

A Litmus Test for the EU: Solidarity Principle and Challenges by COVID-19 in 2020

Pırl AKIN OCAK

Ph.D. Candidate, Ankara University, Department of EU and International Relations, Ankara

E-mail: ocak@ankara.edu.tr

Orcid No: 0000-0003-0422-3909

Çağrı ERHAN

Prof. Dr., Altınbaş University, Department of International Relations, İstanbul

E-mail: cagri.erhan@altinbas.edu.tr

Orcid No: 0000-0002-7446-5535

ABSTRACT

Solidarity is one of the oldest but still ambiguous principles of the European Union (EU). In the year 2020, COVID-19 took its place among many other previous litmus tests over solidarity. Initial reluctance of European institutions and lack of effective joint counter-disaster mechanisms, to cope with the unprecedented social and economic devastation caused by the pandemic, triggered once more a wave of harsh criticism of solidarity principle. Although the pandemic did not reach to its end, and it is still too early to measure its overall results in the EU, the article asserts that, a positive tendency for European members' adherence to solidarity principle is on rise.

Keywords: COVID-19, EU Solidarity Principle, EU Policies Combating the COVID-19, Crisis Management, Solidarity in the EU

AB'nin En Uzun Yılı İçin Turnusol Testi: Dayanışma İlkesi ve COVID-19 Salgınının 2020'deki Meydan Okumaları

ÖZET

Dayanışma, Avrupa Birliği'nin (AB) en eski ama müphemliğini hâlâ koruyan ilkelerinden biridir. 2020 yılında, COVID-19, AB'nin daha önce sınındığı birçok turnusol testinin arasında yerini aldı. Avrupa kurumlarının başlangıçtaki tereddütleri ve pandeminin yol açtığı eşi görülmemiş sosyal ve ekonomik yıkımla başa çıkmak için etkin ortak afetle mücadele mekanizmalarının yokluğu, dayanışma ilkesine karşı sert bir eleştiri dalgasını yeniden tetikledi. AB'de dayanışmanın ortaya çıkışı ve dönüşümü hakkında kısa bir değerlendirmeden sonra, bu makale esas olarak COVID-19'un, dayanışma algısı üzerindeki etkisine odaklanmaktadır. Pandemi sona ermemiş ve bunun AB'deki genel sonuçlarını ölçmek için henüz çok erken olsa da, makale, AB üyelerinin dayanışma ilkesine bağlılığı konusunda olumlu eğilimin yükselişte olduğunu iddia etmektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: COVID-19, AB Dayanışma İlkesi, COVID-19'la Mücadelede AB Politikaları, Kriz Yönetimi, AB'de Dayanışma

Introduction

The principle of ‘solidarity’, which was referred to by the Treaty of Lisbon¹ as well as a number of essential European documents as a guiding principle of the European Union, is one of the fundamental values on which the EU was founded. However, with the breakout of COVID-19, this principle has been questioned since the EU’s institutional mechanism to cope with the pandemic was largely insufficient to meet the expectations of the member states. A common sense of struggle against the crisis was not adopted under the roof of the EU and the solidarity mechanism could not be immediately activated. Therefore, the Union has so far failed to appear as an actor who can manage the crisis from a single source in a coordinated manner. For instance, Italy’s request for masks from European Civil Protection Mechanism (CPM) was not immediately responded. Some members decided to close their borders promptly to all foreign nationals, while others, such as Slovenia and Austria, only increased border security controls at the first stage. Some member countries have started to implement the methods of combating the pandemic that differ from the recommendations of the World Health Organization (WHO) as seen in Sweden while in some member countries, governments have urgently declared a state of emergency and preferred to strengthen their authorities under the name of ‘effective fight against the crisis’ as seen in Hungary. The Prime Minister Victor Orbán started to challenge the EU’s core values by receiving extraordinary powers from the parliament in the fight against COVID-19 for indefinite period of time as if turning the crisis into an opportunity. In addition, Poland’s decision to hold elections on May 10, 2020 despite the current situation in the EU showed that these two countries played the blind man and sustained their political processes.² These developments undermined the solidarity principle and showed how fragile could be the solidarity in the EU.

In this context, covering the full year of European developments in 2020, this article aims to examine multifaceted influences of the COVID-19 outbreak on the ‘solidarity’ of the EU. The article also intends to make a conceptual analysis of the ‘solidarity principle’ and to evaluate its moral and institutional aspects.

