU27 will need to invest in developing expertise in areas where it traditionally depended on UK inputs, notably in medical research and pharmaceuticals. Nevertheless, the harm caused by disruption in the EU–UK health-security relationship is asymmetrical and politically potentially highly disruptive in the age of COVID-19.

As a country particularly dependent on PPE imports, the UK is at greater risk of supply disruption if it fails to negotiate a relationship that provides for some degree of participation in existing as well as newly launched EU public health policies. Privileging sovereignty over cooperation in the area of health security means the UK government could be punished if its unilateral approach does not pay off. Indeed, the scramble for PPE brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic turned into a geopolitical 'great game' as Russia and China sought to burnish their reputations in Europe by providing this form of medical assistance. This 'battle of narratives', as the EU's High Representative Josep Borrell (2020) has dubbed it, only underscores the value of the JPA and the importance of stockpiling to ensure resilience against a second wave of COVID-19 as well as future pandemics. However, based on existing EU arrangements with third countries, it would appear impossible for the UK to access the JPA without requiring the EU to change its rules of participation and the UK to accept an oversight role for the Court of Justice of the EU. By contrast, the rules governing the CPM suggest it would be possible for the UK to benefit from RescEU stockpiling as a participating state, albeit dependent upon it making an appropriate financial contribution.

In the aftermath of COVID-19, the EU's foreign policy chief notes that the EU must demonstrate that it 'is a Union that protects and that solidarity is not an empty phrase' (Borrell 2020). This focus on material solidarity is welcome, but it makes reconfiguring the UK–EU health-security relationship more difficult as Brexit has made the UK more

wary of making commitments to joint enterprises. The new reality the UK faces after the Brexit transition is one in which the EU's push for greater health sovereignty is liable to affect British policymakers regardless of whether London participates. The politicisation of health security as a result of COVID-19 thus adds another complication to the already fraught post-Brexit EU–UK relationship.

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EU democracy in the times of coronavirus

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Margherita Movarelli

Abstract

The future of the European integration project depends on the EU's ability to respond to the COVID-19 crisis and to other crises in the future. The pandemic constitutes an opportunity for EU democracy to be reinvented and for its complex institutional design and mechanisms to be adapted to the current challenges. This article examines the long-standing debate around the shortcomings of EU democracy and focuses on two elements—populism and communication—as crucial components in understanding the difficulties of democratic governance in the EU today. The COVID-19 crisis has highlighted the flaws of the populist forces, which seemed to lose their consensus in the first months after the outbreak of the pandemic, thus giving traditional parties a chance to reaffirm their position. Furthermore, COVID-19 has emphasised the need for more and better communication between EU institutions, member states and citizens. Overall, EU democracy could benefit from these difficult times and bring the EU closer to its citizens.

Keywords

EU, Democracy, Coronavirus, Democratic deficit, Populism, Communication

Introduction

For over a decade now, EU democracy has been one of the issues taking centre stage in political debate. Following Easton's model of political systems, it can be argued that discussions have referred to both the 'input', that is, the methods of citizen participation, and the 'throughput', namely the institutional arrangements and functioning of the EU (Easton 1957, 383–4).¹ Specifically, the debate has revolved around the democratic character of this apparatus, addressing numerous concerns about the legitimacy and accountability of EU governance (see, e.g. Follesdal 1998). Against this backdrop,

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the global health crisis caused by the coronavirus pandemic has been having a severe impact on the economic and social fabric of the EU, thus contributing to a very insidious picture for EU democracy.

This article investigates the future of the European integration project after the coronavirus by addressing the question of populists' influence on public opinion and the role of communication between EU institutions and citizens. In so doing, it argues that these two elements play a crucial role in defining both democracy in the Union and citizens' trust in the EU. Moreover, they pose pressing questions that will determine the future of the EU, which is now confronting its longstanding and unresolved problems as well as the new challenges imposed by the coronavirus crisis.

The analysis is structured as follows. First, the current state of EU democracy and its weaknesses are presented. Second, the performance of populism in the times of coronavirus is scrutinised and some proposals are put forward to strengthen EU democracy. Lastly, the ties between citizens and EU institutions are discussed through the lens of the Union's 'communication deficit'.

EU democracy: between expectations and disappointment

If we start out from the basic assumption that there is, by definition, an unbreakable bond between democracy and the people, the complexity involved in applying the political categories normally used on a national scale to a supranational and multilevel system such as the European one—whose people are simply the sum of those of its constituent democracies—immediately becomes apparent. Indeed, EU democracy has its own unique features. These peculiarities are linked to its history, how it has been built up through the decades since the Second World War, and the economic, political and social developments that have shaped its evolution. For the purpose of this article, EU democracy is understood as the institutional design and decision procedures of the supranational institutions that characterise the unique system of political actions that the EU embodies.

EU democracy is a product both of the idea that belonging to a single 'European house' can protect the continent from the re-emergence of nationalism, and of the constant balancing of individual member states' interests with those of the EU. Therefore, its structure—evolved during the various stages of the integration process—is manifested at different levels in a complicated intertwining of competences, bodies and decision-making mechanisms known as EU governance. This hybrid model is determined by both intergovernmental and Community mechanisms, which involve both bodies of democratic representatives, such as the European Parliament, and instruments of direct democracy, such as petitions. However, a lot of processes are managed by specialists (or 'technocrats') under the remit of the European Commission and its agencies. Revolving around these, a microcosm of non-governmental organisations, think tanks and businesses actively participate in the EU decision-making process and influence its outcome.

The complexity of these interaction mechanisms, along with the proliferation of rules and bureaucracy that have arisen from them, has reinforced the citizens' perception of a

‘democratic deficit’. The main arguments behind the idea of an ‘undemocratic EU’ refer to the lack of an electoral contest for the political leadership at the EU level and a weak European Parliament (see, e.g. Follesdal and Hix 2006), or the lack of accountability. Furthermore, while for a long time the continent’s economic prosperity and political stability provided a bulwark against citizens challenging the legitimacy of EU democracy, the gradual decline in these areas and the critical issues that have emerged in the governance framework have led to the public’s gradual alienation from the European project. This trend is reflected in the generally low turnout rates for the European Parliament elections—50.66% in 2019 (European Parliament 2019). This has been accompanied by a growing rejection of the commitment to abide by the constraints enshrined in the EU’s integration pact (i.e. financial stability policies, burden-sharing and solidarity schemes).

Finally, EU democracy has also morphed over time into a ‘democracy of narcissism’. According to the definition coined by the historian and political scientist Giovanni Orsina (2018), this is characterised by increasingly demanding citizens, whose democratically elected representatives have made substantial promises of well-being and individual rights which have not, however, been completely honoured, resulting in a vicious circle of growing expectations and disappointments. This is all the more true in the EU because the European level sometimes lacks the powers required for effective action.

Never let a crisis go to waste

In this climate of dissatisfaction, it was easy for the seeds of populism to take root and bear fruit in almost every country across the EU. Populist rhetoric, be it on the left or right, centred on a mantra emphasising the need for people to regain control over the democratic process. ‘Let’s take back control’, the slogan of Vote Leave that successfully campaigned for the UK’s departure from the EU in the country’s 2016 Brexit referendum (*Why Vote Leave* 2016), implied that Britain had ended up in the hands of an EU and global governance system dominated by anti-democratic elites.

It is no coincidence that the first major populist wave to spread across the EU coincided with the period following the 2008 financial crisis. This movement was instigated specifically by a desire to challenge global finance, market deregulation policies and international financial institutions, which were regarded as responsible for the economic disaster. In the EU, populism and Euroscepticism are two sides of the same coin. Both phenomena have made constant headway, propelling populist forces of various kinds to the top of the opinion polls in many EU countries, and even into government itself in some cases—as has happened in Greece, Italy, Poland and the UK. According to populists, the processes of European integration and globalisation are responsible for the impoverishment of vast swathes of the population and growing inequalities.

Years of economic recession, rising unemployment, the lack of a coordinated approach to migration and a standstill in EU governance reforms have worn the EU down. Thus weakened, it now faces a public health challenge whose scale and impact can be likened to a war. In this light, it is conceivable that—once again—the political forces that will

benefit will be those that advocate turning in on ourselves behind our national borders as the solution to the effects of internationalisation. Yet, an initial examination of people's feelings—expressed in public opinion polls in the EU and in other parts of the world during the first month of the health emergency—showed a reverse in this trend.

In the US, President Donald Trump's administration has been accused of underestimating the scale of the health crisis and exposing the US population to the risk of the uncontrolled spread of the virus. In late April 2020, the US—a country without welfare mechanisms capable of providing long-term support to its people, in particular those with lower incomes—had both the highest number of reported coronavirus cases and the biggest COVID-19 death toll (*Worldometer* 2020). In Brazil, President Jair Bolsonaro has been severely criticised for minimising the significance of the COVID-19 pandemic. As a result, he has become such an isolated figure that the very institutional balance of his government has been shaken to its core (*Il Post* 2020). Meanwhile, in Germany, the Christian Democratic Union of Germany (Christlich Demokratische Union Deutschlands) and the Christian Social Union in Bavaria (Christlich-Soziale Union in Bayern) saw their approval ratings rise in their first month of handling the crisis, from March to April 2020 (Forsa 2020), while the far-right populist party Alternative for Germany (Alternative für Deutschland) suffered a decline in its fortunes as it had major problems presenting a clear and credible alternative solution (Schulz 2020). Even in France, Marine Le Pen's far-right National Rally (Rassemblement national) experienced a dip in support during the initial phase of the crisis (de Calignon 2020), while its Italian counterpart, Matteo Salvini's League (Lega), has gradually lost support since the onset of the public health emergency (Faggiano 2020). As for Poland and Hungary, where the coronavirus crisis has led to the adoption of measures criticised for aiming to strengthen executive power, both public opinion and the EU institutions are keeping a close eye on these countries' governments.

For the moment these are only empirical observations, as the situation remains fluid and the trend may well be reversed again. It will all depend on how the crisis develops and the ability of moderate government and opposition forces to provide citizens with practical solutions. However, the current situation suggests a glimmer of hope for the traditional parties, which have an opportunity to reassert their leadership. This contrasts with the flaws so far shown by populists in government and the inability of populists in opposition to present themselves as credible alternative governments in times of crisis.

In this context, EU democracy is under scrutiny too. Now is the time for the EU to demonstrate that, notwithstanding its initial delays and lack of coordination, it can offer a joint response to the crisis. From the beginning it was evident that the scale of the upheaval caused by the spread of COVID-19 would make a return to the pre-crisis status quo unlikely. Instead, huge fiscal interventions and liquidity injections into the system have been required, inevitably raising the level of public debt for many countries. 'Flexibility—not rigidity—is what may yet save Europe', wrote political scientist Ivan Krastev back in 2017 (Krastev 2017, 110). In fact, EU institutions need to deploy the conventional and unconventional tools at their disposal to support member states as they cope with this crisis.

Despite initial disagreements and harsh debates on the approach to take, the EU has adopted several initiatives. The European Commission's three-pronged response to the current crisis provides a good starting point: it has (a) mobilised funds and opened credit lines for member states through various channels such as the European Stability Mechanism, the European Investment Bank and the huge intervention by the European Central Bank; (b) ensured that national borders between member states have remained open so that goods and aid can continue to circulate; and (c) suspended the constraints imposed by the Stability Pact and deviated from the rigid state-aid rules. Nevertheless, the main EU response will arrive with the delivery of the Multiannual Financial Framework 2021–2027 and the recovery fund, which is called 'Next Generation EU'. At the time of writing, the intense negotiations of the European Summit of 17–21 June had just ended with a 'historic deal' (Strupczewski et al. 2020). Indeed, the European Council's agreement on the unprecedented mobilisation of the EU budget and the creation of new financing instruments for the recovery looks promising and paves the way for future prospects for EU democracy. Nonetheless, it is now up to the European Parliament and national parliaments to discuss, approve and implement this agreement.

The crises that have put the EU's democracy to the test in the last two decades, that is, the 2008 economic and financial crisis and the current one, have shown that there is a need for political will to support unconventional measures to get through crises, with these measures then being followed by structural reforms of the European frameworks, in particular, the eurozone. The need to reform EU governance has been discussed for more than 10 years now—unfortunately to no avail. There is also the need for a change of pace in the debate on which European integration model should be pursued in the future. The five scenarios outlined in the European Commission's *White Paper on the Future of Europe* (European Commission 2017) provide a useful tool for understanding where it is possible to achieve a wider consensus. In this context, the upcoming Conference on the Future of Europe (European Commission 2020b) will take on even greater strategic importance and could be the platform that will finally herald the reform of EU governance.

Every crisis brings challenges but also progress and opportunities. The pandemic constitutes an opportunity for EU democracy to be reinvented and for its complex institutional design to be adapted to the current challenges, in line with the original ideals.

Citizens and institutions turning an eye to the future

Communication plays a crucial role in any democracy. In the case of the EU, however, the lack of a European public sphere makes it extremely difficult to ensure the effective flow of information and communication between the nerve centre of the EU institutions and the member states. Indeed, despite the many tools and platforms at its disposal, the EU has trouble getting its messages through to citizens, with the lens of national debate often acting as a filter on the original content. The EU institutions do have direct communication channels that are easily accessible online for everybody to see, but a lot of their communications continue to be relayed by media outlets or national/local representatives. The

original message travels over long distances and is reflected in a kaleidoscope of ‘derived messages’, expressed in a range of linguistic and cultural codes, often incorporating the intermediary’s point of view and interpretation.

While the process of democratising information and communication has resulted in a wider and more accessible range of channels, it has also made checking sources and selecting such channels more difficult. In this context, there are also frequent cases of ‘misinformation’ (the unintentional dissemination of fake news) and ‘disinformation’ (the intentional dissemination of fake news), which are difficult to control and which further complicate communication within the EU’s 27 national public spheres. Initiatives such as the website² What Europe Does For Me (European Parliament 2018), where users can directly consult information on EU policies and projects with a local impact on citizens, are emerging with a view to supplying an official source of clear, accessible and reliable content. Over the past decade, many projects have been launched to establish a direct channel of communication between institutions and citizens and to counteract the EU’s ‘communication deficit’. However, the crucial element is not the quantity but the effectiveness of these communications, that is, the strategies that can be put into practice to communicate with citizens despite the limitations—whether linguistic, cultural or structural—that make the dynamics of any communication between the European institutions and the citizens of the member states extremely complex.

In general, tools that are able to bring the institutions and citizens closer together and create a more direct connection between them also have greater potential in terms of effectiveness of communication. At the EU level, especially in recent years, a lot of effort has been invested in this strategy, attempting to introduce innovative aspects into EU democracy, in terms of both policy and communication. For example, 2014 saw the introduction of the *Spitzenkandidaten* system, whereby the candidate put forward by the political family that won the European Parliament elections would become president of the European Commission. Despite the undeniable difficulties encountered in making this mechanism work—due to both the specific nature of such elections and the complex negotiations involved in deciding on EU leadership roles—it does have some potential that could yet be explored as time goes on (see Van Hecke et al. 2018). The EU institutions’ representations in the member states also play a strategic role. By promoting projects aimed at citizens and information campaigns on the opportunities offered by the EU, they represent key points of contact between citizens and the institutions. These channels, which have the strategic advantage of greater geographical proximity to the public, should be further developed.

The coronavirus crisis is highlighting once more the benefit of and the need for more direct communication. Tools such as video messages and live chat on social platforms are increasing the reach of EU messages within individual countries. In this sense, the tools of the digital age are powerful aids for the EU institutions. The communication campaigns launched to inform citizens about the real extent of the EU’s joint response and to counter disinformation are a step in the right direction.³ These are just a few examples, but the number of initiatives has grown over the years. However, even on this front, while much has been achieved, more can still be done—and it can be done better.

Conclusion

Like any democracy, EU democracy is ultimately imperfect. This makes practical suggestions, aimed at proposing specific reforms and improvements, both useful and desirable. In discussing the implications of the pandemic for EU democratic governance, this article has focused on the role of populism and its consequences for EU democracy, on the one hand, and the EU's communication deficit and the strategic actions to overcome it, on the other. To deal with these two phenomena, which challenge EU democracy on a daily basis, constructive criticism is needed to create the political will to review EU governance and get the integration project up and running again following an effective model, on the basis of the principle of subsidiarity. This model will be able to reconcile and build on unity in diversity, relaunching a sense of common European citizenship on these foundations and drawing on the benefits of its constituent individual national identities.

