

“UNITED IN DIVERSITY”? THE EUROPEANS AND THE COVID-19 CRISIS

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ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 pandemic erupted in the wake of previous crises that have put European integration to the test. Faced with an unprecedented health crisis and the numerous challenges triggered by the pandemic, the members of the European Union demonstrated their ability to work together and provide effective common responses while also launching ambitious programs for the future. Without erasing national and societal differences, the EU managed to get together and to emerge united from the COVID-19 crisis.

Keywords: health crisis, COVID-19, European integration, national differences

The Covid-19 pandemic and the multiple crises it triggered gave rise to diverse arenas of information, communication, incommunication, and cohabitation at the European level, between member states, and within the countries.

In *Incommunications européennes*, Wolton reminds us that “to communicate means to negotiate”⁴ and “to cohabit” (2017a, p. 4) and has pointed out the paradox that Europe, which had built its political project against the incommunication, finally reaches the incommunication (2017b, p. 247). European incommunications characterize the relationships between different levels and actors: between the West and the East, the EU’s relations with the Southern Mediterranean, and the dynamics within the member states and their immediate neighborhood (Nowicki *et al.*, 2017, p. 20). How have these trends been affected by the pandemic?

Together against Covid-19...

In March 2020, the Covid-19 outbreak hit the EU and the entire globe in an unprecedented way in a century. Hundreds of millions of European citizens have been affected together, and in the face of this ordeal, they have been able to stay together.

Experts were quick to point out that, compared to previous crises, the EU has demonstrated its increased adaptability and rapid decision-making capabilities in the face of Covid-19. “*The EU is confronted with a permanent state of emergency, and the capacity of the EU to deal with crises is now part of its normal mode of policymaking,*” Wolff and Ladi (2020, p. 1029) pointed out. This would be due to the learning acquired during and between recent crises and the new mechanisms put in place (Idem, p. 1031). This was also possible because of a spirit of cooperation: “*The Covid-19 pandemic made it clear early on that the virus has no borders and that cooperation between member states as well as the backing of European institutions proposals by key countries such as France and Germany were of a paramount importance for the EU’s adaptability*” (idem, p. 1037). They emphasize the discursive and endogenous nature of crises and the importance of framing them for the development of events and policies (idem). The significant discursive and policy shifts in the early months of the Covid-19 crisis with respect to state aid or economic governance seem to be a step towards a paradigmatic shift in the EU (idem, p. 1036).

⁴ All translations are suggested by the author.

Politicizations and depoliticizations of the health crisis have taken various forms at the level of EU elites or in member countries, but also within societies. The EU has experienced unity but also protest movements of anti-maskers, against anti-epidemic measures, against lockdowns and restrictions of freedom or vaccines.

State of emergency legislation, passed in a move of national unity as in the case of a “war”, concentrated decision-making inside the executive, but the national parliaments quickly adapted to a remote mode of operation. The Covid-19 crisis has been instrumentalized for political or electoral purposes, as in Poland and Bulgaria. It has been a catalyst for opposition and internal conflicts in various countries. In the East, governments have tried to use the crisis to tighten their grip on society and marginalize the opposition or to attack the rule of law. For Guasti, the Covid-19 crisis was a major test for democracy in Central and Eastern Europe (2020, p. 57). As a counterweight, citizens’ protest outbursts gave strong signals in defense of democracy or against corruption, such as the Bulgarian protest summer of 2020.

Clearly, the European Union has emerged more robust and integrated into the face of Covid-19. After an initial period in which member states were tempted to close in on themselves, the gravity of the situation has encouraged them to cooperate. Greer, de Ruijter, and Brooks point out that the COVID-19 crisis is a “good” crisis for the EU:

“The predictable, if demoralizing, phase of disorganization and national egotism lasted only about a month (March-April). In May and June 2020, it created a substantial new first-face health policy agenda, reasserted its second-face market-preserving powers, and shifted its fiscal stance [...]. The COVID-19 crisis exposed European Union member states’ interdependence. It has, so far, also led to integration” (2021, p. 761- 762).

