

European Vision and Ambition Needed: Italy and Germany Must Promote a Global EU Response to COVID-19

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The European project was built on the ashes of two world wars. The ongoing COVID-19 crisis, the most devastating pandemic afflicting humankind in the last century, may be its undoing. Or can it become the catalyst for building a stronger European Union for the future? The jury is still out.

As one of the epicentres of this global pandemic, the quest inevitably begins at home. As European countries struggle to reach and eventually descend from the protracted plateau of COVID-19 infections, and grapple with the complexities of when and how to ease national lockdowns, they look ahead at a desolating economic horizon.

With the contraction of the EU economy estimated at 7 per cent GDP amidst a global economic recession unprecedented since the 1930s, what is becoming crystal clear is that recovering from this crisis is possible only if Europeans stand united. Only if common economic measures support national ones aimed at alleviating the immediate impact of COVID-19 and relaunching their economies, can the Union avoid a protracted recession which would imperil its foundations as a whole.

German Federal President Frank-Walter Steinmeier recently underscored that even those who seem to have weathered the crisis and can afford large national stimulus packages will not be able to prosper on their own. Pointing to the responsibility of his own country, he said: "Germany cannot emerge from the crisis strong and healthy if our neighbours do not also become strong and healthy."¹

This realization has already led to several concrete steps. From the suspension of the Stability and Growth Pact and the European Central Bank's temporary asset purchase programme, to a European unemployment scheme, the European Investment Bank's

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¹ German Federal Presidency, *Televised address by Federal President Frank-Walter Steinmeier on the coronavirus pandemic at Schloss Bellevue*, 11 April 2020, <http://www.bundespraesident.de/SharedDocs/Downloads/DE/Reden/2020/04/200411-TV-Ansprache-Corona-Englisch.pdf>.

loan guarantees and the revision of the European Stability Mechanism, key decisions have been taken.

Were these to be accompanied by an ambitious European recovery fund, bolstered joint research on pharmaceuticals and vaccines, and, perhaps most important of all, by a resolute response to the frontal attack on democracy within its borders, the EU would have done its part, rising internally to the challenge.

How the EU of today deals with the crisis will determine the Union of tomorrow. If nationalist answers prevail, nationalism in general will succeed – and the European project will perish. Yet, if we can come up with a truly European strategy for dealing with the crisis and its economic ramifications, we can build a better Europe and a true Union.

All of this would amount to the most ambitious set of measures to strengthen the European project and recover from the worst economic, social and political crisis any European will have lived through in their lifetime. However, momentous as this is, alone it remains insufficient. The onus is on member states, beginning with two founding and heavy weight ones like ours – Italy and Germany – to come together and promote an EU response that is commensurate to the task.

In a world torn by an escalating confrontation between the United States and China, in which COVID-19 wreaks havoc in the Union's fragile surroundings, and multilateralism risks collapsing precisely when it is most desperately needed, hibernation is not an option for European foreign policy. COVID-19 is a defining moment as much for the EU's internal hold as it is for its global role. In the medium-term, both are equally existential and both are equally at risk.

True, enveloped in its internal battle for survival, Europe was late in reacting to this multifaceted crisis. However, the underlying principles guiding the EU's role in the world – security, resilience, an integrated approach to conflicts and crises, regional cooperation and multilateralism –, have been vindicated by COVID-19. They provide opportunities for Europe to take action and to make up for lost ground.

The pandemic highlights the fundamental importance of strengthening the resilience of fragile and conflict-ridden regions to the Union's east and south in an integrated manner, whereby health, economic, security and political dimensions are tackled together. This virus knows no borders and is driving home the reality that engaging our surrounding regions is something we ought to do not merely out of altruism but out of enlightened self-interest.

We now know that no continent is an island and that unless we help strengthen the resilience of fragile countries, the effects of our neglect will come full circle and hit us back within our borders. As European diplomats and businesspersons, civil society

workers, students and tourists eventually step out of their homes, the risk of a relapse prior to the arrival of a vaccine is great.

Our response to COVID-19 cannot stop at the Schengen borders which the coronavirus completely ignores. This is true first and foremost in the Western Balkans, where not just public health and socio-economic future are at stake, but also political orientation. Serbia's calculated praise of China and trashing of the EU² may be a special case of state-sponsored disinformation. But it should also serve as a warning of what may come if the EU fails to extend maximum support to the Western Balkans in confronting COVID-19.

This is only the beginning. In North Africa, the Middle East and across Sub-Saharan Africa, COVID-19 is a threat multiplier that will exacerbate existing vulnerabilities and crises. Africa's densely populated cities combined with high poverty rates are a ticking time bomb for the spread of COVID-19 infections. In Syria, where the public health system in opposition-controlled areas has been systematically attacked by Russia's air force and the regime, there are only 325 intensive care unit beds with ventilators for a population of 17 million. Even more dramatic, in opposition-held Idlib, home to 3,5 million people, there are only 20 such beds.³ Deprived of the luxury of social distancing, if COVID-19 were to spread in these regions, the death toll would be devastating.

Just as worrisome are the indirect effects of the pandemic on Europe's surrounding regions, which will be hit regardless of whether the virus itself spreads. From food insecurity in the Horn of Africa to an exacerbation of social instability in Iraq, Algeria or Lebanon, the risk of terrorism and the entrenchment of authoritarianism, these risks exacerbating to hitherto unknown proportions.