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Notes

1. 'Throughput' refers here to the processes of EU governance: the rules and procedures that affect the way an 'output' (i.e. a policy) is delivered and its quality and legitimacy (see Schmidt 2015).
2. This website is available in the EU's 24 official languages.
3. For instance, the European Commission's campaigns 'Support the Coronavirus Global Response Effort' (European Commission 2020c) and 'Fighting Disinformation' (European Commission 2020a).

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Croatia's EU Presidency: A strong Europe in a world of challenges

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Abstract

The article reflects on Croatia's EU Council Presidency in the first half of 2020. The programme for Croatia's Presidency had four pillars: a Europe that is developing, a Europe that connects, a Europe that protects and an influential Europe. The article focuses on the various challenges faced by the Croatian Presidency during its six-month term. The period of Croatia's Presidency will forever be remembered as the time when the COVID-19 pandemic began. Other demanding issues also had to be dealt with: the UK leaving the EU; the challenges of European (non-) solidarity; the continuation of the enlargement process, with the green light being given to Northern Macedonia and Albania; the migrant crisis at the border of Turkey and Greece; the preparations for the EU's 2021–7 budget; and the COVID-19 recovery plan.

Keywords

Croatia, EU Presidency, COVID-19, (non-)Solidarity, Zagreb Summit, Enlargement, Next-Generation EU

Introduction

In the first half of 2020, Croatia held the Presidency of the Council of the EU for the first time. Based on Croatian national priorities, in line with the guidelines set by the EU Strategic Agenda 2019–24 and drawing on the Trio Programme (for the trio of Romania, Finland and Croatia), the Croatian Presidency's programme planned to focus on four main pillars: a Europe that is developing, a Europe that connects, a Europe that protects

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and an influential Europe (EU 2020 HR 2019a, 1). In addition to the listed priorities, it was already known that the Croatian Presidency was coming at a time of great change for the EU: a new institutional and legislative mandate for the European institutions and the challenges resulting from the UK's EU withdrawal process.

An additional test was to find an agreement acceptable to all members for the EU's 2021–7 Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF). Furthermore, even before the Presidency began, it was known that the EU was facing global challenges. Croatian Prime Minister Andrej Plenković pointed out before Croatia took over the role: 'Uneven economic development, climate change, increased migration, dissemination of disinformation and growing populism are some of the challenges of today's world to which citizens are expecting answers, and with good reason. Those answers can be given only by a strong Europe' (EU 2020 HR 2019b, 4). Precisely those challenges and the need for a strong Europe were the key messages of Croatia's EU Presidency motto, 'A strong Europe in a world of challenges'. The motto very accurately predicted the circumstances of Croatia's Presidency.

This article analyses the main challenges of Croatia's EU Presidency. The most significant were the COVID-19 pandemic and European (non-)solidarity, which will be the main focus. In addition, the article will address the UK's EU withdrawal process, the preparations for the 2021–7 MFF and the Next-Generation EU recovery plan, the EU enlargement process, and the migrant crisis at the border of Turkey and Greece in February 2020.

Migrant crisis at the Greek–Turkish border

At the beginning of its Presidency Croatia had to deal with the migrant crisis on the Greek–Turkish border. The situation had escalated, with a significant number of illegal crossings of the Greek–Turkish border happening in late February 2020. This situation called into question the implementation of the 2016 EU–Turkey Joint Statement on addressing migrant challenges (European Council 2016).

Following an extraordinary meeting of the Foreign Affairs Council (FAC) on 6 March, the situation at the EU's external borders calmed down. In a statement, the FAC said that it recognised the burden of migration and the risks facing Turkey, and acknowledged its efforts to take care of the 3.7 million refugees and migrants living within its borders (Council of the European Union 2020b). The statement noted, nevertheless, that the FAC opposed Turkey's use of migrants for political purposes. In this context, the EU expressed its full solidarity with Greece, Bulgaria and Cyprus in preserving the EU's external border.

The temporary calming down of the migrant crisis on the Greek–Turkish border was a consequence of successful diplomatic activities, but also of the growing threat of the COVID-19 pandemic and the more rigid control of European (external and internal) borders.

The COVID-19 pandemic and (non-)solidarity

Another sudden challenge was COVID-19. Resolving the crisis caused by the pandemic imposed itself as an absolute priority on Croatia's EU Presidency. As early as 28 January, due to the occurrence of isolated cases of coronavirus in some EU member states, the Croatian Presidency decided to activate the EU integrated crisis response arrangements in the form of an information exchange (Croatia, Government of the Republic of Croatia 2020). This crisis coordination mechanism, which collated the information coming from the various international actors, was a very useful tool for monitoring the further development of the situation and for evaluating COVID-19-related activities. Unfortunately, at the time, the topic was still of little interest to the media. The European media were mostly focused on the conclusion of Brexit and the potential new migrant crisis on the Greek–Turkish border. COVID-19 continued to be seen as an Asian problem even though the first European case was reported in France on 24 January 2020 (WHO Europe 2020).

The COVID-19 situation had already become very serious by the time the Director of the World Health Organization declared COVID-19 a global pandemic on 11 March 2020 (WHO 2020). After the declaration, the EU did not act as one. The pandemic strategies of the EU member states were not unanimously agreed at the EU level, but were adopted individually by each country. However, we can see that some methods were implemented almost as a domino effect—when one country applied one, others soon followed (Bandov 2020). This was the case, for example, with closing the borders, imposing a mandatory 14-day self-isolation period on all people entering the country, the transition to online education, the regulation of retail opening hours and the closing down of a range of services. Every European country zealously started to inventory available medical equipment; count medical staff; assess how many intensive care beds, respirators and masks it had; and establish the quality of the equipment. Each state devised its own strategy to prevent the spread of COVID-19, in particular to reduce the number of severe cases and deaths (Bandov 2020). Some states also discussed whether they should go with the proven quarantine method or opt for 'herd immunity'.

On 19 March 2020 the EU established the coordination of common medical equipment supplies, primarily respirators and protective masks, for emergencies in EU member states (European Commission 2020a). This newly established system of common stock is an excellent instrument for achieving solidarity and providing rapid assistance to member states in need. But in precisely these areas, the EU had to do more. Although, on the whole, EU solidarity functioned to a significant extent during the COVID-19 pandemic, at one point, it remained simply words on paper.

The EU is based on fundamental ideas and values, one of which is solidarity. The principle of EU solidarity is 'based on sharing both the advantages, i.e. prosperity, and the burdens equally and justly among members' (EurWORK 2011). 'Solidarity already has an undoubted presence in the legal framework of the EU, as well as a well-established constitutional tradition in some Member States' (Federico and Lahusen 2018). Consequently, EU solidarity is one of the most powerful instruments of interconnection

among the EU member states, ensuring that assistance is provided to any country that is unable to respond effectively to a crisis such as a flood, epidemic, earthquake or pandemic (Bandov 2020).

At the same time, ‘solidarity is an identification with a collectivity such that an individual feels as if a common cause and fate are shared’ (Hunt and Benford 2004, 439). As former President of the European Commission Jean-Claude Juncker pointed out: ‘. . . solidarity must be voluntary, must come from the heart, it cannot be forced’ (Juncker 2016). Consequently, solidarity between member states is also strongly felt by the individual citizens of the EU. However, if EU solidarity is not activated immediately, it causes concern and its absence is unexpected, because it is expected that you help a friend and ally in need, no matter how difficult it is for you at that moment in time.

Italy, one of the countries most affected by COVID-19 in Europe, requested the activation of the EU Civil Protection Mechanism for the supply of personal protective equipment on 28 February 2020 (European Commission 2020b). Unfortunately, not a single EU country responded within a reasonable time frame to this request. The EU itself was unable to act independently because it did not, at that time, possess an EU supply of medical supplies. Where Europe should have been first, others were ready to step in: China, Russia, Cuba and Vietnam.

EU solidarity was first visible in the following weeks when aid began to arrive. Among others, Austria delivered 1.5 million masks and over 3,360 litres of medical disinfectant to Italy via the EU Civil Protection Mechanism; Czechia delivered 10,000 protective suits; France donated 1 million masks and 20,000 protective suits; Germany delivered 7.5 tons of medical equipment, including ventilators and anaesthetic masks; and Slovakia sent masks and disinfectant (European Commission 2020c).

European solidarity worked, but much later than it should have. Precisely because of that delay, on 16 April European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen offered an unconditional and sincere apology to Italy and its citizens for the absence of full solidarity at the time of their suffering (Von der Leyen 2020). Moments of non-solidarity threaten the EU as a community of peace, prosperity and well-being for every individual citizen. It was therefore very important that concrete, strong and clear actions of European solidarity followed in the subsequent weeks. EU solidarity came to the fore in a number of aspects, from the organised return of European citizens, the transportation of protective masks and respirators, and the sharing of medical staff, to the admission of patients for treatment in intensive care units and, ultimately, assistance for the economies of the EU member states (Bandov 2020).

The return of European citizens from all over the world took place in a spirit of full European solidarity. From Asia, North and South America, Australia and Africa, EU citizens flew back to Europe together. At the end of the journey, within Europe itself, a series of flights were organised to allow citizens of individual countries to return to their homes (European Commission 2020c).

EU enlargement

One of the main successes of Croatia's EU Presidency was the continuation of the enlargement policy and the adoption of the decision to open accession negotiations with Albania and Northern Macedonia. On 6 May 2020 a key political event of the Presidency occurred—the EU–Western Balkans Zagreb Summit, which took place via video conference. The meeting brought together the leaders of the EU27, EU institutions, the six leaders of the Western Balkan countries and representatives of international organisations. The summit delivered a strong message about the European prospects for the region and support for the reform efforts of the Western Balkan states (Croatia, Parliament of the Republic of Croatia 2020, 7–9).

At the summit, the EU showed its determination to further intensify its engagement at all levels to support the political, economic and social transformation of the Western Balkan countries. EU leaders and Western Balkan partners agreed with the Zagreb declaration that 'the EU once again reaffirms its unequivocal support for the European perspective of the Western Balkans . . . [and] the Western Balkans partners reiterated their commitment to the European perspective as their firm strategic choice' (European Council 2020b).

On 30 June progress was also made on the accession negotiations with Montenegro. Negotiations were opened on Chapter 8: Competition policy. This is especially significant, because it is the final chapter of the negotiations, which started in 2012 (European Commission 2020d). At the same time, Croatia's EU Presidency continued to support the establishment of the Instrument for Pre-accession Assistance for the period 2021–7, which will help to prepare partners for future membership of the EU and support their accession process (Croatia, Parliament of the Republic of Croatia 2020, 9; European Commission 2020e).

The 2021–7 MFF and the recovery plan

Although European Council President Charles Michel was in charge of the EU member states' agreement on the MFF, Croatia's EU Presidency was obliged to coordinate all the preparations for the meetings of the working groups, the Committee of Permanent Representatives and the General Affairs Council. Following the outbreak of the economic and health crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, on 23 April 2020 the EU held a strategic debate via videoconference on overcoming the crisis and recovering from the pandemic. It was agreed to work on the establishment of a recovery fund for the most affected sectors, regions and EU countries.

The European Commission was in charge of the needs analysis and urgent preparation of a proposal which would be in line with the MFF. Consequently, on 27 May the European Commission published a package proposal containing a Recovery Plan for Europe and a modified version of the MFF (European Commission 2020f). This was followed by several meetings, while intense quiet diplomacy also continued in the background. Discussions held during Croatia's EU Presidency continued in July under the German EU Presidency.

A modified version of the Recovery Plan for Europe and the MFF was finally agreed at an extraordinary meeting of the European Council held on 17–21 July: ‘Combining the multiannual financial framework (€1074.3 billion) and an extraordinary recovery effort known as the Next Generation EU (€750 billion), the package will help the EU to rebuild after the COVID-19 pandemic and will support investment in green and digital transitions’ (European Council 2020a). Both of these financial instruments should support the economic recovery of the EU member states and at the same time encourage the transition of European society to green and sustainable solutions.

The Conference on the Future of Europe

From the very beginning, Croatia’s EU Presidency was very active in the Conference on the Future of Europe, a new initiative of the European Commission and the European Parliament, announced at the end of 2019. The aim of the Conference is to search for a new vision for the EU’s future, including the sorts of policies that should be implemented, the institutional reforms that should be made and what kind of EU its citizens want. In addition, the Conference offers an excellent opportunity to debate some of the most crucial issues in contemporary Europe (*EuropeanMovement.eu* 2020).

During February 2020, the Conference debates stalled. The main cause of this was the crisis caused by COVID-19, but there were also differences of opinion on what the mandate of the Conference should be. After several months of very intensive talks and negotiations, an agreement was reached on 24 June on a Joint Statement which sought to stimulate wider public debate on what kind of EU citizens want: ‘Member states want the Conference on the Future of Europe to get citizens involved in a wide-ranging debate on Europe’s future in the coming decade and beyond, including in the light of the COVID-19 pandemic’ (Council of the European Union 2020a).

Croatia’s EU Presidency successfully advocated that the Conference on the Future of Europe should have a strong mandate to make a significant contribution to the debate on EU fundamental values, the social and human rights of EU citizens, the EU’s economic recovery process and the strengthening of each member state.

Brexit and negotiations on EU–UK future relations

Even before Croatia’s EU Presidency began, it was clear that one of the main priorities would be to complete an orderly exit of the UK from the EU. On 30 January the European Council adopted the Decision on the conclusion of the Agreement on the withdrawal of the UK from the EU and the European Atomic Energy Community (Council of the European Union 2020c). On 25 February, a Decision to open negotiations and a mandate to negotiate a new partnership with the UK was adopted (Council of the European Union 2020c).

Britain will remain in a transitional arrangement until the end of the year while negotiators try to thrash out future EU–UK ties. Negotiations began in March 2020. Four

rounds of negotiations were held during Croatia's EU Presidency (Croatia, Parliament of the Republic of Croatia 2020, 11) and the negotiation process has continued during the German EU Presidency.

Conclusion

Croatia's EU Presidency was full of challenges and unprecedented events. The global crisis caused by COVID-19 forced the issues of health and resolving the crisis to become the absolute priorities of Croatia's Presidency. COVID-19 made the Presidency significantly more difficult and gave it a new, significantly more complex framework. However, the Presidency responded very quickly and adapted to the extraordinary circumstances caused by the coronavirus pandemic. In addition, the pandemic has accelerated the transition to digital platforms and virtual conferences, which have become an integral part of the new normal.

During Croatia's Presidency, the EU also managed to address the issue of EU enlargement, a topic that shows that the EU is still a very attractive club, a factor to which the EU does not pay enough attention. Northern Macedonia and Albania have been given the green light to start negotiations, and Montenegro has opened the final chapter of pre-accession negotiations.

Croatia's EU Presidency has contributed to the further development of the EU as a community that promotes equality, inclusiveness and solidarity, and strengthens European democracy and fundamental values. It has advocated for the EU as an influential global player and for an EU that reflects responsibly on its citizens' future, and establishes green and sustainable solutions to the problems they face in their daily lives.

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The Western Balkans during the pandemic: Democracy and rule of law in quarantine?

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Abstract

In the Western Balkans, as elsewhere around the world, governments took extraordinary measures to effectively contain the spread of COVID-19, measures that entailed serious restrictions to individual freedoms. They also introduced extra powers that upset the ordinary division and balance of governmental power. In this context, several analysts have expressed concern that the authoritarian trend observed in the region during the last decade will become further entrenched. The worst fear, that some of the Western Balkan leaderships may retain extraordinary powers indefinitely, has not been confirmed. However, constitutionally prescribed procedures were disregarded and the operation of formal and informal mechanisms of checks and balances ignored. The article argues that the ease with which the Western Balkan leaders removed any checks and controls over their rule raises the valid question of how they may deal with future circumstances which may endanger their power.