The *EU4Health* program was designed to respond to the impact of Covid-19 on hospitals and medical staff: “it is the largest health program ever,” with a budget of five billion euros for the period 2021-2027 (European Commission, 2021a). Its objectives are to improve health and health systems, protect EU citizens from health threats, and improve medical devices.

The Emergency Aid Instrument was activated on April 14, 2020, to support member states in a strategic and coordinated way at the European level, acting on the principle of solidarity and pooling resources to mitigate the immediate

consequences of the pandemic (European Commission, 2021b), to order vaccines, etc. Another instrument aimed at supporting economic recovery within States is REACT-EU (European Commission, 2021c). During the Covid-19 pandemic, the EU adopted the *NextGenerationEU* recovery plan, “the largest ever funded recovery package in Europe,” aiming to invest €806.9 billion for a “greener, more digital and more resilient” Europe (European Commission, 2021d). The European Commission, with the support of member states, is launching in June 2020 a joint European approach to ordering and purchasing vaccines against Covid-19 (European Commission, 2021e), made possible by the *Advance Purchase Agreement*, which authorizes the European Commission to act on behalf of member States.

In the area of academic exchanges, the adaptation of the Erasmus+ program has been rapid with the expansion of the digital component, which has allowed for a leap forward with the development of digital tools such as the “E+ Dashboard” and *Erasmus without Papers*.

In her 2021 State of the Union address, “Strengthening the Soul of our Union,” Ursula von der Leyen emphasizes the unity of Europeans in the face of COVID-19, joint effort, and cooperation: “We have chosen to face up together” to access to vaccines, with the *NextGenerationEU* and with the *Green Pact for Europe* (European Commission, 2021f).

At the Conference on the Future of Europe in Strasbourg on May 9, 2021, French President Emmanuel Macron emphasized the “unique European model” based on “solidarity” and “humanism”:

“If we have resisted this pandemic together, it is because for 71 years, we have built together what was not at all obvious. We have resisted first of all through our social protection model, through a Europe of solidarity, and it is the fruit of a model that is both productive and social, of a Europe of competitiveness, of production, of economic strength, but which has always thought about these solidarities from the beginning: regional and territorial solidarity, solidarity in our societies” (Presidency of the French Republic, 2021).

On May 9, 2022, at the closing of the Conference on the Future of Europe. President Macron emphasized that the pandemic had shown the greatness of European democracy:

“That the free, open science, that the democratic, transparent, deliberative processes demanding in our national parliaments and at the

European level, that a Europe inventing itself as a health power [...] – together we have built an unprecedented response to this pandemic – of science, democracy and efficiency. By succeeding in producing a vaccine on our own soil, by becoming the world’s first vaccine production area, [...] by always being the ones to leave the borders open and [...] by being the first power of vaccine solidarity. This is the Europe we should be proud of: a Europe of democracy, of open and free science and of efficiency” (Presidency of the French Republic, 2022).

... but a situation of incommunication.

However, communication and cooperation were not always automatic or easy. The early days of the pandemic were marked by uncooperative management at the national level, and citizens expected their governments to play a leading role. At the forefront, for Brooks, de Ruijter, and Greer, was “*the failure to coordinate, or even to identify a shared agenda between member states, but also flamboyant exercises of national egotism. Border closures and bans on export of key medical supplies to other member states were moves that attacked the core principles of European integration and the value of solidarity meant to underpin the project*” (2021, p. 237). However, the result has not been the decomposition of the EU, but “the redefinition of public health in EU law” (idem, p. 238).

In early 2020, Italy, hard hit by COVID-19, became an epicenter of the pandemic. The EU was not up to the task of providing assistance in time. “I apologize, we are with you”, the President of the European Commission later wrote in a letter to the Italians (*France24*, 2020).

