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The EU's Regional & Global Responses to Covid-19: An Increasingly Uncomfortable Fit?

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European Interest and Principles in Times of Covid-19

Ever since the arrival and spread of Covid-19 in Europe in early 2020, the European Union (EU) and its Member States have been involved in a search for crisis-response. How can we best explain the quest that the EU and its 27 Member States have been involved in? Starting from the observation that Member States (and the EU itself) gradually acknowledged that European solutions were warranted in the first quarter of 2020, I will aim to explain the search for European responses in 2020-2021 as one of accelerating self-interests on the one hand, as well as one of persisting European principles and identity on the other. When analyzing the EU's response throughout 2020, I will look both at EU responses that concern the activation of crisis-response measures 'at home' as well as those concerning the EU's 'global action', including its contribution to global governance responses against Covid-19. Overall, this essay will

show the difficulty of matching regional crisis responses with those of the EU as a global actor.

By doing so, this contribution aims to show that the responses of the EU were both internally and externally seen as speaking to Member State and wider European interests. Arguably, such interest-based action was even evident before and accelerated during the crisis because of Covid-19. The recent Commission communication to scrutinize exports of vaccine doses is only one example that can support this claim.[1] At the same time, the EU retained the image of an organization based on legally agreed upon principles (enshrined in the EU treaties) and a promoter of a rules-based international order: thus, during all quarters of 2020 Covid-19 responses were also linked to European identity, and tried to adhere to principles of multilateralism.[2] For example, internally the notion of 'solidarity' guided EU action, while externally the EU, itself a multilateral organization par excellence, pushed for greater coordination against Covid-19 in global governance. The problem the EU has faced over the last 24 months, however, was not only managing the Covid-19 crisis but answering European needs within the pandemic through both interest- and principle-based action at the same time. The difficulty, which has increased with the Covid-19 crisis, is that the EU has taken action on the basis of various perspectives that do not consistently fit each other and that overall may undermine the EU's perception as a coherent actor – both internally and externally. While simultaneous interest- and principle-based action as well as simultaneous domestic and global action look like a perfect fit, upon closer inspection it increasingly becomes incoherent.

Europe's delicate balance: between interests, principles and global action

In the absence of a so-called permissive consensus,[3] defining the integrative way forward is no longer only in the hands of European political and technocratic elites. Rather, in the new reality of international and European governance facing ideological contestation, EU action needs to be justified in a context of increased politicization, Euroscepticism and populism.[4] As a consequence, European governance-level decisions may not be found easily and EU and Member State institutions could face (or even create) unforeseen waves of political contestation. In this environment, EU decisions need to balance regional and national interests and reflexes of unilateral national action with the aim of arriving at European solutions, especially in times of crises. Conversely, it means that in times of global crisis, European solidarity with the world — showing transnational empathy with others across the globe — is tested if the European interest becomes the ultimate guideline for European action.

What is seen as a legitimate source of EU action may ultimately be a question of perspective. As scholars of government and international relations remind us,

legitimacy is not something an organization has, but is something it needs to gain. And it can only gain it in relation with those through which it governs and those who are governed.[5] As Martha Finnemore argues, “Legitimacy can only be given by others.”[6] In other words, an organization like the EU can be legitimized or delegitimized in times of crisis and contestation.[7] In the context of the pandemic, national governments may call for less or more European Union action, solidarity amongst Member States and adherence to European values, depending on where they situate their interests in the first place. European supranational institutions, like the European Commission and the European Parliament, may push for more European action as the only way to overcome the crisis collectively, but also in order to gain competence in times of crisis. As a global actor, the EU is also likely to be driven by these internal constellations as well. In other words, the EU will find itself in a position of balancing the need for EU global humanitarian action and solidarity against the pandemic, while respecting specific European and national interests at home.