Keywords

Western Balkans, Pandemic, COVID-19, Rule of law, Democracy

Introduction

Considerable concern has been raised about whether the extraordinary measures that governments have adopted to contain the COVID-19 pandemic might reinforce the authoritarian shift in several non-consolidated democracies around the world. The six non-EU Western Balkan countries (WB-6)¹ collectively represent one of the regions where democratic backsliding has been taking place since 2009. Indeed, a series of reports concur on the assessment that all WB-6 countries are hybrid or semi-authoritarian regimes.²

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In its 2019 progress report, the European Commission itself remarked on the existence of ‘certain elements of state capture’ as well as ‘instances of widespread corruption’ in the region (European Commission 2019, 4). In a nutshell, the WB-6 feature ineffective rule of law institutions, weak parliaments that do not exercise control over the executives, politicised judicial institutions, and shrinking spaces for civil society and the independent media.

While the battle against COVID-19 has not yet been won, this article examines how the WB-6 managed the first phase of the crisis (March–June 2020), which required the imposition of very strict measures, including general lockdowns. Out of space considerations, we cannot analyse here what followed the loosening of measures (e.g. the region-wide increase in COVID-19 infections). At any rate, the purpose of this article is not to assess whether the WB-6 managed to contain the pandemic. It is rather to figure out whether and to what extent authoritarian trends have become further entrenched in the region. Like the EU27 member states, the WB-6 took severe measures that restricted individual freedoms, progressively lifting them once the spread of COVID-19 seemed to be under control. However, contrary to what happened in liberal democracies all over the world, the leaders of the WB-6 also sought to sideline parliaments and diminish the influence of the formal and informal mechanisms of checks and balances. The way they disregarded their countries’ institutional procedures and the ease with which they eliminated any counterweight to their power should alert us to what could happen in other circumstances in which their hold on power might be at stake. The article is divided into three parts. The first investigates whether executives sought timely legislative approval of all the decisions taken during the period examined. The second questions the function of the constitutional courts and whether civil society and the independent media were able to act as watchdogs. Finally, the last section draws some comparative conclusions from the preceding analysis.

Parliaments in quarantine

During the pandemic, most executive branches of government in the region took on extraordinary powers at the expense of legislatures. To some extent, the emergence of a severe disequilibrium in the balance of power among state institutions was due to the introduction of states of emergency. To illustrate, the pandemic arrived in North Macedonia during a pre-electoral period in which the parliament had been dissolved. As a result, the country’s president, Stevo Pendarovski, declared a state of emergency on 18 March that could not receive legislative approval; thus, since then North Macedonia has been ruled by decree by the caretaker government. While Pendarovski prolonged the state of emergency on four occasions, until 22 June, the National Assembly was not reconvened. With respect to what the country’s constitution prescribes for such a situation, constitutional law experts in North Macedonia have offered divergent interpretations. Despite this, Talat Xhaferi, president of the parliament, espoused the view of those who claimed that a self-dissolved parliament could not reconvene, even in the case of a state of emergency (Markovikj 2020, 66–7). Meanwhile, the caretaker government has been criticised for having overstepped its mandate, as, allegedly, only one-third of its decrees have been related to the pandemic (Markovikj 2020, 67).

In other cases, Western Balkan leaders exploited the extraordinary circumstances to purposely sideline national parliaments and avoid legislative scrutiny. For instance, although Montenegro did not declare a state of emergency, its authorities avoided seeking parliamentary approval for several economic decisions that were taken during the period examined. Despite the opposition's calls to bring the legislature into session and debate all the issues, the parliament did not convene in a plenary session from 4 March to 22 April 2020 (Uljarević et al. 2020, 12).

In Albania, the government declared a 'state of natural disaster' on 24 March and vested an Inter-Ministerial Committee on Civil Emergencies with the authority to take all the necessary actions to manage the pandemic. This normative act should have been approved within five days by the parliament, which was at that time in regular session. However, the governmental decision was eventually voted on in the legislature on 16 April, with the intention of preventing its retroactive invalidation due to the passing of 45 days from its date of issue (Bianku 2020). While the parliament's role should have been to decide on the necessity of those measures, as well as to supervise the government's efforts to manage the pandemic, it was reduced to an institution that merely dealt with the duration of the measures' implementation. Even so, while the Albanian constitution prescribes that the legislature should give its consent every 30 days to the prolongation of a state of emergency, the government requested from the parliament, and obtained, a one-off two-month extension to the state of natural disaster from 21 April to 23 June (Bianku 2020).

Serbia, likewise, introduced a 'state of exception' on 15 March without seeking legislative approval. The Serbian authorities followed the procedure described in Article 200 of the Constitution, which stipulates that the president of the republic, the president of the National Assembly and the prime minister can themselves take the decision on the implementation of a state of emergency in cases in which the National Assembly is unable to convene. The same article dictates that any decision taken by those three persons is still subject to confirmation by the parliament within 48 hours, or as soon as possible (Marinković 2020). However, the Serbian legislature was convened on 28 April to simply give *ex post* approval to all acts taken during the previous 45 days. It is worth mentioning that, according to the Serbian constitution, the introduction of a state of emergency represents a sufficient condition for bringing parliament back into session even if it has been previously dissolved in view of national elections. There was, indeed, no legal basis to evade timely legislative endorsement of the state of emergency (Cuckić and Ivković 2020).

In Bosnia and Herzegovina's case, the two constituent entities (the Federation and Republika Srpska) declared a state of emergency on 16 March, and the state authorities followed suit and adopted a similar decision on 17 March. While the corresponding legislatures at both the state and entity levels voted on these decisions, they have been entirely sidelined since. To illustrate, the National Assembly of Republika Srpska convened only three times from early March to early June to decide on the state of emergency's onset and termination and to legislate on all measures that had already been

taken by the entity's president. Likewise, at the state level, the House of Representatives (lower house of parliament) held three sessions during the period under examination, while the House of Peoples (upper house) convened only once (Živanović 2020b, 11).

The Kosovan³ parliament was not silenced during the period examined. It was, however, seriously discredited by a dispute between the country's president and prime minister over the expediency of declaring a state of emergency. Albin Kurti, the prime minister, was against such a move, which entailed the transfer of substantial executive powers to Hasim Thaci, the country's president. Eventually, the Kurti-led government collapsed on 25 March under pressure from the US (which disapproved of Kurti's approach to conflict resolution with Serbia) and with the alleged backing of President Thaci (Hehir 2020). Hence, a dangerous political void was created in Kosovo at the height of the crisis. This void lasted until 3 June, when a new government led by Avdullah Hoti, a member of the Democratic League of Kosovo (Lidhja Demokratike e Kosovës), the second largest party in parliament, received a vote of confidence. Thaci's (acknowledged) involvement in the process of getting a majority of MPs to approve Hoti's government dealt a blow to the credibility of Kosovo's legislature (*Exit News* 2020c).

To the extent that many governmental decisions taken during the period in question entailed substantial derogations from constitutionally guaranteed freedoms and rights (e.g. decrees related to the imposition of curfews), the attempt of executives in the region to bypass or control their parliaments is very troubling. And it is all the more so in that some governments occasionally took abusive decisions that effected disproportionate and unnecessary violations of their people's rights. For instance, the state authorities of Montenegro and the cantonal/local authorities in Bosnia and Herzegovina published the names of people infected with COVID-19 'to protect the lives' of all other citizens (Kajosevic 2020b; Živanović 2020a). In other cases, countries exploited the opportunity to strive to legislate on entirely unrelated matters. The Albanian government, for instance, proposed a piece of legislation that could give the police extensive surveillance powers over citizens that, crucially, would not presuppose the issuing of a warrant by the authorities and could last for up to six months (*Exit News* 2020a). In this regard, some researchers have reasonably voiced concerns that executives in the Western Balkans could be tempted to indefinitely maintain the extraordinary powers that they implemented during the pandemic, striking a clear blow to the already weak mechanisms of checks and balances (Bieber et al. 2020, 11). Notwithstanding that the end of curfews in May/June alleviated many of these fears, the ease with which executives took a stronger grip on power should perhaps alert us to what might happen if their rule was threatened under entirely different circumstances.

The judiciary, civil society and the independent media

The exceptional procedures linked to the state of emergency (e.g. fast-track procurement) created a very favourable environment for wrongdoings and abuses of public authority in a region where corruption has been endemic. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, for instance, the authorities of the Federation granted a \$5.8 million contract to a

raspberry producer to import 100 ventilators from China. Not surprisingly, the selected contractor supplied ventilators that were overpriced and totally inadequate for their designated purpose (Djugum et al. 2000). Likewise, in Republika Srpska, the authorities disregarded public procurement procedures and purchased a mobile hospital from a company that was not registered as a supplier of medical equipment. As could be expected, the supplier failed to fulfil its contractual commitment in a timely manner (Marković 2020). And in Serbia, the president himself revealed that he had purchased ventilators on the grey market without disclosing any other information concerning this procurement (Maksimović 2020).

With the legislatures neutralised, the judiciary should have emerged as the main formal institution in charge of checking the executive's work. However, the judiciary's track record in the region has been mixed at best. While constitutional courts performed their role in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo and North Macedonia, the corresponding institutions in Albania, Montenegro and Serbia did not rise to the occasion. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, the constitutional court ruled that the decision of the Federation's government to impose a complete curfew on people aged under 18 and over 65 years old was unconstitutional (Živanović 2020a). In Kosovo, the constitutional court ruled against the legality of the government's measures as well as in favour of the president's decision to bypass the parliamentary party holding the largest number seats and give a mandate to form a government to a member of the second-largest party. Notwithstanding that both of these decisions allowed Kosovo to move forward, their fierce domestic contestation indicated the people's low level of trust in the judiciary's independence. And the constitutional court of North Macedonia ruled in favour of the constitutionality of the president's declaration (and prolongation) of the state of emergency and against the government's decision to reduce salaries. In contrast, in the cases of Montenegro and Serbia, it was not until after a lengthy delay that the constitutional courts examined the legality of government measures (i.e. when they were no longer applicable), while the Albanian constitutional court has not been operational at all as it has no quorum due to several unfilled posts.

In a context marked by the disempowerment of formal mechanisms of checks and balances, the responsibility for acting as watchdogs fell on the shoulders of civil society and the independent media. On a positive note, investigative journalists revealed the aforementioned wrongdoings, while civil society organisations struggled against abuses of power. The lockdown, however, critically reduced the space for civil society activism. Some executives strove to exploit the opportunity provided by the curfew to implement decisions that might otherwise have met with massive popular resistance. To illustrate this, while the state of emergency was in place in Albania, in the early hours of 17 May (at 4.30 am) the government proceeded, using force to remove the few protesters present, to demolish the National Theatre in Tirana. Not only was the National Theatre listed by Europa Nostra as one of the seven most endangered cultural heritage sites in Europe, but the constitutionality of the law on the theatre's demolition and the legality of the government's decision to transfer the ownership of the land on which it stood to the municipality of Tirana were at that moment under review by the Albanian constitutional court.

What is more, the building's destruction was approved in secret by the Tirana Municipal Council, while the matter was additionally under investigation by the Office of the Special Anti-Corruption Prosecutor (Rüttershoff 2020).

Another example is the toppling of the Kurti government in Kosovo, which was perceived by many of its supporters to be part of a plan orchestrated by the country's president to push forward a deal with Serbia that would entail some sort of border change. Thaci had on several occasions pronounced himself in favour of such a deal and it was widely speculated that he had already reached an agreement with President Vucic of Serbia. Knowing that a land-swap solution would be very unpopular in Kosovo, Kurti's supporters believed that Thaci (backed by the US) aimed to bring down the government (formed less than two months prior) in order to quickly seal an agreement while people were confined to their homes and could not protest. Although these fears have not materialised, they are telling of the people's low level of trust in their country's institutions. In any case, the creation of conditions of political uncertainty during the pandemic provoked the anger of many people in Kosovo (not just Kurti voters), who could find no other way to manifest their discontent than by banging pans and pots every night from their balconies (Travers 2020).

A month later, on 26 April, people in Serbia adopted exactly the same protest method of hitting pots and pans from their balconies to express their frustration with the very harsh curfew measures taken by their government, and to denounce the greater authoritarian shift of their country with its alarming concentration of powers in the executive. Supporters (and members) of the regime responded a few days later, on 29 April, with counter-protests that included the lighting of torches on building rooftops. Although the large flames on inhabited buildings were dangerous and in violation of the curfew, the police did not intervene (Dragojlo and Stojanovic 2020). The existence of double standards towards protests was also observed in Montenegro, where the authorities reacted differently to the services carried out by the Serbian Orthodox Church and to the celebration of Montenegrin Statehood Day.

The shrinkage of civic space was matched by the exercise in parallel of pressure on media freedom in several countries in the region. The pandemic-related extraordinary measures presented an opportunity for some Western Balkan leaders to increase their control over the generation of information. At the beginning of the crisis, all Albanian mobile phone users received a direct voice message from Prime Minister Edi Rama that said, 'protect yourself from the media' (Erebara 2020). Moreover, Albania's National Health Inspectorate demanded the shutting down of a media outlet (ORA Radio and TV) for having violated the measure of not hosting more than one guest per broadcast show. The problem with this decision was not only its disproportionate penalty. It was also obviously discriminatory as similar punitive actions were not taken against pro-government media outlets (*Exit News* 2020b).

Both Serbia and Republika Srpska attempted to fully control the generation of information about the spread of COVID-19, allegedly in order to combat disinformation that could incite fear and anxiety (OSCE 2020).⁴ The Serbian authorities also proceeded to

detain journalists, in one case because the reporter's investigation into a medical facility's poor conditions 'could cause panic and unrest' (European Federation of Journalists 2020). And in Montenegro, several people were prosecuted and placed in custody for allegedly spreading fake news through their social media posts (Kajosevic 2020a).

Overall, we can see in the Western Balkans (though with some variations from one country to another) that the scope for freedom of expression and civic activism was reduced during the period under examination.

Conclusions

The COVID-19 pandemic upset normal political procedures in the Western Balkans as it did elsewhere in the world. For instance, North Macedonia and Serbia were compelled to postpone national elections that were originally planned for 12 and 26 April respectively. Also, all executives took exceptional measures to contain the pandemic, which entailed the imposition of curfews and serious restrictions to constitutionally guaranteed individual freedoms. Nevertheless, in sharp contrast to what happened in consolidated democracies (where similar measures were also adopted), the leaders of the WB-6 countries disregarded domestic institutional procedures and ignored the operation of formal and informal mechanisms of checks and balances. In particular, legislatures were sidelined, allowing little room for opposition parties to scrutinise governmental decisions; constitutional courts (which lack genuine independence in any case) were not operational; and freedom of expression was severely restricted. The end should not justify the means, and liberal democracies all over the world demonstrated that the temporary adoption of absolutely necessary extraordinary measures against the pandemic was not tantamount to *carte blanche* for abuses of power.

Crucial differences were certainly noticed from one country to another. The fewest abuses of power were observed in North Macedonia, which was, nevertheless, being ruled by a caretaker government at the time. On the other hand, the greatest problems were noticed in Albania and Serbia. Interestingly, no correlation can be seen between the track records of the WB-6 countries on the rule of law and their progress along the EU accession path. Justice and the rule of law seem to have functioned better in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo, the two laggard countries that are only at the stage of 'potential candidate' EU members, than in Serbia and Montenegro, the two EU accession front-runners. This troubling discrepancy should not go unnoticed by the EU institutions, which regularly monitor and assess the progress of each Western Balkan country towards EU membership.

The WB-6 leaders loosened their lockdowns in May and June and lifted restrictions on the exercise of fundamental rights and freedoms. Still, the ease with which they eliminated any checks and controls on their rule generates reasonable fears about how they may deal with any future circumstances in which their very hold on power might be at stake. To guard against such a predicament, the Commission should not hesitate to look beyond the expediency of most of the adopted measures and to criticise the abuses of power that took place during the period examined. The pandemic has, after all, presented an opportunity to test the resilience of rule of law institutions in the region.

Notes

1. Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Serbia.
2. See, for instance, Freedom House 2020.
3. This designation is without prejudice to positions on status, and is in line with UN Security Council Resolution 1244/99 and the International Court of Justice Opinion on the Kosovo declaration of independence.
4. The Serbian government passed the decree on 28 March and revoked it on 2 April in response to strong international reactions (European Federation of Journalists 2020).