Therefore, this study provides a comprehensive assessment of why and how the COVID-19 epidemic affected the EU solidarity principle at the borders of the European Union over a one-year period. The article argues, firstly that, the existence of a turbulent European integration climate created by the painful migration and refugee problems, Brexit *fatigue* and domestic economic crises in some member countries at the beginning of 2020, gave an initial impetus to negative approaches to solidarity when the COVID-19 outbreak started. Secondly, the article asserts that, the lack of supra-national and developed disaster management mechanisms, inadequate coordination of health infrastructure, and a shortage of emergency materials weakened the emphasis of solidarity and were used to justify national priorities instead of common European objectives. And finally, the article evaluates that, rather than

1 Treaty of Lisbon Amending the Treaty On European Union and The Treaty Establishing the European Community (2007/C 306/01) Title VII Solidarity Clause Article 188 R and Treaty on the Functioning of The European Union Article 222.

2 Mustafa Aydın and Sinem Akgül-Açıkmeşe, “Avrupa Covid-19 salgınından nasıl etkilendi? AB’nin dayanışma prensibi neden çöktü? Avrupa ve AB salgın sonrasında ekonomik ve siyasi olarak yeniden nasıl şekillenecek?”, 26 April 2020, <https://www.uikpanorama.com/blog/2020/04/26/panorama-soruyor-ii/> (Accessed 31 December 2020).

the failing cooperation in health services, it was the effective colossal efforts to revitalize the devastated European economy that gradually flourished an increased support for European solidarity in the upshot of the year.

EU developments throughout 2020 dramatically proved that the perception of solidarity differs from one member to another. For some, solidarity is measured by how much support flows to a country in need. For others, solidarity means everyone doing their own 'duty' to avoid the need for help in the first place. Some believe that solidarity against today's risks and threats is best sustained outside EU frameworks; others still believe it is better to cope with them within the EU.

Solidarity as a Conceptual Framework

The concept of solidarity, which has existed since the establishment of the EU, is a core element of the early European integration process and one of the existential principles at the heart of the EU. The principle of solidarity has been a subject of controversy from time to time. A comprehensive understanding of solidarity is needed to understand the complexity of that notion. While most authors who deal with solidarity focused on its manifestation within the borders of the nation state, some important figures focus on solidarity in the EU as a compound and multidimensional issue. Whereas Jürgen Habermas offers a powerful conception of transnational solidarity as such, he does not sufficiently elaborate on its discreteness within the system of multilevel governance of the European Union.³ However, Andrea Sangiovanni complements the argument with a more accurate understanding of the different manners of solidarity.⁴ Habermas' conception of solidarity has proven to be crucial by showing that solidarity in modern societies is not a natural moral duty but a political liability based on reciprocity.⁵ According to him, solidarity was artificially constructed within the nation state and it would thus be possible to expand it into a form of transnational solidarity within the EU. The core of this process is in line with characteristic European experiences. Unlike other cultures, the European identity was always designated by divisions and tensions between different regions, confessions and especially between nations. This dialectical process taught Europeans how to cope with particularism, how to develop tolerance and finally resulted in a project of successful political integration; that is the EU. This common legacy can also function as a basis for further social integration therefore, we may talk about the Habermasian ideal of 'the Portuguese and the Swede standing in for another'⁶ which constitutes the principle of European Solidarity.

The compound structure of the EU is often referred to as a system of multilevel governance. This approach gives exposition to the unique multilayered and overlapping system

3 Jürgen Habermas, *Democracy, Solidarity and the European Crisis*, Lecture delivered on 26 April 2013 in Leuven Univ., <https://www.pro-europa.eu/europe/jurgen-habermas-democracy-solidarity-and-the-european-crisis/> (Accessed 31 December 2020).

4 Andrea Sangiovanni, "Solidarity in the European Union", *Oxford Journal of Legal Studies*, Vol. 33, No 2, 2013, p.214.

5 Florian Kommer, "The Clash of Solidarities in the European Union", *Fudan Journal of the Humanities and Social Sciences*, Vol. 11, No 2, 2018, p.177-183.