Understanding how Covid-19 hits and how the EU responds

To understand the EU’s response to the Covid-19 crisis, we may want to remind ourselves of two assumptions that have been widely acknowledged. The first is about the EU. In light of the multiple crises the EU has been dealing with since 2009 – including financial, migration, security, Brexit and rule of law crisis – the Juncker-Commission (2014-2019) and the newly-established Von der Leyen-Commission (2019 until today) have gradually tried, together with the EU Member States, to re-strategize EU action in times of domestic and international contestation.[8] To respond to the contestation, both the EU *Global Strategy* (2016) and the Von der Leyen-Commission’s call for a ‘geopolitical’ Union have accentuated the EU’s self-perceived need to combine a pragmatic geopolitical approach, guided by the EU’s own interests, with the EU’s commitment to its own fundamental values – including human rights, the rule of law, and democracy.[9] The EU’s *Connectivity Strategy* (2018) is a case in point, aiming to counterbalance China’s creeping influence in the EU’s neighbourhood through a combination of pragmatic investments and principled action.[10] Pushed by domestic European concerns and national self-interest on the Member-State level as well as contestation abroad, the EU may no longer afford to be the cosmopolitan organization it was once seen to be. Rather, it is likely to look as an organization aiming to combine European interests with values in the most pragmatic way.

The second assumption is about Covid-19 and its impact. It has been claimed that the global pandemic is accelerating conditions and developments that already existed prior to the crisis. This, it is said, was true for private life but also business and public affairs. Think, for example, about how Covid-19 has accelerated the digital transformation and its impacts on individuals, corporations and the state. Think as well about how Covid-19 accelerates the perception of a need to find ways for a climate change transition and

global sustainability. As such, the EU's adaptation to already existing developments and crises through a more self-interest-based pragmatic or value-based approach may well have been even more accelerated by Covid-19. On the one hand, certain societal forces and Member State governments that were already questioning the need for more European action and solidarity may now be likely to call for action that serves their nations first, rather than other peoples of Europe. On the other hand, others may well underline the need for European and even global action.

European and Global Solidarity

In the first quarter between January 2020 and April 2020, when Covid-19 spread globally and the World Health Organization (WHO) recognized it as an 'international emergency' on 31 January 2020,^[11] the EU's collective response remained limited. Member States acted rather than the EU itself, also due to a lack of EU competences in the fields where action was needed, and in March 2020 a large number of Member States were starting to go into first lockdowns due to the accelerating numbers of infected citizens and increasing death rates. Responses remained largely uncoordinated, including unilateral border closures by Member States.

Despite increasing difficulties finding a common direction in the EU internally, during these first months of the crisis the EU was able to act globally, addressing in the G20 Summit in March 2020 the importance of the WHO and hinting at the importance of global co-ordination in order to find proper global and multilateral solutions through global health governance. In a common declaration, the Presidents of the European Council and the European Commission, Charles Michel and Ursula Von der Leyen, declared after the G20 summit hosted by Saudi Arabia on 26 March 2020:

“The G20 has a pivotal role in ensuring [...] global coordination. [...] G20 countries should coordinate their macroeconomic policies, mobilising all instruments available, to mitigate the economic downturn, support workers and companies most affected. [...] The European Union thanked the G20 Presidency for its focus on global coordination towards enhancing our collective pandemic preparedness and welcomed the fact that the G20 asked the WHO, working closely together with relevant organisations, to come up quickly with a global initiative on pandemic preparedness and response. In this context, Europe stands ready to set up an international online pledging event to ensure adequate funding to develop and deploy a vaccine against COVID-19.”^[12]

In other words, the EU first showed a multilateral reflex, looking for global answers and solutions to the accelerating pandemic, underscoring its commitment to multilateral coordination. At the same time, in an attempt to appeal to the need for solidarity in the EU and warning of a negative impact a rift within the EU could have,

Commission President Ursula Von der Leyen said in the European Parliament on the same day:

“We are standing at a fork in the road: will this virus permanently divide us into rich and poor? Into the haves and the have-nots? Or will we become a strong continent, a player to be reckoned with in this world? Can we even emerge stronger and better from this? Can our communities be closer in the face of adversity? Can our democracies be greater?”[13]