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The coronavirus in the MENA region: Enhancing turbulence or mitigating conflicts?

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Abstract

The novel coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic has affected the countries in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region in different ways, and the varying political structures, economic conditions and civil-crisis preparedness of the states in this region have resulted in it being handled in a variety of ways too. Even if it is difficult to assess how the crisis has affected the MENA region in more detail due to the region's general volatility and ongoing conflicts in Libya and Syria, current trends have so far not shown a diminution in regional conflicts. Nor have the pandemic's consequences in the Middle East lessened Europe's problems with the region. Thus the article argues that COVID-19 has not really led to a decrease in the conflicts and wars plaguing the MENA region, and that, therefore, the effects for Europe—both short- and long-term—will still be felt, as existing problems will continue to affect Europe.

Keywords

Coronavirus, COVID-19, Middle East, North Africa, MENA, Conflict

Introduction

This article seeks to give an overview of the novel coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic in the Middle East and how it has been dealt with in a sample of countries. It is important to point out that the paper also deals with the greater Middle East, that is, the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region as a whole. The reason for this is that the pandemic itself, along with the many conflicts and wars in the region, is affecting the whole area. Furthermore, the article aims to look at how conflicts and wars in the Middle East have been affected by the pandemic, if at all.

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The main argument of the article is that, however serious a problem COVID-19 is, its impact has not lessened current conflicts or decreased pre-existing tensions to any significant degree. On the contrary, if anything, the pandemic has exacerbated already difficult situations, economically, socially and politically. This can be seen, for example, in Libya, Lebanon, Syria and the tense Israeli-Iranian situation.

The first section of the article looks at how the pandemic has impacted a sample of countries, with comparative figures to better illustrate the situation. The second touches upon some underlying structural and political differences present in the region and how these have affected the impact of the pandemic. Finally, the conclusion sums up the argument of the article and points to some long-term effects that the pandemic may have in the region, as well as for Europe. It also suggests that the EU needs to shape up its responses to the many problems in the Middle East and to better coordinate those responses.

Regional overview

When COVID-19 first started to make an impact in the wider Middle East, two countries stood out. The first was Iran, because the virus rapidly spread there, causing significant levels of sickness and death (Ali 2020). The second was Israel, for the opposite reason, it being the first country to lock down, quickly implement testing and isolate affected areas—measures that led to comparatively few hospitalisations and deaths (Taub Center 2020).

Israel locked down on 19 March, but had by then already implemented various rules to limit the spread of the virus, such as social distancing, quarantines and travel restrictions. Israel has had fewer than 500 deaths since the outbreak began (from 62,000 infections) (Worldometers 2020c), but there has been a spike in cases since late June. In contrast, Iran did not impose a lockdown and has had, according to official statistics (which are not verifiable), nearly 16,000 deaths and 291,000 infections since February (Worldometers 2020b).

Iran and Israel are polar opposites in terms of how Middle Eastern countries have tackled the virus and how it has been combated. It is too early to draw any long-term conclusions about the effects of the virus in the Middle East, since it is still active in the region. However, some tentative general conclusions about responses to the pandemic can be made. To see this larger picture it is useful to start by looking at some concrete examples of the ways in which different countries have handled the outbreak.

As stated above, Israel initially handled the outbreak better than most, which resulted in a comparatively low mortality rate. Up until late June, when the second wave hit, Israel had only had just over 300 deaths (Worldometers 2020c). This compared favourably with countries such as Austria (705 deaths) and Switzerland (nearly 2,000 deaths) which have similar sized populations (Worldometers 2020a and 2020d; figures from 30 June for all countries). However, in late June/early July the country was hit by a second wave and found that it had opened up too soon and too quickly. As a result Israel suffered

backsliding, with steep increases in the number of people who were sick and testing positive (Jeffay 2020).

Neighbouring Jordan and the Palestinian areas fared better when opening up after lockdown but were obviously affected by their proximity to Israel (AFP 2020). However, the closure of the Gaza Strip, due to closed borders with Israel and Egypt, turned out to be a blessing in disguise, as very few people became sick or died there. With only two major entrance points (from Egypt and Israel), the spread of the virus was effectively stopped at the borders and the few cases that did develop were swiftly quarantined (Meir Amit Intelligence and Terrorism Information Center 2020).

Analysis

Across the MENA region, the population is generally young, with 85% being under the age of 55 (Feuer 2020). This factor might mitigate the impact of the virus since, according to the research conducted to date, younger people seem to suffer much less if they are infected (Schraer 2020). At the same time, though, other similarities among countries in the region, such as weak health systems, economic vulnerabilities and tense internal-security situations, have reduced preparedness to combat the pandemic. Examples in this regard are Iran and Algeria, both of which have long been dependent on hydrocarbons and slow to reorientate their economies.

Interestingly, countries lacking natural resources (such as oil), for example, Morocco, have fared better, since they have had to liberalise their economies. Morocco is a good example of the benefits of opening up politically and economically, as it has shown that it is better prepared to endure the pandemic. This has to do with the fact that when opening up and liberalising their economies, countries benefit from a surge in external investment, including cooperative academic medical efforts and research (IMF 2001; Nguyen 2019).

Morocco's position as a gateway between Africa and Europe, the conflict with Algeria over the Western Sahara and being a neighbour to the Sahel mean that the country is constantly dealing with security-related issues. In this Morocco has been fairly successful, but the pandemic has compounded the country's economic problems, with its major trading partners (France, Spain, Italy and the US) restricting movements and trade (UN 2020).

For some of Morocco's neighbours in North Africa, such as Tunisia, the pandemic has highlighted structural dysfunctions and a lack of central planning, which have led to severe problems in handling the pandemic (Otay 2020a). Simultaneously Tunisia has had to deal with a dire economic situation and a difficult counter-terrorism problem at the borders with Algeria and Libya, mainly caused by the ongoing movement of Islamic terrorists across these borders (Otay 2020b; International Crisis Group 2016).

For poorer countries such as Egypt, the combination of corruption, weak medical structures and various degrees of authoritarianism has weakened the response to the

virus. In addition, a side-effect in Egypt has been a surge in conspiracy theories, such as the idea that the virus is a creation of Israel and the Jews and/or an attempt to hurt the country and Islam as a whole (Abdelaziz 2020).

For countries such as Syria, Yemen and Libya, where armed conflicts (including wars of shifting intensity) are raging, the pandemic has added to already serious problems. Because of the ongoing wars, it is impossible to accurately assess the numbers of people who are ill or have been affected by the virus, but the very fact that health systems are effectively non-existent (and in the case of Yemen, were weak even before the pandemic) means that infected people often do not receive the help they require. Furthermore, the various conflicting or warring sides are unable (or unwilling) to effectively meet the onslaught of the pandemic.

Finally, in Iran the combination of the pandemic and the ongoing sanctions (due to the nuclear issue), its meddling in Iraq and Syria, and the simmering conflicts with Israel and its Sunni Arab neighbours has been a real headache for the regime and has hindered the implementation of an effective response to the virus. The slow start when the virus first struck, including a conscious effort by the regime to understate the danger so as not to endanger the election, proved to be disastrous in the longer run. As a result, there have been a large number of deaths and infections in Iran (Ali 2020). Widespread corruption and the authoritarian and oppressive regime have also been obstacles in countering the virus, as the regime is viewed with suspicion by large parts of the population, rendering ineffective even proven measures, such as social distancing rules, which have been ignored by citizens. Iran is a good example of a situation where attempts by the regime to initially downplay the seriousness of the virus have added to an already high level of suspicion towards the leadership (Bozorgmehr 2020; Khalaji 2020).

Conclusion

None of the underlying conflicts (whether outright wars or lower-tension conflicts) in the MENA region has diminished or disappeared due to the COVID-19 crisis. On the contrary, some problems have been exacerbated, if not directly by the virus, at least by the effects of the pandemic. Despite the need for a cooperative international approach to combat COVID-19, tensions have been rising between Israel and Iran (Harel 2020). In the ongoing conflict between Egypt and Ethiopia about the Ethiopian dam on the Blue Nile (Malsin 2020) the parties are far from reaching an understanding, and in Libya the civil war simmers on, in large part because of meddling by Russia and Turkey (Polat 2020). This is without mentioning the fact that the war in Syria is nowhere near over.

What this means for Europe is really ‘more of the same’, with the additional problem of having to juggle travel, trade and communication with the Middle East without endangering the health situation at home. For example, the huge problem of people-trafficking in the Mediterranean has not visibly diminished during the pandemic (Morgan 2020). The only thing that has changed is that the European Mediterranean littoral states (France, Italy, Greece and Spain) have fewer resources to spend on combating this trafficking, making the crossings even more dangerous for people.

To better handle relations with the Middle East during the difficult circumstances created by the pandemic, the EU needs to reassess its policies. As Winston Churchill said, ‘Never let a good crisis go to waste!’

A first step is to put even more emphasis on helping countries on the southern and eastern littoral shores to better combat the underlying problems and stop the flow of people and illegal drugs at the source. Clearly, the various initiatives in recent years have not been enough.

Second, the Union must better coordinate its response to these challenges. Again, despite no lack of attempts, it is obvious that there is no common outlook on how to respond to and handle either the ongoing wars (in particular in Syria and Libya) or the illegal drug running and trafficking emanating from the Middle East. The EU certainly has the potential political and military clout to be a lot more assertive. What is lacking is the political will to live up to that potential.

Rightly assessed and handled, COVID-19, as a truly international problem, could offer the chance to establish a new EU-wide policy on the MENA region.

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Electoral process in Africa: The impact of COVID-19 and challenges for the EU

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic is having a considerable impact on global economic and intercontinental geopolitical relations, and is thus significantly reshaping our world. The coronavirus crisis is also affecting democracy and the electoral process in Africa, with important implications for the rule of law, democracy and security. While 2020 started as a pivotal year for African Union–EU relations, the coronavirus has disrupted the agenda and raises questions about the repercussions of the pandemic on not only EU foreign policy but also cooperation between the two continents.

Keywords

Africa, Democracy, Elections, Security, Coronavirus pandemic, AU–EU cooperation

Introduction

Around the world we see elections being postponed due to the coronavirus crisis. In the context of COVID-19, at least 67 countries (*Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance* 2020) have postponed elections, while 49 have held them as initially planned despite the health crisis. In Africa, 11 countries—Botswana, Chad, Ethiopia, Gabon, Gambia, Kenya, Liberia, Nigeria, South Africa, Uganda and Zimbabwe—opted to adjourn their elections, while Burundi, Malawi, Benin, Guinea, Cameroon and Mali held theirs as originally scheduled.

In the time of COVID-19, such decisions leave no one indifferent. Some claim that holding elections as planned is fundamental to safeguarding democratic rights, especially ‘at a time when significant state power is being concentrated in the executive

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branch through the exercise of powerful emergency measures' (Banbury 2020). France recently demonstrated that it was possible to hold elections despite the risky health situation and made it a point of honour to introduce exceptional health and safety measures to reassure the voters and offer optimal conditions for people to exercise their civic duty. Even though public opinion was not in favour of this decision, the French government maintained its position and explained that elections are essential as they cement the public's trust in institutions and allow citizens to hold their representatives to account. In the end, France recorded a record low turnout and decided to postpone the second round of local elections.

What about African countries, which do not have the same resources and infrastructure as France? Is going ahead with elections recommended? What are the implications in terms of democracy, rule of law, health and security? This article argues that the COVID-19 pandemic has had a significant impact on the electoral process in Africa, affecting not only democracy and security in the continent but also cooperation between the African Union (AU) and the EU. The article explores the options for the holding or postponement of elections amid the COVID-19 pandemic and whether either is a viable solution for ensuring a well-functioning democracy in a sometimes fragile security situation. In the last section, the article focuses on the challenges the EU needs to address with regard to the latest Comprehensive Strategy with Africa, including the new EU budget deal, the EU Security Union Strategy and how policy reforms will shape AU–EU relations.

Holding the elections as planned: a double-edged sword

A recent Pew Research study (Connaughton et al. 2020) surveyed attitudes towards democracy and revealed a decline in trust in institutions. The survey, which was conducted in the spring of 2020, explored what people in 34 countries think about the way democracy functions in their own country. While people still value voting, the levels of dissatisfaction are high. Of those surveyed,

- 44% are satisfied with how democracy works, as opposed to 54% who are dissatisfied—in Europe as a whole, 48% are not satisfied, though significant disparities exist from country to country;
- 49% agree that the state operates for the benefit of all;
- 64% are frustrated with elected officials.

Four African countries are among the 34 countries included in the survey: Tunisia, Kenya, South Africa and Nigeria. With the exception of Kenya, those surveyed seem highly dissatisfied with democracy:

- In South Africa, Tunisia and Nigeria, the proportion of those who are not satisfied is 61%, 69% and 70%, respectively.

- In Kenya, 59% of the people surveyed are satisfied with democracy in their country as opposed to 39% who are not.

The research reveals that individuals who ‘think elected officials don’t care about the opinions of ordinary people are more likely to be unhappy with how democracy is working in their country’ (Connaughton et al. 2020). In such a situation, countries face a real dilemma between holding and postponing elections.

Before exploring recent cases, it is useful to learn from the past. In 2014, Ebola erupted in West Africa. It was also an important election year for war-torn Liberia, which was experiencing not only a political and security crisis, but also a significant health threat. After two postponements and in spite of the situation, then-President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf decided to hold the elections (Banbury 2020). The government took a series of measures, including a major public health campaign, to make the citizens feel safe and encourage them to cast their votes. Even though Liberia proved it was possible to organise elections at a highly precarious time, thus not yielding to the health threat and enabling the population to exercise their right to vote, the country recorded a very low turnout: 26.68% compared to 71.33% three years earlier (*ElectionGuide.org* n. d.).

Despite the fear and insecurity caused by COVID-19, Mali followed the same path and held its parliamentary elections on 29 March 2020. Mali had already postponed its legislative elections twice due to security concerns. Even though civil society organisations had called for their postponement, President Keita declared that the elections were essential to support the resolution of conflict in the country. He reminded the population that ‘these parliamentary elections resulted from the decision of the National Dialogue, which set deadlines’ (Gänsler 2020). Some applauded the president’s decision to hold the elections despite the aggravating circumstances. The first case of COVID-19 in Mali was announced the day before the elections (Golubski and Schaeffer 2020). Other disruptions to the elections occurred: Soumaila Cisse, head of the opposition, was kidnapped by armed men while campaigning on 26 March; and more than 270 polling stations were closed due to security concerns. The elections had a participation rate of just 35.25% in the first round (*RFI* 2020) and 35.33% in the second. With such a low turnout, how is it possible to promote the elections as a true representation of the population’s position and beliefs? Since June, Mali has experienced a serious political crisis. Thousands of protesters have gathered to call for the president’s resignation and the protests have resulted in violent clashes with the police. The main breeding ground for this anger is the security crisis that has been going on for years. In addition, the economic situation is worsening due to the pandemic, and the lack of solutions offered by the president, in power since 2013, is increasing people’s dissatisfaction with the government. However, the elections were the catalyst for the popular uprising (Duhamel 2020).

The constitutional referendum that took place on 22 March in Guinea also generated disorder. The referendum, which garnered 91% approval of the proposed amendment, triggered violent protests in the country (*France24.com* 2020) over what ‘critics see as an extension of power by President Alpha Condé’ (Golubski and Schaeffer 2020). The constitutional amendment maintains the two-term limit for elected officials, but increases

the term of office from five years to six. The controversy surrounding the referendum was also fed by suspicions over the verification of 2.5 million names on the electoral roll, as well as the cancellation of the AU's electoral observation mission to Guinea, among other things. President Condé has not hesitated to use COVID-19 to serve his political agenda. The pandemic served as an excuse to postpone the high-level Economic Community of West African States meeting in the capital, Conakry, a few days before the election. The heads of state who had expected to attend this meeting had considered it the very last opportunity to convince President Condé not to move forward with the referendum (Sylvestre-Treiner 2020). In the end the vote took place out of the view of the global community as the authorities shut down the Internet for 48 hours.

The Guinean example shows how the coronavirus has been dangerously used to serve political interests and strengthen leaders' holds on power (Gyimah-Boadi and Logan 2020) at a time when opposition gatherings are banned, campaigning has been made very difficult and electoral observation missions are not easy to set up.

