



DISCUSSION PAPER

Shaping the role of the EU as a global player in a post-COVID-19 world

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I. Introduction

On 9 January 2020, China declared the existence of a new coronavirus following a cluster of pneumonia cases that emerged in Wuhan (Hubei Province, China) in December 2019. COVID-19 is a virus that is now prevalent in all European Union (EU) countries and affects more than 150 countries worldwide. It is responsible for more than 45,000 registered deaths so far, a figure that continues to rise, and the European Center for Disease Prevention and Control so far has registered more than 950,000 cases.¹ The spread of COVID-19 was characterised as a pandemic by the World Health Organisation (WHO) on 11 March 2020.² There is currently no approved specific treatment or vaccine against COVID-19 but some are in the testing phase.³

This pandemic highlights that our interconnected world has its limits. Worse, the crisis demonstrates that the European Union seems incapable of acting in concert to counter such alarming circumstances.⁴ When the crisis began, many European leaders did not show a spirit of coordination. Italy's permanent representative to the European Union, Ambassador Maurizio Massari, argued that this lack of coordination between EU members contributed to the escalation of the situation in his country.⁵ Furthermore, this crisis will not suspend rivalries between international actors as they do not present a united front against COVID-19⁶.

Moreover, multiple challenges regarding health, economy, social and political issues are piling up in every member state of the European Union. China and Russia are expected to undermine the European Union's role in fighting the pandemic.⁷ Further dramatic developments could be expected, as Joseph Borrell - the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy - said, "*COVID-19 will reshape our world.*"⁸

II. Crisis management and humanitarian aid: the EU's contribution to the international effort against the spread of COVID-19

As a response to the coronavirus outbreak, the EU Civil Protection Mechanism was activated on 28 January 2020 which enabled the EU and its member states to provide consular support to its citizens in third countries as well as to bring them back to their home countries through special flights if transportation via commercial flights is not possible. Since the beginning of the outbreak in Europe, this instrument has been used to repatriate thousands of EU citizens stranded in countries across the

¹ <https://www.ecdc.europa.eu/en/geographical-distribution-2019-ncov-cases>

² <https://time.com/5791661/who-coronavirus-pandemic-declaration/>

³ <https://time.com/5790545/first-covid-19-vaccine/>

⁴ <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/mar/11/italy-criticises-eu-being-slow-help-coronavirus-epidemic>,

⁵ <https://www.politico.eu/article/coronavirus-italy-needs-europe-help/>

⁶ <https://lens.monash.edu/@politics-society/2020/03/13/1379820/pandemics-great-power-rivalries-and-political-upheaval>

⁷ <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/28/us/politics/china-russia-coronavirus-disinformation.html>, paragraph 21

⁸ https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage/76379/coronavirus-pandemic-and-new-world-it-creating_en

world including China, the United States, Japan, Tunisia, Morocco⁹ and Georgia¹⁰, as well as the Maldives¹¹, the Gambia¹², Chad, Indonesia and Egypt.

On the same day, the Council of the European Union on the initiative of the Croatian Presidency decided to activate the EU's crisis response mechanism (IPCR) for information sharing purposes as a measure to counter the coronavirus outbreak.¹³ On 24 February 2020, the European Commission announced an aid package worth €232 million to support the international effort to tackle the spread of the virus. These funds were planned to be allocated to the WHO, Africa, the EU Civil Protection Mechanism and Public-Private Partnership with the pharmaceutical industry, research on epidemiology, diagnostics, therapeutics and clinical management in containment and prevention.¹⁴ One week later, on 2 March 2020, as the situation was escalating, the Croatian Presidency of the Council triggered the full activation of the IPCR.¹⁵

Crisis management and humanitarian aid are two essential parts of the EU's external action. At the same time, a working document of the European External Action Service (EEAS) and the European Commission, which was produced in 2017, seemingly reveals to some extent that the EU's approach as a global actor towards crisis management and humanitarian aid is mostly centred on conflict management, conflict prevention or counter-terrorism¹⁶, rather than dealing with health-related issues.