Especially (but certainly not exclusively) in view of heavy-hit Member States like Italy and Spain, EU action became unavoidable. As such, first steps were foreseen by the European Central Bank (ECB), which took action and launched lending packages for financially destabilized Member States, worth Euro 750 billion.[14] As actions of the ECB were likely to be only a first step, further, more extensive, and controversial financial interventions were needed. In late March, the EU faced the first unilateral border closures, which threatened the EU’s heart of integration and, more specifically, the smooth functioning of the EU’s Single Market and the freedoms of movement of persons and goods. Rifts emerged across Member State governments over how to respond to the escalating crisis financially.[15] The existing principle of budgetary rigidity was lifted and hailed by some commentators as the end of ‘ordo-liberalism’ and ‘austerity’,[16] which was seen as the guiding economic-financial principle in the Eurozone since the German-led response during the European financial crisis.[17]

At the same time, the question was how a necessary and essential recovery fund and economic stimulus could be organized in an EU in which Member States were hit so differently by the pandemic (at least during the first two quarters of 2020). It was mainly the so-called “frugal four” Member States — the Netherlands, Austria, Sweden and Denmark — that pushed for solutions which aimed to highlight that any financial support from the EU fund would arrive in the form of loans rather than donations to the countries in need. Solidarity was underscored, but clearly had its limits from their point of view. Other Member States argued that heavy-hit countries, like Italy and Spain, should no longer be subject to loans, but that financial stimuli through grants needed to help the economically-drained countries.[18] In other words, the European recovery mechanisms would have to figure out how far the inter-European support and solidarity would go – even in times when a global pandemic was threatening Member States’ health systems by a seemingly invisible hand. Bringing these two opposite ends together, financial ministers were able to agree in principle on a comprehensive response in April 2020, building on an existing mechanism like the European Stability Mechanism as a safety-net (worth Euro 540 billion), a recovery fund, and the utilization of the new Multi-Annual Financial Framework (MFF).[19]

By June 2020, the European Commission revealed its Vaccination Strategy, not the least based on the mandate it received from the Member States to negotiate contracts

with vaccine-producers in April,[20] with the aim of purchasing vaccines on behalf of the EU and distributing the purchased vaccines in a fair manner amongst Member States.[21] The idea here was to place the purchase of vaccines in the hands of a single central institution, which would avoid — again underscoring the idea of European solidarity — an inter-European competition over vaccines, and a scenario in which larger and richer Member States may outbid smaller and less rich countries in the race towards available and effective vaccination products. In its own words, the Commission’s vaccination strategy foresaw “swift access to vaccines for Member States and their populations while leading the global solidarity effort”.[22] Indeed, the combination of a vision of ‘solidarity at home’ and ‘solidarity with the world’ started to constitute the EU’s overall approach. ‘Solidarity with the world’ became an embedded feature of the EU’s verbal response to the pandemic. “The European Commission is committed to the principle of universal, equitable and affordable access to vaccines, especially for the most vulnerable countries”, the vaccination strategy states.[23]

And, indeed, action proved to follow the EU’s rhetoric at this stage of the pandemic. The first global reflexes of the EU in the first quarter of 2020, when the EU supported multilateral action through the WHO (especially in the context of the G20), were repeated in the second quarter of 2020. The EU appealed to global solidarity by contributing to fundraising activity following the WHO’s call for a Covid-19 Tool Accelerator,[24] to support global governance networks in the development and distribution of a future vaccination. GAVI (The Global Alliance for Vaccines and Immunisation), the main public-private partnership responsible for the vaccine roll-out in lower- and middle-income countries across the world (called COVAX), received a contribution from “Team Europe” — including EU Member States, the European Commission and the European Investment Bank — of a total of Euro 11.4 billion in May and June 2020.[25] This financial contribution included Euro 1.4 billion from the European Commission, Euro 3.1 billion from the Member States, and a total of Euro 6.9 billion from the European Investment Bank – the latter to a large degree (approx. Euro 4.1 billion) in the form of loans for the Western Balkans and Turkey, and neighboring countries of the EU.[26] This financial commitment corresponded with the EU’s earlier strategic reflections on how to respond to the crisis, underscoring the need to financially help several regions in the European neighbourhood and beyond: again with a financial emphasis on those regions and countries, like the Western Balkans and Turkey, closest to the EU.[27]