The postponement of elections: a move to save democracy?

While some Western countries have managed to avoid postponing their elections by offering alternatives such as Internet or postal voting, these alternatives are difficult to put in place in Africa because of the lack of infrastructure. Postponing the elections could prove to be a wise decision; nevertheless the challenges that lie ahead are significant. Maintaining public order, ensuring the population's safety and fighting against the rapid spread of fake news on social media are among the challenges that must be overcome to guarantee stability and consolidate people's trust in institutions in any country holding elections.

In Ethiopia, the national election board has announced that the parliamentary elections due in August 2020 have been postponed to a later date. The stakes in these elections are high and the population has been waiting impatiently for the political process to unfold. Indeed, 'the winning party or coalition will set the terms of a national reconciliation process, oversee the drafting of a new constitution, and further the privatization of Ethiopia's industries' (Bruton 2020). With this in mind, the government cannot afford a low turnout or an eruption of protests. The elections will also be crucial in terms of societal structure. The voters will choose between supporting an ethnic federalist system or a unified social system. The fragile security situation of the country is also a factor to be taken into consideration for the organisation of the elections. Bearing in mind the circumstances, the postponement of the elections was a wise decision by Abiy Ahmed, Prime Minister of Ethiopia, and one which was supported by the opposition. However, the adjournment of elections might weaken Abiy's bid for office. The prime minister, laureate of the 2019 Nobel Peace Prize, is under strong scrutiny.

Amid the coronavirus crisis, Tanzanian President Magufuli has been highly criticised for allowing people to continue to attend places of worship (Ng'wanakilala 2020). Tanzania has taken only mild measures to contain the virus in comparison with

its neighbours. The situation, reminiscent of the Ebola outbreak, which was marked by non-transparent management, is likely to break 'the trust between the government and its people, and diminish the international community's trust in Magufuli's administration, too' (Edwards 2020). COVID-19 may have an impact on the upcoming presidential elections scheduled for October 2020. Even though Magufuli announced in December 2019 that he will not seek a third term if he is re-elected, he could use the exceptional circumstances as an opportunity to amend the constitution and consolidate his power.

This would be comparable to the situation of Rwandan President Kagame, who was in a similar position before he decided to change the constitution in 2015 to allow him to stay in power until 2034 (*The Guardian* 2016). Taking advantage of the health crisis would have a very serious impact on Tanzania's aspirations for democracy and prosperity. Since Magufuli rose to power in 2015, the country has suffered from an alarming decline in political and civil rights (Gavin 2019). A concrete example of this fierce repression is the deliberate attack on Tundu Lissu, a leading opposition figure, who was shot 16 times outside the parliament. He survived the attack and has announced that he is ready to run for the presidency (*BBC News* 2019). The Inter-Parliamentary Union is investigating the violations of human rights in Tundu's case and 'highlights concerns over alleged abuses and proposes that an IPU Committee delegation accompany him upon return to Tanzania' (*Amsterdam and Partners* 2020). However, the current conjuncture will make the investigation difficult and represents an important impediment to Tundu Lissu's right to campaign for the presidential elections.

While holding elections as planned presents risks in terms of turnout and true representativeness, postponing elections also constitutes perils in terms of political reputation and repression. The longer the restrictions are in place in Africa, the more the risks engendered by the COVID-19 crisis—economic, security and political—will increase.

The EU's Comprehensive Strategy with Africa is at stake

The EU's partnership with Africa is high on the European Commission's agenda. Ursula von der Leyen's first trip outside Europe as Commission president was to Addis Ababa, the Ethiopian capital and headquarters of the AU. She declared: 'For my first visit, I have chosen the continent hosting the world's fastest growing economies; a continent with immense ambition and aspirations, but also with immense needs' (*DW.com* 2019). The commitment to strategic cooperation with Africa was confirmed at the tenth EU–AU college-to-college meeting in February 2020, which saw the largest delegation of its kind ever to travel outside the EU (Mashika and Nyman 2020). Following the meeting, on 9 March the European Commission released the Joint Communication *Towards a Comprehensive Strategy with Africa* (European Commission 2020). The strategy is built on five partnerships: (1) a partnership for green transition and energy access, (2) a partnership for digital transformation, (3) a partnership for sustainable growth and jobs, (4) a partnership for peace and governance, and (5) a partnership on migration and mobility.

According to the Fragile States Index (*Fragile States Index 2020*), 36 of the world's most fragile states are in Africa, where the situation is often weakened by conflicts and political instability. The crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic struck at a global level shortly after the release of the Africa Strategy. While 2020 started as a pivotal year for AU–EU relations, COVID-19 has disrupted the agenda and exacerbated some African countries' political instability. Votes in elections have been marred by reports of violence and rights violations. Given the circumstances, election observation missions have not been able to take place and follow-up has been difficult to establish.

Not only do electoral periods represent a risk in Africa in terms of security and the rule of law, but the pandemic also 'threatens to raise the risks in recent post-conflict states and other countries not experiencing conflict' (Moyer and Kaplan 2020). In a context of heightened economic and security fragility, vulnerable populations may be forced to migrate. Migration and forced displacement represent challenges for both Europe and Africa. The largest migrant flows are intra-African (Gandhi 2018) and the main drivers of migration are political instability and the search for economic opportunities (UN Conference on Trade and Development 2017). According to an investigation conducted by the Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project, the Latin American Center for Investigative Journalism and various media outlets around the world, a smuggling network between Brazil and South Africa provides fake visas to Africans planning to reach the US or Canada via Latin American states (Nwoye 2020). 'Europe's crackdown on migration' (Nwoye 2020) is why Africans are favouring other dangerous migration routes. Such migration flows present a high risk, especially in the time of COVID-19. Europe and Africa need to renew their cooperation and the crisis may turn out to be an opportunity for an important reset that would benefit both parties.

In April, as part of the 'Team Europe' package, Ursula von der Leyen announced financial assistance to African countries of €502 million in emergency cash and €2.8 billion to support research, health and sanitation systems (Fox 2020). Nonetheless, there is nothing new in this announcement as the money draws on existing resources. Assistance to the health sector aimed at containing the coronavirus crisis, therefore, comes at the expense of funding for other essential sectors for sustainable development, including enhanced cooperation on democratic governance and the rule of law, the very cornerstones of peace and security.

The EU Security Union Strategy

The EU Security Union Strategy, introduced in July 2020, focuses on four main pillars: (1) a future-proof security environment, (2) tackling evolving threats, (3) protecting Europeans from terrorism and organised crime, and (4) a strong security ecosystem. The strategy cannot be achieved without strong AU–EU cooperation. As the Communication from the Commission on the EU Security Union Strategy rightly says: 'Protecting the Union and its citizens is no longer only about ensuring security within the EU borders, but also addressing the external dimension of security' (European Commission 2020a,

2). Both the Common Foreign and Security Policy and the Common Security and Defence Policy have to take into account the electoral process in Africa in order to ensure the effectiveness and sustainability of the different security policies. The security dimension is not sufficiently integrated into the election observation missions. Given that elections have the potential to become a catalyst for violence in fragile countries, resulting in insecurity, political instability and eventually forced displacement, EU security policies need to be assimilated within the missions. The promotion of governance and development objectives must be part of AU–EU efforts in the fields of democracy and security.

Conclusion

It is clear that 2020 is not only a pivotal electoral year for Africa, but also a turning point in terms of Africa–Europe relations. The crisis induced by the COVID-19 pandemic goes way beyond the sector of health and has affected the exercise of democracy, the rule of law and security in both continents, which have been confronted with difficult choices with regard to holding and postponing elections. Various challenges have emerged in Africa: while holding the elections comes at a high cost in terms of turnout and representativeness, postponing them could be used by political leaders as a way to extend their powers—something which has also been witnessed in the EU. In both cases, countries have experienced episodes of violence that have heightened the risk of instability and fragility, especially in times of a pandemic. Political instability and insecurity represent drivers of migration and forced displacement, issues which need to be tackled at an intra- as well as inter-continental level.

AU–EU relations have often been described as asymmetric. Significant political efforts have been made, notably under the leadership of Ursula von der Leyen, to improve the relationship; however, the pandemic has disturbed and disrupted this cooperation. The creation of the Comprehensive Strategy with Africa is an important step towards enhanced cooperation. Fostering a two-way partnership will be essential for continued cooperation and calls for coherent policies and follow-up. A fresh start in Africa–Europe relations is needed, founded on a common political vision. EU foreign policy cannot be limited to solving the problems that manifest themselves in the most visible way, such as terror attacks or boats with migrants sinking in the Mediterranean Sea.

An integrated approach is needed, more than ever, with increased coordination of policies and budgets. In the past, the EU has had a tendency to assess its partnership with Africa in a quantitative fashion by displaying the financial aid granted to countries. Nonetheless, one needs to highlight the progress that has been made in terms of political ambition. In the strategy it is written that ‘the EU also intends to step up cooperation on democratic governance and rule of law on both continents, including accountability and transparency of public institutions; independent and impartial justice, corruption and transnational crimes as well as trafficking in human beings’ (European Commission 2020c, 14). This is a great first step towards a mutually beneficial partnership. Is the EU finally ready to turn intention into action?

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Missing in action: The EU–UK foreign, security and defence policy relationship after Brexit

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Abstract

Brexit has transformed the EU–UK relationship into a foreign-policy challenge for both sides. The negotiations on the EU–UK future relationship have been a process in which both sides have been learning about the other as a third-party negotiator. The UK has taken a very different attitude to the Political Declaration, agreed alongside the Withdrawal Agreement (covering the terms of the UK's departure from the EU), treating it as a guide rather than a roadmap for negotiations. And the UK has decided not to pursue negotiations with the EU on a future foreign, security and defence policy relationship. This is in a context in which the EU's member states have committed to deepening security and defence cooperation. At present, and despite shared international challenges, a formal agreement on EU–UK foreign, security and defence policy looks set to be replaced by an approach of 'muddling through'.

Keywords

EU, UK, Brexit, Defence policy, Security policy, Foreign policy

Introduction

The UK's departure from the EU on 31 January 2020 created a new foreign-policy challenge for both parties. Ending nearly half a century as an EU member state, the UK moved from being a participant shaping EU policy to being one of the subjects of its external action. For the UK, negotiating a future relationship with the EU became its most pressing foreign-policy challenge—with the outcome of the negotiations likely to have far-reaching economic, societal and economic effects.

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This profound shift in the EU–UK relationship to a third-party one was less remarked upon than might have been expected. And Brexit day was a more low-key affair than the Brexit drama of domestic political upheaval and extensive withdrawal negotiations might have warranted. This was primarily because immediate changes to the economic and social life of the UK were invisible as the country entered into the transition period provided for under the Withdrawal Agreement. The Withdrawal Agreement, agreed on 17 October 2019, was negotiated under Article 50 of the Treaty on European Union and provided the terms under which the UK exited the EU. The political drama of Brexit had also been largely muted before this by the election in December 2019 of a government led by Boris Johnson that had a significant parliamentary majority. This ensured the swift passage of the legislation ratifying the Withdrawal Agreement through the UK Parliament, ending domestic political deadlock and completing the first withdrawal of a member state from the EU under the terms of Article 50 of the Treaty on European Union.

The subsequent negotiations on the future EU–UK relationship have provided a different kind of political drama from the earlier negotiations on the Withdrawal Agreement. The major issue of controversy has been that the UK government has interpreted the Political Declaration on future EU–UK relations (agreed alongside the Withdrawal Agreement) in starkly different terms from the EU. The EU has treated the Political Declaration as a roadmap for structuring and organising the negotiations for a post-Brexit EU–UK relationship. The UK has interpreted the Declaration as non-binding guidance on how agreement might be reached. This significant difference of perspective has created a difficult start in the relationship between the EU and its newest third-country partner. The negotiations have also been accompanied by public jousting between the lead negotiators, the UK’s David Frost and the EU’s Michel Barnier.

The negotiations have been overshadowed by the COVID-19 pandemic. Both lead negotiators caught the virus and talks moved from face-to-face to online meetings for three rounds of negotiations. Beset by one of the most significant outbreaks of the virus, the UK’s negotiations with the EU have also been subordinated to the challenge presented by COVID-19. However, despite the major order challenge presented by the pandemic, the UK government took the decision not to extend the period for the negotiations beyond 31 December 2020 using the clauses of the Withdrawal Agreement that would have allowed for an extension of the transition period (Council of the European Union 2019, art. 132; Moens 2020).

The effect of the pandemic, and the political dynamic created by the EU’s actions in response, has been to dramatically downgrade the future relationship with the UK in the order of the EU’s priorities. The UK is now a third-country problem to be managed (and a possible ‘no-deal’ relationship mitigated) rather than the post-June 2016 member state continuing to participate in EU decision-making whilst negotiating its departure. The dynamic has shifted from EU27+1 to a new configuration of the EU27 interacting with the UK through the Joint Committee (established to manage the joint commitments made under the Withdrawal Agreement) and simultaneously as a third party seeking to negotiate a future relationship.

No negotiations: the foreign, security and defence policy relationship

A striking characteristic of the current EU–UK relationship is that it is focused almost entirely on the current and future trading relationship. The nature of the trade relationship, of course, has broader foreign and security policy implications, as demonstrated most clearly with respect to Northern Ireland. However, this has not translated into an impetus for an understanding of the future relationship beyond trade and trade-related issues—and it is notable that there are no ongoing negotiations on the future EU–UK foreign, security and defence policy relationship.

Since Brexit in January 2020, the UK has been operating under the terms of the Withdrawal Agreement. This contained provisions to cover the UK's relationship with the EU's security and defence policy during the transition period (Council of the European Union 2019, art. 129). These commit the UK to following EU foreign policy and security positions but without participating in the institutions that determine that policy, notably the Foreign Affairs Council, the Political and Security Committee, the EU Military Committee, and the attendant committees and working groups that define and implement the EU's foreign, security and defence policy.

The UK has ceased to be directly involved in decisions on the EU's Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) but continues to contribute financing, staff and other assets to CSDP missions which are underway (Council of the European Union 2019, art. 156), most notably, forces for Operation Althea. During the pre-Brexit negotiation of the Withdrawal Agreement, the UK exited its existing EU security and defence commitments by withdrawing from the EU's roster of Battlegroups, relinquishing its provision of an Operational Headquarters for the Atlanta CSDP naval mission and ceasing to provide operational commanders for CSDP missions. UK participation in any CSDP operations launched before the end of the year will be on the basis of third-country arrangements rather than the arrangements for the EU²⁷. Consequently, until the end of 2020 the UK is formally committed to playing this shadow role in the EU's foreign, security and defence policy while being absent from decision-making, following EU positions but without a substantive role in their implementation.

The original intention was that these measures would be a stop-gap, with new arrangements for EU–UK foreign, security and defence policy cooperation coming into force before the end of the transition period (Council of the European Union 2019, art. 127.2). The Political Declaration, outlining the ambitions for the post-Brexit EU–UK relationship, contained detailed proposals on the terms of the future relationship in the fields of foreign, security and defence policy (UK, HM Government 2019, Part III, III). The Political Declaration specified cooperation in areas such as sanctions, the defence industry and research, and consular cooperation in third countries. It also envisaged the UK being invited to EU foreign minister meetings and raised the prospect of the UK participating in EU military operations.

As the Political Declaration was a jointly agreed document it has been something of a surprise for the EU that the UK has not wished to negotiate on future foreign, security and defence policy cooperation (Whitman 2020). And the UK made no mention of cooperation in these areas when it published its own draft texts for future EU–UK agreements in May 2020 (UK, HM Government 2020).

The UK has taken the decision to negotiate with the EU exclusively on the future trading relationship, to the exclusion of other non-trade and border-related issues. Unlike a failure to reach agreement on the terms of the framework for EU–UK trade, the UK's withdrawal from foreign, security and defence policymaking during the transition period means that the immediate costs of Brexit have already been incurred. Further, it can be argued that the foreign, security and defence policy field was one of the first areas of policy to be impacted by Brexit.

A foreign and defence policy future without the UK

The coincidence of the June 2016 Brexit vote and the publication of the EU's Global Strategy symbiotically provided the basis for a greater level of ambition for the EU, including a push for 'strategic autonomy' and moves towards the creation of an EU defence union.