However, while the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (TFEU) places public health in the category of shared competences between the EU and its member states¹⁷, and in practice, the EU tends to treat this policy area as a matter of internal policy, it can be noticed the fact that its importance on the international agenda has grown over the past two decades.¹⁸

Furthermore, in the European Union Global Strategy, it is stated that the EU will “*work for more effective prevention, detection and responses to global pandemics.*”¹⁹ The developments surrounding the ongoing crisis, but also taking into account the EU's actions during past pandemics such as the Ebola virus outbreak²⁰ in 2014-2016, and the 2002-2004 SARS outbreak, suggest that these types of problems that transcend national borders become a matter of concern to EU foreign policy decision-makers when they pose a threat to international security and economic growth.

⁹ https://ec.europa.eu/echo/news/coronavirus-new-round-repatriations-eu-citizens-civil-protection-mechanism_en

¹⁰ https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage/76203/covid-19-consular-support-eu-citizens-third-countries_en

¹¹ https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage/76368/eu-tourists-stranded-maldives-%E2%80%93-good-example-cooperation-among-authorities_en

¹² https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage/76426/eu-nationals-return-safely-home-gambia_en

¹³ <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/policies/ipcr-response-to-crises/>

¹⁴ https://ec.europa.eu/echo/news/eu-commits-232-million-global-efforts-tackle-covid-19-outbreak_en

¹⁵ <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2020/03/02/covid-19-outbreak-the-presidency-steps-up-eu-response-by-triggering-full-activation-mode-of-ipcr/>

¹⁶ <https://europa.eu/capacity4dev/public-fragility/wiki/eus-comprehensive-approach-external-conflict-and-crises>

¹⁷ <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=celex:12012E004>

¹⁸ <https://www.un.org/en/chronicle/article/advancing-global-health-agenda>

¹⁹ http://eeas.europa.eu/archives/docs/top_stories/pdf/eugs_review_web.pdf

²⁰ https://ec.europa.eu/echo/files/aid/countries/factsheets/thematic/wa Ebola_en.pdf

III. How the EU addresses the economic repercussions of COVID-19 while Chinese politics of generosity undermines European solidarity

The coronavirus pandemic has a dramatic impact not only on lives and public health but also on the global economy. As governments impose lockdowns and social distancing, it inevitably means a slowdown in production, investments, and trade, leading to a massive downturn in every sector of the economy. As the UNCTAD Secretary-General Mukhisa Kituyi highlighted, “*any slowdown in manufacturing in one part of the world will have a ripple effect in economic activity across the globe because of regional and global value chains.*”²¹

While China is starting to recover from the virus²², Europe is now the world’s COVID-19 pandemic epicentre as well as the most affected economy.²³ The European Commission and the Council announced that the coronavirus pandemic qualifies as an unusual circumstance outside of the governments’ control.²⁴ In order to contain the crisis, the EU aims to respond rapidly and in a coordinated manner to ensure that member states can deal adequately with both the human and socio-economic dimension of the COVID-19 pandemic.

As a result, the European Commission proposed for the first time to activate the General Escape Clause of the Stability and Growth Pact (SGP) in order to allow member states to have greater flexibility to ensure sufficient liquidity into their businesses, preserve their economies, and enable emergency spending without the risk of being fined for violating the 3% debt/GDP ratio.²⁵

Moreover, the European Central Bank (ECB) launched the Pandemic Emergency Purchase Programme (PEPP) on 18 March 2020, a €750 billion programme consisting of purchasing both public and private securities until the end of 2020.²⁶ This measure should be able to help Italy and the other severely affected member states. In addition, the ECB decided to ease some of its collateral standards in order to facilitate banks to raise funds during this crisis.²⁷

Italy is so far the most affected country in the EU.²⁸ When soaring numbers of patients were putting the health services under strain, the country pleaded with the EU member states for urgent medical supplies.²⁹ However, such demand was not met by any of the European countries. On the contrary,

²¹ https://unctad.org/en/pages/newsdetails.aspx?OriginalVersionID=2297&utm_source=CIO+-+General+public&utm_campaign=3d29f17385-EMAIL_CAMPAIGN_2019_05_17_11_42_COPY_01&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_3d334fa428-3d29f17385-70569529

²² <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/03/25/europe-china-us-economic-recovery-v-coronavirus/>