However, as highlighted by Lequesne and Beaumais (2020), the European solidarity has been present since the beginning of the pandemic, with the “European roadmap” of the European Commission from 26th of March 2020, defining recommendations to the member states such as sending of face masks from one country to another or receiving of patients from neighboring countries in difficulty and overloaded hospitals and healthcare system.

The “frugal” countries, the Netherlands, Austria, Sweden, and Finland, initially opposed the 750-billion-euro recovery plan and the associated solidarity mechanisms in June 2020. The “frugal” countries had reservations about the countries of the South because of their lax budgetary policies and wanted to make the plan conditional on respect for the rule of law in countries like Poland and Hungary (*Euronews*, 2020).

The pandemic revealed deficiencies in health systems, a lack of preparedness, and the lack of equipment. Differences in the quality of health systems between the West and the East have been highlighted, although, in several countries, the lack of doctors, nurses, and hospital capacity has become a major problem.

Second, differences in the types of vaccines ordered appeared between Northern and Western Europe, which had primarily ordered RNA vaccines (Pfizer-Biontech and Moderna), while Southern and Eastern Europe had relied on viral vector vaccines (AstraZeneca and Janssen) (Barneaout, 2022).

In the spring of 2021, the governments of six Central and Eastern European countries (Austria, Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Croatia, Slovenia, and Latvia) accused the European Commission of failing to ensure an equitable distribution of Covid-19 vaccine doses among member states. The Commission then defended its approach, called on these governments to be responsible for ordering vaccines (Reuters, 2021), and called for European solidarity, again, with transfers of vaccine doses from West to East.

Thus, behind the overall picture of successful Covid-19 vaccinations in the EU, differences between the West and East are visible. In the EU and the European Economic Area, 85.9% of citizens over 18 years of age have been vaccinated with at least one dose of the Covid-19 vaccine, and 8.4% are fully vaccinated (European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control, 2022). But just 36% of adults in Bulgaria have received at least one dose of the Covid-19 vaccine, and 35.5% are fully vaccinated.

In terms of information and especially the multiple misinformation and conspiracy theories related to Covid-19, the European Commission committed itself early on to developing platforms to combat fake news: “the fight against misinformation, misinformation about the coronavirus saves lives” (European Commission, 2021f). On this point, too, it is essential to emphasize the greater importance of conspiracy theories in the East than in the West.

For Schmidt, Europe seems to be making a paradigmatic shift in terms of policy and process in the economic and health fields, but not in other areas. “*Such changes in different policy domains have also differentially affected European integration, with deepening integration in some areas, greater differentiation in others, and even reversal of integration possible in yet others*” (2020, p. 1178).

The Covid-19 pandemic thus revealed the strengths and weaknesses of the EU (Ash, 2021). The health crisis is one of those rare events threatening the lives of most of the population, such as World War II, or having a profound signifi-

cance of change like the protests of 1968 or the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989. “This shared threat should have pulled us together. But has it? And what will happen as the solidarity fades and long-term differential impacts become apparent? Will the EU ultimately emerge stronger or weaker?” (Ash, 2021). This will depend, for Ash, on how effectively the European Union responds to the problems and expectations of citizens. One of the great successes is the European budget and the Recovery Plan for Europe *NextGenerationEU*, a reinforced integration with a shared debt.

Europeans have been able to work together on containment, masks, multiple tests, movement restrictions and anti-epidemic measures, vaccination, the “European health pass,” and the “re-open Europe” system. The health crisis of Covid-19 has catalyzed and exposed the differences between the countries of the EU, but at the same time has advanced the EU and strengthened the European identity through democracy and many actions of solidarity and mutual aid between countries with the transfer of patients, or deliveries of medical and health equipment. The Covid-19 crisis has therefore brought not only the countries but also the European citizens closer together, preparing them for the crises to come...

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