The vote to leave the EU had the consequence of eliminating the UK's capacity to influence debate on the future of EU security and defence. And it facilitated an opportunity for the EU's foreign policy chief, High Representative Federica Mogherini (until November 2018), to pursue a new agenda with considerable vigour. Security and defence have become a priority area for further EU integration. The current European Commission, French President Emmanuel Macron, German Chancellor Angela Merkel and a range of other member state politicians have signalled their ambitions for deeper security and defence integration as a component of an enhanced European global role. The Global Strategy has set a roadmap for developing EU security and defence ambitions and capabilities, with considerable policy development undertaken over the last three and a half years. Consequently, EU–UK negotiations on a future security and defence policy relationship take place in a context in which EU policy is developing in a direction that was resisted by the UK as a member state and over which it will have minimal influence to set the agenda.

Further, a key aspect of these developments is that they are being pursued without substantive consideration of the role and participation of third countries. This means that the UK's departure from the EU, despite its significant security and defence capabilities, has not been used by the member states as a basis to consider how third countries might facilitate the EU's ambitions for capabilities development. Rather, there has been concern not to create a precedent for relationships with third countries by conceding a role for the UK that is more ambitious than those already in existence with other third countries. Furthermore, there is also a consideration that the UK should not be allowed to use

its contribution to European security and defence as leverage for advantage in the trade-related aspects of the negotiations on the future EU–UK relationship.

The Withdrawal Agreement negotiations also demonstrated that the UK's and the EU's negotiating stances limited the scope for a deep and comprehensive security partnership. The EU's position, pursued by Mr Barnier and the Article 50 task force, that the UK should not be granted privileges or access to EU foreign, security and defence policymaking that exceeded those already granted to third countries, limited the scope of the relationship. One of the consequences of this position was demonstrated in the plan to curtail access to the Galileo global satellite-based navigation programme, of which the UK had been a committed participant. The EU's focus on preserving the integrity of the single market trumped security and defence cooperation. The Galileo issue had a chastening impact on those in the UK advocating a close post-Brexit EU–UK security and defence relationship, and resulted in the UK government committing to build its own satellite system.

However, unlike other aspects of the EU–UK negotiations (which are about the consequences of the degree of divergence from EU rules and norms), European security and defence is situated within a complicated landscape of competing and overlapping organisations, bilateral agreements and commitments, and a major role is played by a non-European country, the US. The EU is not the exclusive venue for European security and defence policy development, nor does it, or its member states, provide all the capabilities necessary for securing and defending Europe. European security and defence is an area in which the UK has both a role and national capabilities that give it a salience that is different from other areas in the EU–UK negotiations.

With all of these challenges in play, determining the future EU–UK security and defence policy relationship will be a complicated undertaking. This is especially true as seeking a new identity for Britain in international relations has been a core component of the argument for Brexit. The much-maligned idea of 'Global Britain', used by UK governments since 2016 to signify a new post-Brexit role for the UK, has signalled the ambition and intent of the UK to seek greater autonomy for its international diplomacy and especially its foreign economic policy. The implication is that there will be a divergence (although with uncertainty as to what degree and in what areas) from the EU's norms, practices and ambitions in the security and defence field.

The future: muddling through?

At the time of writing, the EU–UK relationship on foreign, security and defence policy looks likely to move from the arrangements established for the transition period to a situation in which there are no formally established arrangements for cooperation. This, of course, does not mean the lack of a foreign, security and defence policy relationship between the UK and the EU's member states. The UK's European bilateral, mini-lateral and multilateral relationships will all continue, but with the unsettled EU–UK relationship circumscribing the scope of future cooperation.

The EU–UK foreign, security and defence policy relationship has been transformed in a relatively short space of time. The UK has moved from its role as a member state central to EU decision-making and implementation, through a brief period of shadowing EU foreign and security policy during the transition, to the current state of ambiguity as to whether the relationship will evolve to one of a rebooted alliance or one between frenemies.

At present there are no active or planned negotiations on the future EU–UK foreign, security and defence policy relationship. Consequently, if an EU–UK future relationship treaty is agreed before the end of 2020, the principles and modalities of foreign, security and defence policy cooperation will be absent. Whether reaching agreement on the EU–UK future trading relationship will then pave the way for a willingness on the part of the UK government to seek to broaden cooperation is uncertain. At the present time the odds look much more likely that the UK will pursue an approach of ‘muddling through’. This would be to avoid an overarching framework for EU–UK foreign, security and defence policy cooperation, in line with the UK preference for seeking ad hoc arrangements for cooperation where judged to be appropriate and necessary.

Such an approach by the UK would be in keeping with the behaviour exhibited during the transition period. The UK has adopted a three-track approach. First, it has demonstrated its capacity to caucus with other groupings to highlight new post-Brexit possibilities (such as coordination with Five Eyes partners on policy regarding Hong Kong) (*BBC News* 2020). Second, there has been the low-key prioritisation of other foreign-policy cooperation formats in Europe (most particularly E3 cooperation with France and Germany) (Billon-Galland and Whitman 2020). And third, it has studiously avoided cheerleading for EU foreign-policy positions where the UK is seeking a differently calibrated relationship (most notably on the current Turkey policy in the Eastern Mediterranean) (Meral 2020).

The language employed by the May government regarding the EU–UK security partnership has disappeared under the Johnson administration (UK, HM Government 2017). Advocacy of a far-reaching EU–UK formalised strategic alliance on foreign and security policy is currently absent in Westminster and Whitehall. The current Integrated Review of Security, Defence and Development Policy, defining the government’s vision for the UK’s role in the world over the next decade, will likely make no substantive reference to the EU. The EU’s recent difficulties in agreeing sanctions on Belarus and the apparently diminishing momentum in Brussels for an EU defence union will allow the UK government to reassure itself that the UK is not being excluded from a rapidly coalescing EU foreign and security policy to which it might consider it needs to align itself.

With a security partnership not in prospect, and with a UK government that has deliberately sought to loosen the EU–UK trading relationship (by leaving the EU customs union and seeking to allow itself the scope for regulatory divergence) to allow for greater autonomy in trade policy and managing its economy, the UK is set on a different trajectory to the EU and its member states. In the medium to long term the extent to which divergences in approaches towards political economy will impinge on foreign and security policy will be conditional on the extent to which trade policy impacts the

UK's foreign policy writ large. In the short term the outcome of the 2020 US presidential election will be of greater importance. If President Donald J. Trump is re-elected—and if he then goes on to pursue a second-term agenda that further undermines multilateralism, weakens the US security commitment to Europe through NATO, and pursues a confrontational approach towards China and the EU—this will place the UK's foreign and security policy under considerable strain. Facing a choice between alignment with a capricious White House actively undermining international multilateralism and rendering the transatlantic security relationship irrelevant, the UK will face an existential crisis in its diplomacy and security and defence policies. The election of Joe Biden would confront the UK with the different challenge of needing to work hard to persuade the new administration (notwithstanding close intelligence, security and defence links) that Brexit has not greatly diminished Britain's European and global influence.

The outcome of the US presidential election will, therefore, impinge on the EU–UK relationship and may encourage a reset in cross-channel dialogue. This could thereby create a new atmosphere that is more encouraging of discussions on a more formal foreign, security and defence policy relationship. However, such a change could be cancelled out by the domestic political constraints faced by the current UK government. The preoccupations of managing the economic consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic, together with the adjustment of the UK economy to a different trading relationship with the EU, will be accompanied by more demands in managing the Union of the UK. There will likely be increasing agitation for a second Scottish independence referendum following Scottish Parliament elections in May 2021 and additional complexity in the politics of a post-Brexit Northern Ireland.

The politics of the Conservative Party is also likely to inhibit an evolution of the EU–UK relationship. The degree of antipathy towards the EU within the Conservative Party has been heightened during the Brexit negotiations. A broadening and deepening of cooperation beyond trade policy will face significant opposition. Security and defence cooperation with the EU is a taboo for many Conservative Party Members of Parliament and also for elements in the grass roots of the party.

Reaching the end of December 2020 with no agreement in place between the EU and the UK will push a settled foreign, security and defence policy relationship even further into the future. Failure to reach agreement on a future trading relationship will become the major policy preoccupation of both sides. Managing the consequences of a trading relationship that reverts to trading on WTO terms, whether as the prelude to further negotiations or as the ongoing basis for the trading relationship, will push discussion on other key policy issues such as foreign and security cooperation into the background.

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Time to use to European power again

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Abstract

The decline of Russia and rise of China have shifted the security focus of the US towards China, leaving a security vacuum in Europe's neighbourhood that the EU has so far been unwilling to fill. The vacuum has been exploited by hostile external powers, and nationalist anti-Europeans within, threatening the survival of the EU itself. A stronger European security role, anchored in a unified strategic culture, could turn the EU into a producer of regional security, and provide a new conservative narrative for European integration. While this will eventually need a treaty change, the centre-right should not wait until then to relegitimise the use of European power in Europe's own neighbourhood.

Keywords

Defence policy, Foreign affairs, Strategic culture, Centre-right, Populism

Introduction

The multiple crises in Europe's external relations stem from our failure to adapt to the decline of Russia and rise of China. As the focus of the US shifts to Asia, Europe's neighbourhood is being left to its own devices. Russia and Turkey exploit, while fragile states in the Middle East and North Africa generate problems that result from, Europe's failure to fill the security vacuum.

This failure is deepening tensions within the Union, and strengthening anti-European nationalist movements that seek to break up the EU. Hostile powers, terrorist groups and organised crime, operating in a symbiotic relationship with anti-European nationalists, have rushed to press their advantage. Italy's League (Lega), which sought Russian cash to fund its campaigns (Nardelli 2019) while heightening tensions over migration, is a

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case in point. It, and other nationalist parties, find a receptive constituency of voters underserved by the EU's current agenda and powers.

The nationalist right thrives by selling protection from the consequences of decline while reinforcing that decline by encouraging fragmentation and discord.¹ The left finds itself remote from these voters because it increasingly defines itself through the social and cultural values of urban educated liberalism. The coincidence of these two effects is putting European integration itself at risk as nationalists position themselves against a cultural-leftist 'Brussels'. Though a caricature, their charge is not entirely spurious: of the 539 current pro-European Members of the European Parliament, only 187 (or 35%) come from the European People's Party (EPP), whereas 137 of the 324 right-of-centre MEPs (42%) belong to nationalist parties.² Centre-right pro-Europeanism is suffering because its arguments are increasingly limited to economic efficiency. It is our responsibility to rekindle a centre-right pro-Europeanism that can appeal to hearts and minds as well as wallets.

It would be a mistake, however, to copy David Cameron's tactic of jumping into the nationalist culture war. As he found out, that ends up giving legitimacy to the very arguments you hope to take the sting out of, and credibility to the hardliners who brought them to public attention. It is better, instead, to stake out new territory, and better still if that territory can deal with some of the insecurity on which the nationalist movements thrive.

In this article, I argue that that territory should be bringing security and order to our own neighbourhood. When it acts together, the EU is by far the largest power in the area, and ought to be able to set the rules of the game in its own region. Rather than having to scramble responses to crises manufactured by medium-sized former empires, or absorb the consequences of state failure, we should put ourselves in a position to establish peace and security in our region by integrating our defence policy, foreign policy and strategic cultures in the same way we have integrated our trade and environmental policies. Making Europeans comfortable with using power externally again, and the institution-building this entails, will give a new impetus to European integration on the centre-right.

Alone in a bad neighbourhood

As in a neighbourhood where crime rises after cuts to police funding, America's shift in focus to Asia has degraded the security environment on the EU's borders. Some of the changes have been obvious and alarming, including the announcement of troop withdrawals from Syria and, in a different environment, Germany. These changes have made it clear to America's allies that they are on their own. Other changes are less noticeable, but no less insidious. The US State Department has been allowed to rot as career officials have left the US foreign service and few serious Republican political appointees have been willing to take their place (Burns 2019). Their work cajoling and pressuring countries to resolve their differences behind the scenes has been left undone. It is unlikely that tensions between Greece and Turkey would have been allowed to rise so high under a

normal US administration. Nevertheless, even a normal US administration would have had priorities different to the Europe- and Middle East-focused ones of the 1990s and 2000s, as an assertive China is increasing the challenge it poses to US interests and democratic allies in Asia.

Russian President Vladimir Putin is the prime beneficiary of this American withdrawal. Russia has invaded Ukraine, annexed Crimea, poisons its opponents on European soil, conducts cyber-attacks against EU member states and secretly bankrolls anti-European political parties (*Financial Times* 2019). It props up Syrian President Bashar al-Assad's murderous regime. It has taken advantage of the social media companies' greed to resume the disinformation campaigns it perfected during the Cold War. Despite having an economy similar in size to that of Spain or the Nordic countries, it manages to paralyse European decision-making. The Nord Stream 2 gas pipeline project from Russia to Germany has *still* not been cancelled.

The successor state of another former European empire is also learning how to exploit the power vacuum. Turkey is now engaged in brinkmanship with an EU member state, with the EU unable to effectively protect its member; only the COVID-19 outbreak stopped Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan from destabilising European politics further by encouraging refugees from Syria's civil war to make their way to the EU. The continued weakness of North African states, stirred by both Russia and Turkey, has opened up another migration route across the Mediterranean from East Africa (which those Russian-backed anti-European political parties exploit in their own domestic politics).

The effects are poisoning European politics. Had European states strengthened their democratic defences when the US stepped back, Russian subversion and corruption of Western political elites could have been limited. Had the Syrian civil war not been allowed to fester, and Assad not been permitted to carry out crimes against humanity against his own people, there would not have been so many Syrian refugees to accommodate. And had the operation to protect Libyans from their former leader Muammar Gaddafi, which was led by European powers, been followed up with stabilisation and reconstruction, its civil war could have been averted.

In the 1990s and 2000s the US still had the will to eventually save Europe from its own lethargy in the Balkans, but by the 2010s, the Obama administration, tired of war in the Middle East and freed from dependence on its energy, stayed away. It did so even though Samantha Power, a trenchant advocate of interventionism, served as UN ambassador,³ and Susan Rice, a convert to it, served as national security adviser. European policy was caught short, because it could not develop either the political will or the material capability to mount the necessary missions of its own. The blow-back from European shirking has been exploited by both Islamic State and Russia-assisted national populists, including Donald Trump.

If Trump's hostility to the EU is highly unusual in American circles, the belief that it is time Europe looked after its own backyard is more widespread (and, indeed, correct).

Unable to directly challenge US interests since the 1990s, Russia had been downgraded in US thinking to a third- or fourth-tier threat, below Islamist terrorism, China and, arguably, even drug-fuelled organised crime in the Americas. Putin's mistake in 2014 was to have thought that the downgrading process had gone even further; his resultant overreach in Ukraine temporarily shook the US from its complacency. Nonetheless, the long-term focus of US policy has shifted to Asia, with China the country plausibly able to fit the role of 'peer competitor' described in the US's main strategic planning instrument, the Quadrennial Defence Review. Meanwhile, the George W. Bush administration's plans to transform and democratise the Middle East did not survive failure in Iraq, with the Obama administration giving Arab democrats a fine speech in Egypt but little practical support. Obama fell victim to the overreaction that all foreign intervention (and not just bungled military operations) in support of democracy is likely to backfire. He often seemed to console himself with Martin Luther King's remark that the 'arc of History bends towards justice' (Gold 2016), forgetting that as US president he was in a position to give it a hefty shove. He restricted activity in the Middle East to 'hard' counterterrorism, at the expense of longer-term engagement, the promotion of fundamental rights and the reform of the market economy underpinned by the security guarantees needed for progress and the stabilisation of the region.

If US threat perception now focuses on China, the EU's problem is one of 'threat non-perception'. This illusion is based on the hope that the framework of international institutions and the pressure from financial markets will provide strong-enough incentives to keep autocratic leaders within the bounds of the rules-based international order. It is based on the old mistake of thinking that just because it would make sense for everyone to uphold the rules, it therefore makes sense for nobody to violate them. If it should have been clear that this hope was misplaced at the time of Russia's 2008 invasion of Georgia, the repeated cut-offs of gas to Ukraine or Erdoğan's brutal suppression of the Gezi Park protests in 2013, it should now be beyond doubt that the rules of the international order do not enforce themselves. After eight years of the Obama administration's cowardice in their defence, and now four years of Trump directly attacking them, the rules have withered, leaving Europe vulnerable to threats. The division of labour in providing European security between 'Martian' Americans and 'Venusian' Europeans that Robert Kagan described has collapsed, not because Europeans have become even more pacific than expected, but because Mars has left the field (Kagan 2002).