The third quarter between July and October 2020 highlighted again the deep divisions of EU Member States on how to run the recovery fund. The final agreement on the recovery fund and Multi-Annual Framework of July 2020 presented a compromise that allowed for both loan-based funding and direct (non-repayable) donations, worth Euro 1.8 trillion in total.[28] Of this sum, the EU agreed on a Euro 750 billion recovery fund package “aimed at funding post-pandemic relief efforts across the EU.”[29] But instead of the Euro 500 billion proposed by the European Commission, only Euro 390 billion in this fund could finally be used as grants to Member States in need.[30] The rest would

be handed out as loans. In order to find this compromise, rebate mechanisms were used and especially the Netherlands and Austria together with Denmark and Sweden received higher rebate rates for voting in favour of the final compromise.

Over a couple of months, the European Commission asked for and received a larger role in European response and governance. First, the European Commission would not only have an enhanced status thanks to its new lending competence in financial markets (some called this the 'Hamilton moment' of the European Union), which would allow money to be channeled into the Recovery Fund and the European budget (the new MFF). Policy-wise, programmes would be guided by a reform of the European economy, linking the crisis and the necessity of resilience and recovery to the Commission's key ambitions prior to the crisis: economic transformation (digitalisation) and the implementation of the European Green Deal. Second, the Commission assumed in September 2020 that a legitimate Union would only be one that would have more competencies in a future Health Union, an area where the EU showed a lack of powers.[31]

The Commission was certainly boosted at this stage by the fact that it could show the first 'vaccination deals' with major pharmaceutical companies around the globe, including Astra Zeneca (August 2020), Sanofi GSK (September 2020), and Jansen Pharmaceutica (October 2020). When the fourth contract with BioNTech-Pfizer was signed in November 2020, the Commission President claimed that: "With this fourth contract we are now consolidating an extremely solid vaccine candidate portfolio, most of them in advanced trials phase. Once authorised, they will be quickly deployed and bring us closer to a sustainable solution of the pandemic." [32] Simultaneously with its domestic efforts, the European Commission reported on "Team Europe's" ongoing efforts to chip into the Convax-initiative in late 2020 and early 2021.[33] Once again, the Commission tried to justify its action in view of expectations at home, while at the same time adhering to its solidarity with others outside the EU. However, the amounts spent on the purchase of vaccines for Europe significantly outweigh the financial contribution to the COVAX initiative and indicate a domestic prioritization by the EU.

The Rule of Law and Output (In-)efficiency

Between summer and winter 2020, the recovery fund and the new MFF were more and more linked to the question of rule-of-law-compliance. In other words, financial support and inner-European solidarity with Member States may end if rule of law compliance was not fulfilled. Over several years, Hungary and Poland undermined the rule of law through constitutional amendments, the hollowing-out of judiciary independence and the free press, while the EU struggled to find ways to respond to the unfolding crisis.[34] Not surprisingly, Hungary and Poland were firmly against this conditionality principle, which would put them, as large receivers of the recovery fund,

at risk. During the negotiations in July, “a push for tough conditions led to threats from Hungarian prime minister Viktor Orban to block the entire recovery package”.^[35]

But with the European Parliament (EP) and the Council to decide on the final recovery package, the debate was once more revitalized. If the EU wanted to act legitimately in times of Covid-19 then, according to those advocating a conditionality principle, the EU needed to link funding by the recovery fund and MFF to compliance with foundational values and principles of the EU. In principle, both the Council and the European Parliament agreed in November that the EU could only show solidarity with those Member States which were standing firmly on the basis of foundational values, such as democracy, human rights and the rule of law.^[36] Towards the end of 2020, however, the EU, steered by the German rotating presidency, showed once more its pragmatic face in the context of the pandemic. Last minute deals were found between the EP and the Council and paved the way for a final decision on the recovery fund and MFF in the Council and the EP. The rule of law was respected in this latest deal, but surely not written in capital letters – the German Presidency broke a pragmatic deal that allowed for the availability of the recovery fund and MFF, rather than being held back by Hungary and Poland. Under the agreed deal, the applicable regulation to counter rule of law violations would be delayed as it would first be subject to the scrutiny of the EU Court of Justice (CJEU), and only then would the Commission finalize its guidelines by which a breach of the rule of law could be detected.^[37]