²³ https://unctad.org/en/pages/newsdetails.aspx?OriginalVersionID=2297&utm_source=CIO+-+General+public&utm_campaign=3d29f17385-EMAIL_CAMPAIGN_2019_05_17_11_42_COPY_01&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_3d334fa428-3d29f17385-70569529

²⁴ https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_20_459

²⁵ <https://www.cer.eu/media/cer-podcast-eu-must-fight-covid-19-home-front-and-abroad>

²⁶ <https://www.politico.eu/article/ecb-announces-e750b-coronavirus-stimulus/>

²⁷ <https://www.euractiv.com/section/coronavirus/news/ecb-unveils-e750-billion-stimulus-against-coronavirus/>

²⁸ <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-52067673>

²⁹ <https://www.ft.com/content/d3bc25ea-652c-11ea-b3f3-fe4680ea68b5>

the first reaction of some countries such as Germany, the Czech Republic, France, and Poland – fearing for their own shortages – was to introduce national export bans of medical equipment.³⁰ The European Commission later called on those member states to revoke national bans for the sake of the free flow of goods within the EU, threatening Germany of infringement proceeding over its export ban on personal protective equipment.³¹ Accordingly, Berlin and Paris lifted their ban and Germany sent one million face masks to Italy.³²

The first country that responded promptly to Italians' urgent appeal was China.³³ As the country is now recovering from the virus and has a surplus of medical equipment, Beijing seized the opportunity of publicly committing to sending medical equipment and doctors in order to implement its foreign policy strategy and also change its national image from “coronavirus-spreader” to “healer”. Subsequently, even Russia sent military virologists and equipment that the EU and NATO considered “less as generosity and more as a geopolitical move asserting Russian power and extending influence.”³⁴

“China has plans for Italy: it is interested in Italy's ports and infrastructure in connection with the Belt and Road Initiative; in its quality food, design, and tourism potential; in its high-technology hubs like L'Aquila; and in the development of 5G in the country”³⁵, said Theresa Fallon, founder and director of the Centre for Russia Europe Asia Studies (CREAS). Beijing also hopes that Italy could play an active role in deepening China-EU relations while chipping away US influence from Western Europe.

The component of cooperation that appears to turn it into an effective soft power tool during this crisis is tangibility: Chinese medical assistance, Russian deployment of military virologists are more successful on people's perception because they can see it and witness the immediate result, feeling empathy for the helpers. While they can neither feel empathy for nor see concretely the EU's €750 billion economic stimulus, despite no other power has come up with better approaches so far.³⁶

However, although the Chinese “politics of generosity” might have convinced Italy, it irritated a greater number of Europeans.³⁷ The EU's indignation is mainly due to the fact that, when China explicitly asked for discretion concerning the 70 tonnes of EU medical equipment received in January 2020, the EU refrained from turning its medical help into a “public relations campaign.”³⁸ Conversely, China took immediate advantage of its deployment of medical equipment to help Italy for its self-promotion purposes.

³⁰ <https://www.bakermckenzie.com/en/insight/publications/2020/03/new-eu-national-export-controls-medical-equipment>

³¹ <https://www.politico.eu/article/coronavirus-eu-limit-exports-medical-equipment/>

³² Ibid.

³³ <https://thediplomat.com/2020/03/china-italy-and-coronavirus-geopolitics-and-propaganda/>

³⁴ <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-health-coronavirus-russia-eu/russian-aid-to-italy-leaves-eu-exposed-idUSKBN21D28K>

³⁵ <https://thediplomat.com/2020/03/china-italy-and-coronavirus-geopolitics-and-propaganda/>

³⁶ https://www.ecfr.eu/article/commentary_how_the_coronavirus_threatens_a_geopolitical_europe

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Ibid.

At the moment, China is winning this propaganda battle by reaching out to the rest of the world in order to increase its leadership in global governance. The glaring absence of the US as a leading actor on the international stage during this pandemic – in line with the “America first” approach of the Trump administration – allowed Beijing to fill the vacuum of power by positioning itself as a global leader in the coronavirus response.³⁹

In Italy, China is now perceived as the country that provided concrete help when needed, while its fellow member states behaved selfishly and ignored the rhetoric of European solidarity. The fact that a crucial EU Member State like Italy – nowadays characterised by a high percentage of Eurosceptic nationalists – perceives China’s authoritarian measures as successful and more effective to fight COVID-19 should not be unnoticed by the European institutions.