Addressing all this whilst the Union struggles with its own survival is daunting. Yet no other global actor is likely to step in and a failure to act will boomerang back onto the Union itself. The US has (temporarily) abdicated its global leadership, while China's energized international engagement has acquired an ever more visible geostrategic edge.

The EU is beginning to realize the implications. It has reallocated over 15 billion euro of existing funding and added a further 5 billion euro – 4 billion from EU member states and 1 billion from the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD) – to address COVID-19 beyond its borders. However, considering that Germany alone has introduced a national coronavirus stimulus package worth over 750 billion euro, this is only a very first drop in the ocean.

² Milica Stojanovic, "Serbia Imposes State of Emergency, Pleads for China's Help", in *Balkan Insight*, 16 March 2020, <https://balkaninsight.com/2020/03/16/serbia-imposes-state-of-emergency-pleads-for-chinas-help>.

³ Mazen Gharibah and Zaki Mehchy, "COVID-19 pandemic: Syria's response and healthcare capacity", in *LSE Conflict Research Programme Policy Memos*, 25 March 2020, p. 6, <http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/id/eprint/103841>.

The onus is on Europeans not only to mobilize immediately existing resources to bolster the fragile health sectors in these countries, but also to ensure that the guiding principle of the 2021–2027 Multi Annual Financial Framework revolves around internal but also external solidarity. Moreover, COVID-19 should galvanize a final push towards a more coherent European international financial architecture, in which the both the European Investment Bank (EIB) and the EBRD as well as member state agencies would coordinate to jointly mobilize funds abroad.

Beyond the resilience of our surrounding regions, COVID-19 highlights the importance of another cornerstone of European foreign policy: multilateralism. This pandemic may represent the inflection point of an international order that is fast exiting its liberal moment and transitioning into a future where great power competition and ideological contestation are the norm. As the power configuration of the international system changes, the principles, laws and institutions built upon it risk crumbling too.

Nowhere in this clearer than in the controversy surrounding the World Health Organization (WHO). Regardless of the merits, limits and mistakes of the WHO, one thing is clear: for the US to withhold funding to it at the peak of the pandemic is utterly irresponsible. Above all, it shows the drama of a global confrontation between the US and China which is already trumping the global necessity to cooperate to overcome a virus which can only be defeated together. Addressing global pandemics just like all other defining transnational challenges of our age, from climate to digital and demography, require more international cooperation, norms, rules and institutions, not less.

The COVID-19 crisis highlights more than ever the need for European leadership in sustaining and upgrading the multilateral rules-based system, catapulting into action the Alliance for Multilateralism to which more than 60 states have already signed up.⁴ Globally, COVID-19 has laid bare the limits of a governance architecture that merely monitors and suggests, rather than enforces.

As the staunchest supporter of the United Nations, the onus is on Europe to make the post-COVID-19 world be inaugurated by a renewed UN moment. In light of US irresponsibility, a place to start for the EU could be that of contributing an additional 500 million euro to the WHO linked to the clear expectation that the organization will conduct a critical evaluation of its performance in the crisis. No less important is the need to mobilize multilateral fora like the G20 to alleviate the global economic impact of a crisis which, unlike 2007-2008, has begun in the real economy but could spill into

⁴ Official website: <https://multilateralism.org>.

financial markets too. A first key step has been the G20 Finance Ministers' decision on a moratorium on the debt repayment of developing countries.⁵

On top of this, COP26 represents the opportunity to ensure that the restart of global growth is green. With two European countries – the UK and Italy – chairing COP26 and the 2021 G7 and G20, elevating these global governance platforms is an opportunity Europeans must not miss. After COVID-19, globalization will and must change. But rather than lapsing into closure, nationalism and mutually destructive decoupling, globalization 2.0 must retain its principles of openness and interdependence, while becoming fairer, more regionalized and featuring the necessary redundancies and regulation on critical infrastructure and critical supply chains to underpin human security.

The ongoing political debate demonstrates that the success of these principles is far from preordained. So far, those who denigrate multilateralism and international institutions and celebrate the return of the seemingly all-powerful nation-state seem to have shaped the international debate. Now, the champions of a fair and effective multilateralism must find – and raise – their voices. Who – if not the Europeans – should take the lead?

Doing all this is in Europe's immediate interest to ensure that the world comes out of this crisis in the only way possible: together. In addition, there is a clear interest to ensure that, in what High Representative Josep Borrell has defined as the worldwide "battle of narratives",⁶ Europe's story is heard loud and clear. Ensuring this visibility will be vital not simply to address the health and economic dimensions of this crisis. Doing so is about ensuring that the principles of openness, rights, rules and cooperation upon which the Union is founded survive as defining features of our European way of life.

⁵ G20, *Communiqué of the G20 Finance Ministers and Central Bank Governors Meeting*, 15 April 2020, [https://g20.org/en/media/Documents/G20_FMCBG_Communique_EN%20\(2\).pdf](https://g20.org/en/media/Documents/G20_FMCBG_Communique_EN%20(2).pdf).

⁶ European External Action Service (EEAS), *The Coronavirus Pandemic and the New World It Is Creating*, 23 March 2020, <https://europa.eu/!HB33Fw>.