6 Jürgen Habermas, *Die postnationale Konstellation-Politische Essays*, translated by Jürgen Habermas, Frankfurt am Main, 1998, p. 12.

of decision-making within the EU, including the supranational, the national and the regional level. Moreover, it also clarifies horizontally and vertically impact of the non-state actors. The EU is thus neither an international organization nor a federal state but rather an *institution sui generis*. An inclusive explanation of solidarity within the EU has to consider these precise characteristics; as the EU is a *sui generis* institution- and so is its concept of solidarity.⁷ Therefore, Sangiovanni offers a tripartite model of solidarity in the EU context. He differentiates between national solidarity which defines obligations among citizens of member states; and member state solidarity, which defines duties among member states, and lastly transnational solidarity, which defines obligations among citizens of the EU. All three together form “the core of his conception of solidarity for the EU”.⁸

This triune division provides us a tool to analyze the multilevel system of the Union with regard to its different forms of solidarity. Along this basis, different degrees of solidarity exist within a multilevel entity such as the EU.⁹ According to Sangiovanni, solidarity is thus understood as the demand for a fair distribution of the benefits and risks resulting from the degree of integration.

According to Andreas Grimmel, solidarity in Europe has to be built by Europeans, and it has to be made explicit by an agreement.¹⁰ As stated by Robert Schuman in his declaration on 9 May 1950: “Europe will not be made all at once, or according to a single plan. It will be built through concrete achievements which first create a *de facto* solidarity.”¹¹ The EU eventually takes Schuman’s advice seriously and engage in the process of making solidarity explicit through the concreteness of the agreement.¹² As seen, a comprehensive understanding of solidarity and a common practice are needed to understand the complexity of that notion and in order to evaluate this principle correctly.

Solidarity plays a featured role in both the political and the legal discourse as a comprehensive principle behind the framing of all the major Treaties of the EU including the European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC) Treaty (1951), the Single European Act (1986), the Maastricht Treaty (1992) and the Treaty of Lisbon (2006). The Treaties are abounded in with appeals of solidarity, social cohesion, mutual assistance, etc. as seen in the preamble of the ECSC Treaty: “Europe can be built only through real practical achievements which will first of all create real solidarity”.¹³ It is framed as a value binding together both citizens and member states. Solidarity is not just a generalized principle of moral guidance as it also has ‘legal confirmations in EU primary law which can be made effective in court proceedings.’¹⁴

7 Kommer, “The Clash of Solidarities in the European Union”, p.182-183.

8 Sangiovanni, “Solidarity in the European Union”, p.9.

9 Kommer, “The Clash of Solidarities in the European Union”, p.178.

10 Andreas Grimmel “Solidarity in the European Union A Fundamental Value or “Empty Signifier”, Andreas Grimmel and Susanne MyGiang (eds.), *Solidarity in the European Union: Fundamental Value in Crisis*, Switzerland, Springer, 2017, p.174.

11 Franco Piodi, “From the Schuman Declaration to the birth of the ECSC: The role of Jean Monnet”, *Cardoc Journals*, No 6, May 2010, p.9.

12 Ibid.

13 ECSC Preamble, <https://op.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/e74aa5ba-e6db-4456-a593-12beb35c440f/language-en> (Accessed 22 November 2020).

14 Markus Kotzur, “Solidarity as a Legal Concept”, Andreas Grimmel and Susanne MyGiang (eds.), *Solidarity in the European Union: Fundamental Value in Crisis*, Switzerland, Springer, 2017, p.44.

The fact that Chapter IV of The Charter of Fundamental Rights,¹⁵ approved in Nice in 2001, is titled ‘Solidarity’, and that has later established individual and collective rights in the labour market, and rights to different forms of social protection, indicates that solidarity has legal substance at EU level.

‘Solidarity Clause’, one of the most notable innovations of the Treaty of Lisbon, has significantly fostered the reference to the concept of solidarity and enhanced its’ understanding by launching three aspects: solidarity between member states, member states and individuals, and between generations.¹⁶ Moreover, the Treaty has made the Charter of Fundamental Rights part of primary law, which is especially significant for solidarity between member states and individuals, as the Charter uses the concept to underpin the economic internal market with a social dimension.¹⁷ However, the knowledge about solidarity is still incomplete and its conceptualization in the EU legal order needs to be more developed.¹⁸