IV. Geopolitical consequences of COVID-19: winning “the battle of narratives”

Long-term political impacts of the COVID-19 outbreak are hard to anticipate⁴⁰, however important foreign policy trends can already be observed, with multiple states trying to exploit the situation for geopolitical gains, such as China and Russia. The European Union has thus ambivalent relations with other countries during this crisis, with two main dynamics: distrust and cooperation.

The World Health Organisation alerted the public on the “*infodemic*”⁴¹ which accompanied the outbreak of COVID-19, namely the proliferation of information, not always accurate, on the virus. The EU institutions reacted strongly⁴² to disinformation related to COVID-19 spread in other states, including Russia⁴³ and China.⁴⁴

Russia has been increasingly criticized by the EU institutions for its disinformation strategy, targeting national and international audiences through media, such as Russia Today and Sputnik, and social media channels.⁴⁵ Recently, multiple cases of false information were detected, for instance, the theory that COVID-19 was laboratory-created, or that the virus is less harmful than a seasonal influenza.⁴⁶ Disinformation warfare is not a new tool of Russian foreign policy, but it took a crucial turn when wrong information is circulating about a global pandemic. Tensions are hence likely to increase between the EU and Russia.

In the 2019 EU strategic outlook, China was described as a “*systemic rival*” of the European Union, especially in the field of technology with the 5G network.⁴⁷ The European perception of China is thus

³⁹ <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/mar/29/us-awol-from-world-stage-as-china-tries-on-global-leadership-for-size>

⁴⁰ <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2020/03/the-economic-geopolitical-and-health-consequences-of-COVID-19/>

⁴¹ <https://www.who.int/docs/default-source/coronaviruse/situation-reports/20200202-sitrep-13-ncov-v3.pdf>

⁴² <https://twitter.com/JosepBorrellF/status/1242148469407649802>

⁴³ <https://euvsdisinfo.eu/disinformation-can-kill/>

⁴⁴ <https://euvsdisinfo.eu/eeas-special-report-disinformation-on-the-coronavirus-short-assessment-of-the-information-environment/?highlight=china>

⁴⁵ <https://euvsdisinfo.eu/eeas-special-report-disinformation-on-the-coronavirus-short-assessment-of-the-information-environment/>

⁴⁶ <https://euvsdisinfo.eu/the-kremlin-and-disinformation-about-coronavirus/?highlight=influenza>

⁴⁷ <https://ec.europa.eu/commission/sites/beta-political/files/communication-eu-china-a-strategic-outlook.pdf>

ambivalent. It is a rival promoting “*alternative models of governance*”⁴⁸ but also a strong power with whom the EU must cooperate. In the case of COVID-19, there were tensions about China’s censorship and its attempt to hide the scope of the outbreak.⁴⁹

However, the images of the Chinese Red Cross bringing equipment to the Italian Red Cross were shared worldwide.⁵⁰ It was a strong symbol that in times of epidemics, help comes from beyond the European borders, while EU member states only showed limited solidarity. China’s assistance to EU members states during the pandemics can be qualified as a “*show of force*”⁵¹ and an attempt to take back the narrative on COVID-19 by displaying its solidarity.⁵²

The EU is aware of the geopolitical component of the crisis, which Josep Borrell, High Representative of the European Union, described as “*a global battle of narratives*.”⁵³ Josep Borrell underlined the risk for EU values when other powers are promoting authoritarianism as an efficient way to fight the virus.⁵⁴

The global impact of the pandemics calls for extraordinary measures and might influence the relationship between the EU and its rivals, but also with its partners. That is why helping the European neighbourhood, especially Turkey, the Southern Neighbourhood and Eastern Partnership countries, is crucial. There is a necessity to help improve healthcare in these countries and provide neighbouring states with long-term assistance to prevent new cases from multiplying and from weakening them.⁵⁵