Shortly before the deal, the first vaccination test results by BioNTech/Pfizer showed additional evidence of hope days after Joe Biden prevailed in the US presidential election. The approval of the vaccine, however, took the European Medicines Agency (EMA) and the European Commission longer than expected, while the United Kingdom pushed for quick non-technocratic decisions and roll-outs of the first available vaccine. Once the vaccines were approved in December — almost three weeks after the UK did and a week after the roll-out in the US and Canada — the EU soon faced problems with the roll-out of the vaccine itself. By the end of January 2021, several EU Member States had already fallen behind the roll-out of the UK more than three times.^[38] By that point, Israel had already been receiving the vaccines at higher numbers and, as it turned out, also at more interesting conditions for the large pharmaceutical companies, paying better prices than the European Commission, allowing to use patients’ data for the evaluation of the vaccination-efficiency, and retaining the liability of the vaccine to Israel.^[39] With companies like BioNTech/Pfizer and Astra-Zeneca showing difficulties in production and delivery, the European Commission became impatient, asking for an export control of vaccines that were produced on European soil, especially if the EU would not receive any doses from outside the EU. Eventually, the EU export regime could also affect so-called COVAX countries in the global South.^[40] The European Commission not only picked a fight with pharma transnationals, which ultimately hold the key to overcoming the spread of Covid-19; arguably, it also started to show signs of a vaccine approach that was incompatible with its global ambitions, for example by running against COVAX-related

exports — a response to the creeping vaccine nationalism on the level of the Member States, which either asked for greater export restrictions or increasing imports of vaccines.[41]

The European Commission, however, anticipated the critique. On the one hand, it argued that with a new export authorization scheme in place since 1 February, only one export demand was denied.[42] On the other hand, in its social media communication the Commission used global vaccination production hubs of transnational pharmaceutical companies in Europe (like Pfizer's in Puurs, Belgium) as an example of how well 'Europe' was doing in producing and exporting vaccines made in the European Union – obviously in sharp contrast to those countries, including the United States, that did not enable the export of vaccines at all. Ursula Von der Leyen tweeted that “we [emphasis mine] have exported 155 million doses to 87 countries since December. We take pride in this and invite others to join us. We'll only be safe when everyone is safe.”[43] Furthermore, the European Commission and the EU's High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Josep Borrell, announced what he called, standing by the EU's “closest partners whose future lies firmly in the EU”, the delivery of an additional 651 thousand doses of BioNTech/Pfizer to the Balkans together with neighbouring Member State Austria.[44]

The ongoing quest for regional and global action: an emerging inconsistent fit?

The quest for EU responses to Covid-19 lingers on. Over the last year, European action has reflected accelerating self-interests on the one hand and persisting European principles and solidarity on the other.

We could see that the answers the EU was trying to find were based on Member State interests that often stood in the way of greater European solidarity. Member States raised concerns about the EU's vaccine procurement and distribution policy, some even unilaterally buying doses on the vaccine market. An emerging blame-game of Member States passing the buck to the EU is nothing new, but certainly underscores the rift between self-interest and solidarity, and could once again undermine the legitimacy of the EU in the eyes of its citizens.

What's more, while values, like the rule of law, were certainly not thrown overboard in the response to the Covid-19 crisis, they did not prevent pragmatic decisions, as the tale of the EU recovery fund and MFF showed. Again, the EU has tried to combine an interest-based and a principles-based approach during the crisis. However, the

interests of economic recovery and resilience clearly trumped concerns over rule-of-law backsliding.