Despite the central role for member state solidarity, some legal bases justify a broader solidarity role for the EU. The Solidarity Clause in Article 222 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (TFEU) states that ‘the Union and its Member States shall act jointly in a spirit of solidarity if a Member State is the object of a terrorist attack or the victim of a natural or man-made disaster.’ If such an incident occurs, the EU shall mobilize all the instruments at its disposal, including military resources made available by the Member States, to ‘prevent the terrorist threat in the territory of the Member States’ or to ‘assist a Member State in its territory (...) in the event of a natural or man-made disaster.’ Any such assistance may only take place at the request of the Member State’s political authorities.¹⁹ The Solidarity Clause, assumed as a treaty-based method for improving EU cooperation on a range of multifaceted threats, acknowledges the need to mobilize a host of instruments to deal with new security concerns. It thus provides a potential answer to increasingly vocal concerns that the Clause creates one of the most explicit demands upon EU members to act jointly and to assist one another in the face of disasters, emergencies, and crises on the European continent.

In order to make the solidarity clause more comprehensible than its form in the Article 222 and to respond to the numerous questions regarding its scope, the range of threats included, and to foster its implementation, on 24th June 2014 the General Affairs Council of the EU adopted a decision on the implementation by the EU of the Solidarity Clause.”²⁰ The decision further outlines the EU’s role and underlines the need and options for close cooperation of all relevant actors at the Member State and EU level.

15 OJ, <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX:12012P/TXT> and <https://fra.europa.eu/en/eu-charter/title/title-iv-solidarity> (Accessed 16 November 2020).

16 See Article 3 (3) TEU, <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/HTML/?uri=CELEX:12008M003> (Accessed 27 December 2020).

17 See Article 6 (1) TEU, <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A12016M006> (Accessed 27 December 2020).

18 Irina Domurath, “The Three Dimensions of Solidarity in the EU Legal Order: Limits of the Judicial and Legal Approach”, *Journal of European Integration*, Vol. 35, No 4, 2012, p. 1.

19 Consolidated version of the TFEU Part Five- The Union’s External Action Title VII- Solidarity Clause Article 222. See also Anniek de Ruijter, et al., *EU solidarity and policy in fighting infectious diseases: state of play, obstacles, citizen preferences and ways forward*, Amsterdam, The Amsterdam Centre for European Studies SSRN Research Paper, June 2020, p. 2.

20 Council Decision of 24 June 2014 on the Arrangements for the Implementation by the Union of the Solidarity Clause (2014/415/EU) OJ L 192/53.

The solidarity of the EU has been tested in several crises: first the SARS epidemic in 2003, then the 2007-2008 persistent financial crisis and the 2015-2016 migration crisis, the rise of nationalist parties, separatist movements and terrorist threats, crises of identity, islamophobia, Brexit, and last but not least the COVID-19. All these challenges had, or have, the potential to weaken the prospects of European solidarity, ironically while calling for solidarity and for common solutions. At the end, when these problems outstripped members' national coping capacities, the term solidarity was used broadly in European politics: national governments tend to declare the importance of solidarity and enhancing cooperation to protect the safety and security of citizens. Jean-Claude Juncker, president of the European Commission (EC) asserted in 2016 that, "Solidarity is the glue that keeps our Union together."²¹ These crises also offer a major opportunity to ask what solidarity implies with regard to tangible problems which has previously been the subject of many studies and surveys, and been examined in detail. In this study, we will take the existing studies in the literature one step further and examine the effects of the COVID-19 crisis on the solidarity principle.

What makes the COVID-19 crisis more challenging than the previous crises, which tested the solidarity capacity of the EU is its complexity. The pandemic represents a combined health and economic emergency. Hence this combination, the impact of the COVID-19 crisis on all areas of life and its global reach, makes the pandemic a historically unprecedented challenge for Europe and also requires different kinds of aid and redistribution measures that are appropriate for healthcare, economic, and social problems. COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the lack of preparedness to deal with such a crisis among all European states, especially in terms of healthcare. Nonetheless, certain states and social categories of people have been affected more than others. This brought forth the issue of solidarity amongst states and people.²²

Solidarity has come in different forms as Europeans are threatened by the coronavirus pandemic. In this study, the definition of 'solidarity' thus includes examples of health solidarity, economic solidarity and finally political leaders' discursive solidarity. One may count many other activities that Europeans have undergone during the coronavirus crisis as samples of European solidarity, e.g., cross-border civil society initiatives and private donations to pan-European causes, which are beyond the limits of this study.