Furthermore, the EU is particularly eager to strengthen its ties with Western Balkans in this period of crisis, fearing that more states would turn to China for assistance, as was the case of Serbia recently. Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić called China for help and declared that “*all [his] personal hopes are focused on and directed toward China and its President*.”⁵⁶ As a response, the EU is trying to communicate better on the assistance provided internally and to its neighbours.⁵⁷

The decision to restrict the travel of third countries nationals into the Schengen area⁵⁸ for at least 30 days was a political consequence of the pandemic. It was important from a European perspective to preserve the Schengen area and to encourage EU member states to maintain their internal borders

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ <https://euvsdisinfo.eu/eeas-special-report-disinformation-on-the-coronavirus-short-assessment-of-the-information-environment/>

⁵⁰

https://www.repubblica.it/solidarieta/volontariato/2020/03/13/news/coronavirus_a_fiumicino_un_aereo_con_aiuti_della_croce_rossa_cinese_ventilatori_elettrocardiografi_mascherine-251147937/

⁵¹ <https://www.cer.eu/media/cer-podcast-eu-must-fight-covid-19-home-front-and-abroad>

⁵² https://www.ecfr.eu/podcasts/episode/geopolitics_in_the_corona_era_who_will_be_crowned_winner

⁵³ https://eeas.europa.eu/delegations/china/76401/eu-hrvp-josep-borrell-coronavirus-pandemic-and-new-world-it-creating_en

⁵⁴ <https://www.cer.eu/media/cer-podcast-eu-must-fight-covid-19-home-front-and-abroad>

⁵⁵ <https://www.cer.eu/insights/eu-needs-step-its-response-covid-19-outbreak>

⁵⁶ <https://www.euractiv.com/section/china/news/serbia-turns-to-china-due-to-lack-of-eu-solidarity-on-coronavirus/>

⁵⁷ <https://www.cer.eu/media/cer-podcast-eu-must-fight-covid-19-home-front-and-abroad>

⁵⁸ https://ec.europa.eu/info/live-work-travel-eu/health/coronavirus-response/travel-and-transportation_en

open.⁵⁹ However, there were strong restrictions on EU internal borders, especially in Italy, Germany and Poland.⁶⁰

The political impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic will be strong. It can amplify the existing trends of distrust between the European Union and its geopolitical contenders such as China and Russia. However, the pandemic could also weaken existing European alliances. It is a time for countries to show solidarity to strengthen diplomatic ties. Most political responses were initially national solutions and the lack of coordination at the European level gave opportunities to other countries to act.

V. Conclusion

The scale of the COVID-19 outbreak makes it difficult to predict how it will influence the EU's role in international affairs in the future. At the same time, it is rather clear that how the EU decides to manage the situation, and the challenges that could follow its aftermath will have an impact on the EU's image as a global actor. Throughout its history, the EU has dealt with various challenges, but the COVID-19 outbreak proves to differentiate itself from previous crises. From closing borders to closing schools, EU leaders are taking multiple measures to try to stem the pandemic. However, this crisis shows that the EU lacks the necessary tools and organisation to deal effectively with this kind of situations and must rely on the consensus of its member states.

In order to cope with this crisis, the EU is, therefore, progressing to enhance the level of coordination and synergy among member states on issues related to public health. In addition, the EU is developing new and innovative methods to effectively communicate on its actions as well as to counter disinformation campaigns related to COVID-19 both within and beyond its borders. To counter the coronavirus and the geopolitical competition, the European Union is increasing its cooperation with member states, third countries, and international organisations.⁶¹ The EEAS emphasises on the need for the EU to work towards “*a radical scaling up of international cooperation among scientists, economists and policy-makers*”⁶² with the UN, the WHO and the IMF.

Based on Jean Monnet's vision that “*Europe will be forged in crises, and will be the sum of the solutions adopted for those crises*”, the COVID-19 pandemic can potentially represent an experience from which the EU could learn how to mitigate the impact of future crises better and to anticipate the economic and social repercussions that will follow.

⁵⁹ <https://www.cer.eu/insights/eu-needs-step-its-response-covid-19-outbreak>

⁶⁰ <https://carnegieendowment.org/2020/03/18/eu-struggling-to-overcome-muddled-coronavirus-response-pub-81316>

⁶¹ https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage/76379/coronavirus-pandemic-and-new-world-it-creating_en

⁶² Ibid.

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