Escalation dominance

Mars's absence has eroded the credibility of the deterrence provided by European states and NATO in the European neighbourhood. While a full-scale conventional attack like that carried out by Russia in Georgia is highly unlikely at present, not least due to NATO's rotational forward presence in the Baltic states and Poland, we have lost the ability to deter sub-conventional 'hybrid' assaults on security in Europe. Russia's political manipulation has divided the EU and is capable of paralysing the internal politics of its member states on issues crucial to Moscow, as Cyprus's delay in imposing sanctions on Belarus demonstrates. This buys time for hybrid operations, such as those in Crimea, to establish

'facts on the ground' that reverse the equation of deterrence. Instead of being able to deter a Russian incursion, we find ourselves deterred from reversing Russian actions.

If to the east the vacuum is filled by Moscow, to the south it is filled by a variety of actors who prosper from the absence of anyone capable of enforcing international order. That the crisis between Greece and Turkey, both NATO members, has also drawn in France, Egypt, Libya and the United Arab Emirates testifies to how degraded the international security architecture in the Mediterranean has become. In Libya there has not even been a need for foreign powers to divide the EU: member states have managed to pursue incompatible policies on their own!

The cause of weakness is the same, the absence of a process whereby the alignment of national policies is first negotiated, and this alignment then executed. Unlike in the Brexit negotiations, where Britain was unable to divide EU member states because the policymaking process was centralised, in foreign and security policy adversaries foment and exploit differences so that they do not have to face the combined clout of a united EU. This gives them a crucial freedom: to escalate crises, confident that the full strength of the EU will not be brought to bear against the threat they pose. During the Cold War this was called 'escalation dominance': 'a condition in which a combatant has the ability to escalate a conflict in ways that will be disadvantageous or costly to the adversary while the adversary cannot do the same in return, either because it has no escalation options or because the available options would not improve the adversary's situation' (Morgan et al. 2008, 15).

Each of the EU's international crises is the result of these other smaller actors having escalation dominance over the EU: they can always do something to make the conflict worse, while the EU seeks to de-escalate because counter-measures are too painful or, given the EU's internal divisions and lack of means to resolve them, impossible. European Commission President Von der Leyen's call for greater qualified majority voting in foreign affairs is absolutely correct, but the fact that she has to ask for it to be used really just restates the problem she is faced with. In fact, foreign policy divisions occur partly *because* the supra national institutions of the EU do not operate in foreign and security policy. Under the EU's current treaties, the processes by which the Union's Common Foreign and Security Policy and Common Security and Defence Policy are decided give too much weight to individual member states and not enough to central policy formation. Of course, this will remain the case as long as new treaties that would confer greater security and defence powers on the EU itself are not negotiated. Yet though new treaties may be a long while coming, they are not the only obstacle. Despite their inherently international purpose, foreign and security policy debates remain stubbornly national. Though progress has been made on procurement, integration is needed across a range of areas, from military doctrine, defence industrial strategy and the use of covert intelligence to strategic culture. This is a political as much as a practical task. It is not just about possessing the means to act, but also about having the legitimacy to use these means and develop them in the first place. The EU is trying to build the practical elements through initiatives such as its Strategic Compass (Council of the European Union 2020). This is

welcome, but needs to be reinforced politically, too. Developing this political element is something that political groups and parties, in particular on the centre-right, need to lead themselves.

Strategic enforcement culture

Europe's new strategic culture needs to begin with the realisation that outside the EU, the international order needs to be backed up by considerable military force, and should continue by recognising that, far from this being beyond our means, the EU possesses the wherewithal to develop the necessary capability. Even in purely military terms, this is considerable, with the EU's defence spending of \$230 billion in 2018 on a par with that of China (World Bank n.d.). Over time, Permanent Structured Cooperation and other initiatives, including the European Defence Fund, will work to streamline procurement and stimulate research and technological progress. But a change in mindset is also needed. The EU has been able to become one of three global powers, with 450 million people and \$20 trillion in annual GDP, because it free-rides on a rules-based international order created by the US that allows it to dominate in trade and regulation (Bradford 2020).⁴

Inside the EU, we have created a sphere where relationships between countries and their people are governed by peaceful politics and law. This has been so successful that our publics too often shy away from the need to protect it by means including military force, not from 'challenges' or 'issues' that arise through collective processes, but from threats posed by states, terrorist groups and individual leaders who take advantage of our desire to wish them away. International relations scholars frequently cite Immanuel Kant's *Toward Perpetual Peace* as philosophical inspiration for the EU, but in doing so they overlook his warning in the *Doctrine of Right* that relationships of justice can only be stable in what he called a 'rightful condition'—that is, a condition in which disputes are not settled by force (Kant 1795/1996b; 1795/1996a)).

Our strategic culture has to recognise that outside the EU's borders, the use of force is not only necessary, but is even increasingly normal. I do not want to suggest that the EU develops a strategic culture identical to that of the pre-Trump US, which too often conflated the rules-based international order with itself. But if the American failure, particularly in Iraq, was not to understand that military intervention is not self-legitimising, the European failure is to think that the rightful condition is self-enforcing.

After testing the alternatives to destruction, we in Europe have come to understand the importance of tempering power through political and legal institutions that hammer out compromises for the common good. During the Cold War we relied on the US to supply the security under which the European experiment could prosper. As it withdraws further towards Asia, we will need to replace it with security made in Europe, and be willing to exercise power to restore deterrence against escalation and to secure the establishment and extension of European peace.

It should become the centre–right’s new mission in Europe to rebuild the legitimacy of European power, and to persuade our own publics internally, and our neighbourhood externally, in the cause of peace and fundamental rights. This will enable the EU to address much of the insecurity that the nationalists exploit, while, I believe, also forming the basis for a broad coalition stretching from solid conservatives all the way to the centre–left, thereby returning political balance to the European project. In the medium term this will require a treaty change, but we can start setting the agenda now, in the Conference on the Future of Europe, in national political debates and also in the European Parliament. Perhaps as a very first step, the EPP could lead an effort in the Subcommittee on Security and Defence to develop an EU defence doctrine, to provide a public counterpart to the classified efforts of the Coordinated Annual Review on Defence, in the same way that national defence white papers establish the parameters of policy. If possible, it should seek to outflank the Strategic Compass initiative and so give it space to be bolder. The last four years have seen considerable improvements to the technical element of defence cooperation, but there is also political work to be done to legitimise Europe as a defence and security actor in the minds of Europeans and to strengthen the EU’s appeal to conservatives across the continent.

Now that former US Vice-President Joe Biden has won the presidential election we will not enter what Fareed Zakaria has provocatively called a ‘post-American world’ (Zakaria 2008), but we need to accept the reality of an increasingly post-American Europe. The security vacuum that accompanies this shift in focus to China has already been exploited by Europe’s external enemies to obtain escalation dominance over a divided and strategically naive EU. The insecurity this promotes fuels the nationalist enemy within, further weakening and dividing the EU. To stop this vicious circle, the EU needs to start using its power to produce security in its own neighbourhood, and the centre–right should take on the mission of giving this the legitimacy it deserves.

Notes

1. The nationalist right appeals to different groups in different societies: to the nostalgic older population in the UK; the younger, more economically excluded in France and Italy; to both groups in Poland (divided between Law and Justice (Prawo i Sprawiedliwość) and Confederation Liberty and Independence (Konfederacja Wolność i Niepodległość) respectively); and to wealthy social conservatives in Spain. The unifying feature is the type of appeal, rather than the social group targeted.
2. Figures are from European Parliament (2019). I have categorised members of Identity and Democracy and the European Conservatives and Reformists as nationalist, and Identity and Democracy, European Conservatives and Reformists, and the EPP as right-of-centre. The EPP, Renew, the Greens, the Socialists and Democrats, and the European United Left/European Free Alliance are identified as pro-European.
3. This is a cabinet post in the US.
4. Where its power has given rise to the phrase ‘the Brussels effect’, the title of a book by Anu Bradford (2020).

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European strategic autonomy: Energy at the heart of European security?

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Eloïse Ryon

Abstract

Since Brexit and the COVID-19 pandemic, there has been a radical transformation of the meaning, use and role of the concept of strategic autonomy within the European project. Whereas its application was originally restricted to defence matters, it is now explicitly mentioned in other sectors, including pharmaceuticals. The COVID-19 pandemic and its political, social and economic consequences have considerably boosted the trend to broaden the concept's sphere of application. Strategic autonomy has found new life as a key political concept that will help shape the future of the EU. But does the concept really apply to all sectors? To what extent is European strategic autonomy behind the development of the Energy Union? The article attempts to provide an answer to these questions through an analysis of the theoretical and practical development of the concept, focusing particularly on the debate around Nord Stream 2.

Keywords

European strategic autonomy, European defence sector, Energy Union, European security, Energy security

Introduction

L'Europe n'a jamais existé? Ce n'est pas l'addition de souverainetés réunies dans les Conseils qui crée une entité. Il faut véritablement créer l'Europe, qu'elle se manifeste à elle-même et à l'opinion américaine et qu'elle ait confiance en son propre avenir. (Monnet 1950/1993, 124)

As early as 1950, Jean Monnet spoke of the need for Europe to act autonomously—in the passage just cited, he refers more specifically to Europe's duty of unity against the influence of 'American opinion'. More than 70 years later, Monnet would certainly be

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enthusiastic to see the renewal of the idea of strategic autonomy, a concept that was born in France out of the uncertainty created by the end of the Cold War and which has gradually been Europeanised. However, as its popularity and use grew incrementally, its vagueness exponentially increased and its content was increasingly blurred. This article will therefore attempt to shed light on this concept, and most importantly, on whether it can apply theoretically and practically to European sectors beyond the defence sector, in particular to the Energy Union.

This article will argue that the concept of European strategic autonomy, originally applied specifically to the defence sector, has a wider reach than anticipated and is transferable to the European energy sector, a sector whose strategic stakes and characteristics are similar to those of European defence. First, the concept of European strategic autonomy itself and more particularly its development will be analysed. The individual perspectives of France, the EU and other individual member states will be examined to determine whether a common European definition exists. Second, this article will attempt to demonstrate the applicability of the concept to the Energy Union, more specifically through a case study of Nord Stream 2.

An evolving definition

On 16 March 1950, General Charles de Gaulle mentioned the concept of ‘strategic autonomy’ for the first time during a press interview on the ratification of a bilateral Franco-American agreement: ‘the weaponry is limited, as you know, to weapons that confer no strategic autonomy upon us. But this is a bad thing for us, because after all, the policies do not always overlap, particularly concerning Africa, and even French Africa. It may be unacceptable to us not to be able to do anything by ourselves’ (De Gaulle 1970, 328).

In 1994, 44 years later, the Europeanised concept officially appeared for the first time in the French White Paper on defence (France 1994, 139). This new concept complemented and arguably overshadowed the debate around the politically controversial French concept of *l’Europe puissance* at a time when, at the end of the Cold War, European countries needed to take back control of their own security and autonomy. However, at that time, Europe was not yet developed enough to create the protective umbrella that European countries needed. Therefore, the concept was still grounded in the member states before it was truly Europeanised: French strategic autonomy would not be absolute without European strategic autonomy. Indeed, it is important to note that even in the 1994 White Paper (France 1994), Europe, or the aggregation of member states’ capabilities, had already been prescribed, identifying the Union as the future for French strategic autonomy.

When Jacques Chirac came to power in 1995, he was determined to become independent from an American ally with which disparities were growing. He encouraged the Europeanisation of the French concept through the acknowledgement of a ‘European defence identity within NATO’ (Mauro 2018, 7). In 1997 Tony Blair came to power.

Frustrated by Bill Clinton's reluctance to intervene in Kosovo¹ (Mauro 2018, 7), he joined forces with President Chirac, and the two European leaders took the development of this identity a step further and institutionalised the concept of European strategic autonomy at the St Malo Summit in 1998. For the first time, there was a direct reference to the need for the 'capacity for autonomous decision' (UK Parliament 1998) in the realm of defence, creating the first stepping stones towards the concept of European strategic autonomy through European autonomy of military action. This trend matured in 2019 with the creation of the Intelligence College in Europe (in Paris), which brought to life the concept of European strategic autonomy and linked it directly to European sovereignty (Élysée 2019a). A few months earlier the concept of strategic autonomy had been broadly applied by Emmanuel Macron in his letter to European citizens ahead of the 2019 European Parliamentary elections, in which he affirmed that European strategic interests also include 'environmental standards, data protection and fair payment of taxes' (Élysée 2019a). As Jean-Luc Sauron, an adviser to the French Conseil d'État and specialist in European law, has stated, European strategic autonomy 'est la capacité d'autorité publique à définir de manière non conditionnée la marche opérationnelle des politiques' (Sauron pers. comm. 2020), going far beyond the realm of national sovereignty and the defence sector. Indeed, strategic autonomy, today, can only be European.

It is, however, important to note that the 2016 EU Global Strategy, which does indeed refer directly to the concept of European strategic autonomy, leaves some flexibility when referring to the concept as 'an appropriate level of ambition and strategic autonomy' (European External Action Service 2016, 9), reflecting its continuing controversial nature. Indeed, member states perceive European strategic autonomy differently. While larger states such as France, Poland, Germany and the UK are principally concerned with the political decision-making autonomy that such European strategic autonomy would provide, the Eastern European states are rather more concerned about autonomy of action in terms of military and civilian capabilities. Yet others, such as Austria, Croatia, Estonia and Malta, are more interested in information autonomy around intelligence gathering, data collection and analysis (Franke and Varma 2018, 6). It is also important to note that even though the link to European sovereignty has not been directly established by some member states, there has been a recent shift within the Commission when referring to 'operational sovereignty' (European Commission 2013, 3) towards the French 'rapprochement' of the two concepts of autonomy and sovereignty. Indeed, for Niklas Novaky, EU security and defence policy specialist at the Martens Centre, these two concepts mean 'more or less the same thing' in practice (Novaky pers. comm. 2020). However, there is still too much potential for political backlash due to differing degrees of interpretation of the idea of European strategic autonomy, and the sensitivity of member states and European citizens to the issue of national sovereignty, for the connection to be publicly and directly made.

However, with the current crisis and the new dynamism behind the use of the term 'European strategic autonomy' by both the French president and President of the European Council Charles Michel, the concept will certainly be reviewed and a more ambitious common definition could then be achieved.

European strategic autonomy in the energy sector

The Energy Union

Energy was identified in the EU's Global Strategy of 2016 as a sector in which the Union should become strategically autonomous. Indeed, the high strategic and security value of the European energy sector does not align with the fact that the 'EU and all its member states are net importers of energy' (Lippert 2019, 25). Moreover, the gravity of this non-autonomy is exacerbated by the fact that our energy-source dependencies are concentrated on just a few suppliers, in particular Russia for 30% of our crude oil and 40% of our natural gas imports (Eurostat 2020). Such asymmetric dependencies in such a strategic sector as energy create a potentially damaging situation for our European strategic autonomy, weakening our capacity to freely take political decisions and act on them.