At the height of the coronavirus crisis, Jacques Delors -former EC president and one of the modern union's chief architects, aged 94- spoke out about the apparent lack of solidarity shown between member states during the pandemic. His warning that "the climate that seems to prevail among Heads of State or government and the lack of solidarity are putting the European Union in mortal danger"²³ illustrate that a failure to demonstrate solidar-

21 Jean-Claude Juncker, "State of the Union address 2016: Towards a better Europe- a Europe that protects, empowers and defends", 2016, http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_SPEECH-16-3043_en.htm. Retrieved 15 Sept 2016 (Accessed 03 December 2020) and Kommer, *The Clash of Solidarities in the European Union*, p.180.

22 Marius Alexandru Udrescu, "European Solidarity in the context of COVID-19 pandemic", May 2020, p.2, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/344306727_European_Solidarity_in_the_context_of_Covid-19_pandemic (Accessed 30 December 2020).

23 Thierry Chopin et.al., "The EU Facing The Coronavirus: A Political Urgency To Embody European Solidarity", 10 April 2020, <https://institutdelors.eu/en/publications/lue-face-au-coronavirus-lindispensable-incarnation-politique-de-la-solidarite-europeenne/> (Accessed 31 December 2020).

ity could put the EU itself at risk. Similarly, former German foreign ministers Sigmar Gabriel and Joschka Fischer accused the EU of “dramatically failing in this biggest test since its creation”.²⁴ For weeks, the media coverage across Europe was dominated by articles about unilateral border closures, export bans on medical equipment, and the bitter dispute over ‘corona bonds’.²⁵ Therefore, it has become firmly established in much of the public mind that European solidarity in the pandemic has been nothing but an empty phrase. Even with all the coronavirus recovery packages and tight measures meant to dispel this idea, it is difficult to change people’s perceptions and opinions. While some Euro-skeptics stringently believe the idea that solidarity is in fact a farce, some Europeans assert that this narrative is wrong; or, at the very least, is incomplete. They believe that the EU has acted as best as it can, while Euro-skeptics purport that the European Union failed to react quickly and decisively in order to help the countries that desperately needed its aid.

Advocates of EU solidarity think, despite divisions, export bans and unilateral travel restrictions, European people are connected intensely. EU institutions have shown their response in financial and economic context and they reject the claim that the European project has failed. They believe that examples of solidarity between member states, EU institutions, and European civil society disclose a differentiated picture and demonstrate tools such as the European Solidarity Tracker, a project by the European Council on Foreign Relations (ECFR). The tracker provides information on which actors showed solidarity with whom during the coronavirus pandemic and temporary results document the mutual help and cooperation that every EU member has shown with other countries throughout Europe.²⁶

On the contrary, proponents of an idealized EU solidarity think the adopted measures can ease the impact of the crisis on the most severely hurt economies but fall short of providing effective solutions for the larger problems that southern countries face where large numbers of deaths have been caused by the coronavirus. They believe the EU was late to act, and severely criticize the solidarity principle. In addition, they claim solidarity in health is a shared EU principle and it refers to the public enforcement of necessary collective action ensuring universal access to medical care and public health. However, the organization of solidarity is a national responsibility. Hence, the capacity to organize a true European health solidarity response to such a pandemic is limited.²⁷

One reason of the EU’s delay is that the European countries were hit hard and asymmetrically by the virus. Italy, Spain, Greece and Portugal were least prepared and faced big issues whilst Germany, Austria, Finland and the Netherlands which have suffered the least managed better when it comes to financial stability, number of Coronavirus cases, and the

24 Rafael Loss and Jana Puglierin, “The truth about European solidarity during corona”, 26 June 2020, https://ecfr.eu/article/commentary_the_truth_about_european_solidarity_during_corona/ (Accessed 18 November 2020).

25 Sarantis Michalopoulos, “Nine member states ask for eurobonds to face coronavirus crisis”, 25 March 2020, <https://www.euractiv.com/section/economy-jobs/news/nine-member-states-ask-for-eurobonds-to-face-coronavirus-crisis/> (Accessed 18 November 2020).

26 ECFR, https://ecfr.eu/special/solidaritytracker/?utm_source=POLITICO.EU&utm_campaign=e628ab2ba7-EMAIL_CAMPAIGN_2020_06_12_05_01&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_10959edeb5-e628ab2ba7-189121293 (Accessed 18 November 2020).