EU solidarity with the world was certainly not entirely cut off in favour of EU interests. It becomes evident, however, how difficult an exercise it is to speak to European interests and solidarity with the world at the same time. It remains to be seen whether the EU's concern for an effective purchase and roll-out of the available vaccines may eventually trump its solidarity with non-EU citizens and ultimately undermine the EU's global objectives. So far, the EU has tried to keep the image of serving citizens in the EU, as well as regional and global partners outside the EU.

In the end, European solidarity and European values — showing transnational empathy with other Europeans in need and respect for common European norms and principles — are being tested while, given the severe pandemic crisis at stake, national interests are becoming ultimate guidelines of action. Under such an emerging European governance condition, the EU increasingly looks at regional solutions to the pandemic first, with the consequence that EU regionalism is likely to cross-cut global action.

Notes

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[3] Liesbet Hooghe and Gary Marks (2019), “Grand theories of European integration in the twenty-first century”, *Journal of European Public Policy*, 26:8, 1113-1133, 1119.

[4] Liesbet Hooghe, Tobias Lenz and Gary Marks (2019), “Contested world order: The delegitimation of international governance”, *Review of International Organizations*, Vol. 14, 731-743.

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[6] Martha Finnemore (2009), “Legitimacy, Hypocrisy and the Social Structure of Unipolarity: Why Being a Unipole Isn’t All It’s Cracked Up to Be”, *World Politics*, Vol. 61: 1, 58-85, 61.

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[11] *Financial Times*, “WHO declares international emergency over coronavirus”, 31 January 2020.

[12] European Commission, *Joint Statement by President von der Leyen and President Michel following the G20 Leaders’ videoconference*, Brussels, 26 March 2020:

https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/STATEMENT_20_537

[13] European Commission, *Speech by President-elect von der Leyen in the European Parliament Plenary on the occasion of the presentation of her College of Commissioners and their programme*, European Parliament, Brussels, 26 March 2020:

https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/es/speech_19_6408

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https://www.ecb.europa.eu/press/pr/date/2020/html/ecb.pr200318_1~3949d6f266.en.html

[15] *Financial Times*, “EU leaders clash over coronavirus response”, 26 March 2020.

[16] The fiscal rules remain suspended in 2021. See Euractiv, “Commission wants to keep fiscal rules suspended in 2022”, 3 March 2021:

<https://www.euractiv.com/section/economic-governance/news/commission-wants-to-keep-fiscal-rules-suspended-in-2022/>

[17] Simon Bulmer and William E. Paterson (2017), “Germany and the crisis: Asset or Liability”, in: D. Dinan et al. (eds), *The European Union in Crisis*, Palgrave Macmillan, 212-232, 216-217.

[18] See note [10].

[19] Council of the European Union (Eurogroup), *Report on the comprehensive economic policy response to the COVID-19 pandemic*, 9 April 2020: <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2020/04/09/report-on-the-comprehensive-economic-policy-response-to-the-covid-19-pandemic/>

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[23] Ibid.

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[28] *Financial Times*, “EU leaders strike deal on €750bn recovery fund after marathon summit”, 21 July 2021.

[29] Ibid.

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[33] See note [25].

[34] See Raube, K., Costa Reis, F. (2020). “The EU’s Crisis Response regarding the Democratic and Rule of Law Crisis”. In: Marianne Riddervold, Jarle Trondal, and Akasemi Newsome (eds.) (2020): *The Palgrave Handbook of EU Crises*. Palgrave Macmillan (627-646).

[35] Ibid.

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[39] Deutsche Welle, “Israel’s clever coronavirus vaccination strategy”, 16 February 2021.

[40] *Financial Times*, “Discovery of AstraZeneca vaccine doses in Italy raises EU hackles”, 24 March 2021.

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[44] Josep Borrell Fontelles, 'The EU will deliver 651,000 BioNTech/Pfizer doses', Twitter feed, 20 April 2021:

<https://twitter.com/JosepBorrellF/status/1384445628823056384>

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