However, when speaking of European strategic autonomy, Klaus-Dieter Borchardt, deputy director general of the EU's Directorate-General for Energy, argues that since 'we are heavily dependent on energy imports, we cannot say that autonomy is a goal in itself', but that 'the Energy Union strategy is rather to ensure the security of supply through the diversification of energy sources' (Borchardt pers. comm. 2020). In his remarks, the deputy director general explains that the concept as it is perceived in the defence sector, as a driver of increased autonomy, cannot be directly applied to the Energy Union. This is further supported by Jaroslaw Pietras, former director general of the Directorate-General for Transport, Energy, Environment and Education of the Council Secretariat, who states that, 'in the energy sector, it is not so much about autonomy but rather diversification'. He also noted that

of course it helps going towards a certain autonomy through the non-overreliance on some sources of energy, therefore increasing our immunity to external interference . . . but as the economic concept of 'contestable suppliers' demonstrates, if the dominant supplier sees its limited capacity to affect consumers by a change in supply because the consumer has other choices, then it cannot abuse its monopolistic positions. (Pietras pers. comm. 2020)

However, further analysis of the remarks by these senior EU officials shows that the concept of European strategic autonomy, or at least its essence, plays a structuring role in the European strategy for the energy sector. Indeed, it could be argued that the goal of decreasing the EU's energy-supplier dependencies is itself testimony to the presence of the concept as the underlying idea behind the diversification strategy, which aims to ensure the security of supply of energy in the EU and, thus, energy security. Indeed, being able to switch energy providers to stop the potential influence of a dominant energy supplier is similar to the main goal of European strategic autonomy: to have freedom of political choice, and action.

The Nord Stream 2 project

In June 2017 the US Senate adopted a bill lobbying for the establishment of sanctions on companies working on the Nord Stream 2 project (Russell 2017, 2). At that time,

Germany and Austria were the most vocal in denouncing this ‘unacceptable interference in European Energy matters, motivated by the desire to ensure US energy sector jobs by promoting US LNG [liquefied natural gas] at the expense of Russian gas’ (Russell 2017, 2). In December 2019 US President Donald Trump approved the sanctions recommended by the Senate on any firm that ‘helps the state-owned gas company Gazprom finish’ the project (*BBC News* 2019), therefore threatening the European companies OMV (Austria), Wintershall and Uniper (Germany), and ENGIE (France). This interference in the member states’ sovereignty and freedom of choice in their energy supply, as well as the business activities of European companies, can be interpreted as unwanted external influence in European affairs.

In fact, the EU has already identified such American legislative extraterritoriality as a threat to the autonomy of the Union. It has reacted by creating a Council regulation to protect against the effects of the extraterritorial application of legislation adopted by a third country (Council of the European Union 1996). Despite this, Raphaël Gauvain, deputy in the French National Assembly and rapporteur on the situation, argues that ‘le niveau pertinent ici n’est pas la Commission. Pour agir avec des souverainetés partagées, et pour identifier les intérêts stratégiques européens, c’est au Conseil européen, aux États membres de donner l’impulsion politique’ (Gauvain pers. comm. 2020). The Commission’s current silence and inaction stands in sharp contrast to its behaviour in 1996, and shows that there has been a change of approach to one of prudence in its use and definition of the term ‘European strategic autonomy’.

On the other hand, the US ambassador to Berlin defended the US’s stance towards the Nord Stream 2 project as being ‘extremely pro-European’ (*Financial Times* 2019) rather than a threat to the Union’s autonomy, in that it would help Germany avoid becoming a ‘hostage of Russia’ (*Deutsche Welle* 2019). When assessing the impact of such a project on European energy security, and therefore the strategic autonomy of the European energy sector, some argue that Nord Stream 2 would be of benefit by ‘ending the dependence on the unreliable Ukrainian transit route’ (Nord Stream 2, 2020) and by securing a reliable flow of cheap gas to Europe as ‘Middle Eastern and North African suppliers lack sufficient export capacity’ (Nord Stream 2, 2020). It is further claimed that, thanks to technology, European member states can now reverse the flow of energy without difficulty, enabling them to ‘easily share gas with one another, ending their dependence on a single supply route’ (Russell 2017, 2). And this being the case, the argument goes, the new Nord Stream 2 route would not pose any threat to European energy security. This was notably demonstrated in 2014, when Russia threatened to turn off the taps on the Ukraine route; Ukraine was able to secure the supply by buying Russian gas through Slovakia (Russell 2017, 2). Others argue the opposite, that Nord Stream 2 is not beneficial, as the project ‘does not help the EU’s diversification efforts; on the contrary, it concentrates most Russian exports on a single route, while potentially ending the transit via Ukraine’ (Russell 2017, 2). This in itself constitutes another threat to European strategic autonomy by destabilising the European neighbourhood. Moreover, a situation where one energy supplier has a monopoly on the market could be extremely damaging due to the high strategic value of knowledge of the energy system. As Michel Derdevet,

former secretary general of ENEDIS argues, 'les réseaux énergétiques ne sont pas que de l'énergie, ils contiennent une information stratégiquement sensible pour les pays; les datas' (Derdevet pers. comm. 2020).

Conclusion

Over the years the concept of European strategic autonomy has slowly moved from being a controversial political concept relating generally to defence to a more consensual, Europeanised and generalised concept which seems today to be shaping the European strategy for after the COVID-19 crisis. Going beyond this analysis, the article has demonstrated that through its application to the energy sector, the scope of the concept has become much broader. In this sector we find the same objectives of independence of political decisions and actions, giving the energy sector a similar strategic value to that of the defence sector.

However, the economic consequences of the COVID-19 crisis and the inability of European member states to clearly define in normative and political terms what European strategic interests are will certainly dampen the development of strategic autonomy. Europe will certainly be seeing increasing foreign direct investment in strategic areas such as energy systems and infrastructure. Therefore, when the EU framework for screening foreign direct investment is reviewed, particular attention should be paid to developing a common definition of European strategic interests. That will be the forthcoming challenge for Europe if it wants to drive the Union towards its next stage, strategic autonomy.

Note

1. This designation is without prejudice to position on status, and is in line with UN Security Council Resolution 1244/99 and the International Court of Justice Opinion on the Kosovo declaration of independence.

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Author biography



Eloïse Ryon, originally from a law background, is a student at Sciences Po Paris and a recent graduate of the College of Europe. For her master's thesis, from which this article is drawn, she focused on European strategic autonomy and the Energy Union.



Why the Chinese Communist Party doesn't like Winnie the Pooh

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Roland Freudenstein

Communist systems, like dictatorships in general, and especially the Soviet Union, have always been a paradise for political jokes and amusing memes. This is not only because humour is sometimes a good way to circumvent, or at least slow down, censorship, but also because of the comic relief provided, which is good for the morale of dissidents and other party critics in an often-frustrating social environment.

Fast-forward to the turbo authoritarianism of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) under Xi Jinping. Starting seven years ago, Chinese social media have seen a growing number of references to similarities between China's 'Supreme Leader' and Winnie the Pooh, the anthropomorphic teddy bear featured in the 1920s' children's books by Alan A. Milne, and immortalised in several major Walt Disney animated films.

The original Winnie/Xi meme was born in 2013, when a photo of Xi and Barack Obama, walking next to each other during a visit to the US, was pictured next to an uncannily similar image of Winnie and Tigger (McDonnell 2017). This has to be seen in context: Xi had just been appointed Secretary General of the CCP, and shortly after that became President of the People's Republic of China. There were, at the time, some hopes for modernisation as well as liberalisation by Xi among Chinese intellectuals and bloggers—hopes which he quickly disappointed. Those were the days of the CCP's notorious 'Document Number 9'—to date the most concise and stringent official rejection of Western ideas such as checks and balances, and freedom of opinion (Buckly 2013).

Consequently, it was not surprising that Chinese bloggers felt triggered to poke some fun at the president. But what would have been seen as a pretty harmless meme by most heads of state (at least democratic ones) did not go down well with the CCP, in whose world-view the Supreme Leader is infallible and flawless, has no quirks and most

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certainly does not walk in a funny way. But that is precisely what made the comparison between Xi Jinping and ‘Little Bear Winnie’ (小熊维尼, xiǎo xióng wéi ní) so attractive to Chinese dissident bloggers. Needless to say, the memes were quickly banned from the Chinese Internet—a measure possible thanks to China’s ‘Great Firewall’, which virtually closes it off from the World Wide Web.

The same happened in the following year, 2014, when a picture of Xi and Japan’s Premier Abe was likened to one of Pooh and Eeyore the donkey (McDonnell 2017). The final nail in Winnie’s coffin in the eyes of Chinese censors came in 2015 when bloggers made fun of Xi riding in a car at a parade by putting a plastic Winnie-in-a-car next to him (McDonnell 2017). Since 2017, a specially developed piece of software has automatically blocked all Xi/Winnie comparisons on China’s Internet.

However, by that point, the story had reached the West. In June 2018, the US television channel HBO was blocked in China because John Oliver had picked up on Winnie’s newfound fame in China (Kuo 2018). And the 299th *South Park* episode in October 2019, ‘Band in China’, was, indeed, very soon banned in China, and led to a total ban on access to episodes of *South Park* there (Brzeski and Parker 2019).

Today, CCP censorship is total concerning Xi/Winnie comparisons. But not all references to Winnie the Pooh are banned: allegedly, some Disney animated films are still accessible to the Chinese public (China Uncensored 2019). There is still hope!

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A Europe That Protects Its Heritage

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Federico Ottavio Reho and Theo Larue

This policy brief analyses the competences and potential of the EU in the field of cultural heritage protection. Despite numerous references to culture and heritage in the EU treaties, the analysis suggests that the Union’s focus on cultural heritage remains limited and does not adequately reflect the magnitude of recent challenges.

In the last decade of financial and economic difficulties, Europe’s cultural heritage has suffered from major funding cuts. This is now being compounded by the devastating consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic on the culture and heritage sectors. Climate change also represents a growing threat to cultural sites across the EU, and the successes of right-wing Eurosceptic populism have changed the politics of cultural heritage. The EU is routinely portrayed as a remote post-national technocracy bent on overcoming separate national identities and lacking a commitment to the continent’s common historical heritage.

This paper argues that all these developments have created the conditions for considerable ‘European added value’—economic, social and political—to be realised by stepping up EU action for the protection of the continent’s cultural heritage. Currently ongoing negotiations for the next EU Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF 2021–7) and for the post-COVID-19 recovery fund that is tied to it (the ‘Next Generation EU’ initiative) offer a unique opportunity to advance this important agenda.

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Towards a Sovereign Europe - A Centre-Right Approach

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Angelos Chryssogelos

As the debate on European sovereignty has gained traction in recent years, Europe's centre-right should develop its own distinct vision of European sovereignty, one that reflects its own priorities and values.

This policy brief aims to develop a tentative theoretical and historical framework that can be used to work out what this conservative and Christian Democratic vision could look like. It argues that it is important for the centre-right to ensure that its vision stands apart from those of both the nationalist populists on its right and social-liberals on its left. Against populists the centre-right needs to show that conservatism and European integration can be compatible. As the historical overview in the paper shows, conservatives throughout history have supported processes of political and economic centralisation as long as these have taken place in piecemeal fashion and the resulting institutions have reproduced in their conduct and outlook the values conservatives stand for. Against the centralisers on the centre-left, who are currently monopolising the slogan 'more Europe', the centre-right must articulate more clearly how its own understanding of EU integration is a more pragmatic, effective and viable way forward. Contrary to progressives, who view European and international institutions as instruments of ideologically-driven social change, European conservatives see institutions as expressions and safeguards both of diversity inside the EU and of the distinctly European imprint on world politics externally.

The paper offers a first outline of how a conservative perspective on EU sovereignty could be applied to a range of policy areas, from foreign policy to economic governance to migration.

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Summary

As the debate on European sovereignty has gained traction in recent years, Europe's centre-right should develop its own distinct vision of European sovereignty, and that reflects its core political values. This policy brief aims to identify a British theoretical and historical framework that can be used to work out what the centre-right and Christian Democratic movement has to say on the EU. It is a response to the centre-right's concerns in the wake of the 2015 election that the nationalised populists on its right and social liberals on its left. Against populists the centre-right needs to show that conservatism and European integration can be compatible. As the historical overview in the paper shows, conservatism throughout history has supported processes of political and economic centralisation as long as these have taken place in a gradual fashion and the resulting institutions have reproduced in their operation and culture the values conservatives cherish. Against the centralists on the centre-left, who are currently monopolising the English name Europe, the centre-right must articulate more clearly how its own understanding of EU integration is a more pragmatic, effective and viable way forward. Contrary to progressives, who view European and international institutions as instruments of ideologically-driven social change, European conservatives see institutions as agencies, and subjects both of change and the EU and of the ability. European impact on world politics externally. The paper offers a brief outline of how a conservative perspective on EU sovereignty could be applied to a range of policy areas, from foreign policy to economic governance to migration.

Keywords: Conservatism – Centralism – Subsidiarity – Integration – Populism – Social-Liberalism – Centre-right – European Sovereignty

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Rethinking EU Crisis Management - From Battlegroups to a European Legion?

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Niklas Nováky

This paper discusses an idea to create a European Legion that has been put forward by Radoslaw Sikorski, MEP. This would be a new kind of EU military unit, made up of volunteers rather than national contingents contributed by the member states. The idea stems from Sikorski's desire to reform the EU's existing battlegroups, which have been operational for 15 years but have never been used, despite numerous opportunities. The paper argues that although the EU's 2007 Lisbon Treaty imposes heavy restrictions on the Union's ability to deploy military force, it does not rule out conducting operations with a volunteer force. At the same time, a volunteer-based European Legion force would have to be created initially by a group of member states outside the EU framework. These states could then make it available to the EU's Common Security and Defence Policy as, for example, a permanent battlegroup. An existing model would be the multinational Eurocorps.

Author biography



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Development Aid, Migration and Conditionality – The Case of the Marshall Plan with Africa

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Livia Benko

This policy brief analyses the current efforts by the EU and its member states to provide development aid to third countries. It concentrates on the Marshall Plan with Africa. Proposed by Germany, this plan is intended to bring cooperation between Europe and Africa to a new level. The study examines this plan in light of debates on the impact of development aid on third countries in general, and on migratory dynamics in particular. The specific focus is on aid conditionality related to cooperation on migration. The brief shows that increasing development aid does not necessarily lead to a decrease in migration. The available evidence suggests that conditionality in the provision of development aid is not effective in reducing the propensity to migrate.

The policy brief makes recommendations for future EU–Africa cooperation. It suggests that, to ensure a regular dialogue between the two continents, Africa should remain high on the agendas of both the EU and member states. Following the approach taken by the Marshall Plan with Africa, the brief argues that migration-related conditions should be attached to the provision of development aid only with caution. Aid ought to be primarily targeted at creating good governance and strengthening public services.

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Looking Beyond Coronabonds: What Covid-19 Means for the future of the Eurozone

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Charles Wyplosz

The pandemic has created an unprecedented level of uncertainty, mainly because we do not know how long it will last. This affects the economic implications. Two facts are clear: there will be a recession and budget deficits will have to soar. This note draws some implications beyond the immediate health concerns. In many ways, they challenge the architecture of the Eurozone. Either the architecture will change or the Eurozone as we know it will cease to exist. During the sovereign debt crisis from 2010 to 2015, the architecture was changed just as the Eurozone was on the verge of losing one or more members, with unmeasurable consequences. Will history repeat itself?

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Summary

The pandemic has created an unprecedented level of uncertainty, mainly because we do not know how long it will last. This affects the economic implications. Two facts are clear: there will be a recession and budget deficits will have to soar. This note draws some implications beyond the immediate health concerns. In many ways, they challenge the architecture of the Eurozone. Either the architecture will change or the Eurozone as we know it will cease to exist. During the sovereign debt crisis from 2010 to 2015, the architecture was changed just as the Eurozone was on the verge of losing one or more members, with unmeasurable consequences. Will history repeat itself?

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The EU's Security and Defence Policy: The Impact of the Coronavirus

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Niklas Nováky

The current COVID-19 pandemic will change the world, like the fall of the Berlin Wall and the 9/11 terror attacks. For the foreseeable future, EU governments will be preoccupied with dealing with the pandemic's immediate socio-economic consequences. However, other policy areas will be affected as well. With regard to the EU's security and defence policy, COVID-19 is likely to extinguish the unprecedented dynamism that has characterised its development since 2016. Its most immediate impact is likely to be decreased funding for several new initiatives such as the European Defence Fund. The pandemic is also likely to reduce the EU's readiness to address crises in its neighbourhood and may hasten the Union's relative decline as a global power if its recovery is slow and wrought by prolonged disputes between the member states over the appropriate economic response to the crisis. Yet, the EU should not completely abandon its pre-COVID-19 security and defence agenda. Both during and after the pandemic, the Union will continue to face familiar challenges such as cyberattacks, disinformation campaigns and instability in its neighbourhood.

Author biography



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