27 De Ruijter, “EU solidarity and policy in fighting infectious diseases”, p. 8.

general preparedness of their healthcare systems. These differences designated the manner in which negotiations at the EU level have been conducted and the decisions that have been taken.²⁸ Another reason of delay is that, Netherlands, Austria, Sweden and Denmark-which are often called northern creditors or the frugal four- have had a more fiscally conservative stance, opposed to measures that would increase their share of the burden. They have preferred loan-based approaches to corona bonds. As the last reason of this delay, we can count the ineffectiveness, slowness and also voluntary nature of the European Civil Protection Mechanism²⁹ which will be mentioned in the coming parts of the study.

COVID-19 Crisis and the EU: Challenges to Solidarity

On January 9, 2020 the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control (ECDC) issued a risk evaluation paper. At that time, the risk for travelers was considered low, the likelihood of introduction to the EU was considered to be low and the risk of further spread within the EU was considered low to very low. The EU Health Security Committee Chair invited ECDC to present their Rapid Risk Assessment on the January 22 and emphasized that many elements are still unknown. To respond to the COVID-19 outbreak, on January 28, 2020 the Croatian presidency activated the EU's Integrated Political Crisis Response (IPCR), which is the highest instrument of cooperation between member states, in information sharing mode.³⁰ In addition, the first European case was reported from France on January 24, 2020. The outbreak of the new coronavirus increased, and the CPM was activated on January 31, 2020 following a request for assistance from France to provide consular support to EU citizens abroad.³¹ This request was quickly implemented. As of March 30, 2020, this mechanism had facilitated the repatriation of 4382 EU citizens to Europe from different parts of the world.³² Moreover, initial funds were organized for research on the new coronavirus epidemic that €10 million were contributed from the EU's research and innovation programme. It is not wrong to say that when a first mini wave of infections hit the EU on January, the Union entered a period of self-delusion. As expected, a substantial rise of COVID-19 cases was listed in Lombardy Region, Northern Italy. Simultaneously, many other member states started to report infected people. From the last weekend of February, when infections rose intensely in Italy, self-delusion gave way to selfish improvisation.

On the February 28, Italy activated the CPM to demand personal protective equipment and face masks. This mechanism, coordinated by the Commission, relies on EU countries' volunteer help. The reaction of the other 26 EU countries was a great hush. As EU capitals

28 Udrescu, "European Solidarity in the context of COVID-19 pandemic", p. 4-5.

29 The CPM established on the basis of Article 222 TFEU depends on the willingness of member states to join forces with Decision No 1313/2013/EU of the European Parliament and of the Council: <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A32013D1313>. For detailed information see: EC, https://ec.europa.eu/echo/what/civil-protection/mechanism_en (Accessed 11 October 2020).

30 Croatian Presidency of the Council of The EU, <https://eu2020.hr/Home/OneNews?id=160> (Accessed 12 October 2020).

31 European Commission, https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/IP_20_142 (Accessed 16 October 2020).

32 Charlotte Beaucillon, "International and European emergency assistance to EU Member States in the Covid-19 crisis: Why European solidarity is not dead and what we need to make it both happen and last", *European Papers*, Vol. 5, 2020, No 1, table II, p. 390-391.

began to panic about their vulnerability, none came forward to help Italy. Only China, Cuba and Russia responded. No EU country sent physicians to Italy at a time when the crisis was at its peak and Italy needed healthcare personnel, especially doctors. Cuba rushed to the aid of Italy and Cuban physicians were greeted like heroes at Milan airport. Russia sent medical help to Italy with nine transport aircrafts as a gesture of goodwill that Moscow has labelled “from Russia with love”.³³ “The biggest alarm for us in the Commission came at the end of February when Italy requested assistance,” Janez Lenarčič, the EU’s commissioner for crisis management, said. “There was no response. All alarm bells started to ring. We then realized what nobody told us before that there is a general shortage throughout Europe of personal protective equipment.”³⁴

As the situation changed dramatically and different sectors were affected, the Croatian presidency rose the activation of the IPCR mechanism to full mode on March 2, 2020 which allows for the elaboration of concrete coordinated EU response measures at presidency-led negotiations with the participation of related institutions. Throughout the crisis, the presidency convened in regular roundtables to facilitate the exchange of information and to coordinate the crisis response to the COVID-19 pandemic.³⁵ President von der Leyen set a coronavirus response team to coordinate the Union’s reaction to the pandemic in all manners; from medical, to economic, to transport and mobility, at the administrative level.

On March 3, 2020 the French government declared that they were taking control of personal protective equipment production, demanding face masks, and limiting the price of disinfectants. As a matter of fact, France has seized millions of health masks sent from Sweden to Spain and Italy. The enormous ‘Common Market’ was suddenly forgotten. Diplomatic crisis broke out on the Stockholm-Paris line and after the strong reaction of the Swedish government, France had to return the masks weeks later. These moves initiated a domino effect that caused Germany to expand the ban on exports of such equipment and block even selling to other EU members. Other countries quickly imitated the Franco-German plans to act on their own that Czechia blocked the export of anti-virus gear. Von der Leyen has harshly criticized the Union member states for acting alone, imposing unilateral export bans on each other, and for the disruption of the domestic market in Europe with the enforcement of border controls. After intense negotiations with the relevant EU and national representatives, the Berlin administration allowed exports to Italy on March 14-15 and export permits were also granted to other countries such as Austria and Switzerland. Although the Berlin administration abolished the initial bans after the decision of the Commission, the decisions taken at the beginning of the crisis by Germany, as a pivotal member of the EU, and by its followers, caused the EU’s credibility and inflexibility to the solidarity principle to be questioned.

33 Isabel Togoh, “From Russia With Love? Putin’s Medical Supplies Gift To Coronavirus-Hit Italy Raises Questions”, 26 March 2020, *Forbes*, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/isabeltogoh/2020/03/26/from-russia-with-love-putins-medical-supplies-gift-to-coronavirus-hit-italy-raises-questions/?sh=2109be6c4a47> (Accessed 1 December 2020).

34 David M. Herszenhorn and Sarah Wheaton, “How Europe failed the coronavirus test”, 7 April 2020, <https://www.politico.eu/article/coronavirus-europe-failed-the-test/> (Accessed 11 October 2020).

35 European Council, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/policies/ipcr-response-to-crises/> (Accessed 24 September 2020).

France and Germany were not the only countries acting in their own self-interest. Austria closed its borders with Italy and asked its citizens to leave the country. Although these actions against the EU's fundamental principles were highly criticized, the Austrian authorities did not accept these criticisms, and Prime Minister Sebastian Kurz harshly criticized the EU and asserted that they were 'left completely alone' by the Union.³⁶ This situation also has a political dimension. In above mentioned countries, anti-EU political parties have gone beyond being conjunctural parties in recent years, becoming leading political movements of these countries. The rulers believe it is impossible to persuade their societies to borrow, which is too risky in today's world, where anti-EU opposition has increased. Unfortunately, none of them take the solidarity principle into consideration.

Failing to receive the necessary support from the EU, Italy experienced disappointment and trust issue towards the Union after the member states closed their borders to Italy and imposed an export ban on medical supplies. It should be noted that the Italian people were quite reactive to the lack of solidarity within the Union. Matteo Salvini, the far-right leader of Italy, saw the opposition to the EU in society and talked about coming to terms with the EU and saying goodbye to the EU if necessary, after the virus crisis. Organizing on social media, Italians called for 'Italixt' in groups reaching almost one million people. In addition, video footage of Italians angry with the Union, burning the EU flag was shared on social media in large numbers. On March 10, the Italian ambassador, Maurizio Massari, published an op-ed in an Italian newspaper, bemoaning that a better solidarity was not in order:

"It's time now for the EU to go beyond engagement and consultations with emergency actions that are quick, concrete and effective. The virus will pass, but any rotten seeds of complacency or selfishness will stay," and he added, "Unless we wake up immediately, we run the risk of going down in history like the leaders in 1914 who sleepwalked into World War I. The coronavirus crisis is a test of the EU's cohesiveness and credibility -one that can only be passed through genuine, concrete solidarity."³⁷

Spain, like Italy, is among the countries that think they have been left behind by the EU. Spanish Prime Minister Pedro Sanchez harshly criticized his country's unanswered calls for economic aid and the EU's uncertainty. Sanchez has published an article calling on the Union to act. "Our citizens are dying; our hospitals are overflowing. Either we respond with unshakable solidarity or our union collapses", he revealed the point the EU had reached.³⁸ Madrid could not get adequate support from the EU administration and they have requested the help of medical supplies from NATO Euro-Atlantic Disaster Response Coordination Centre (EADRCC), among which Turkey has responded positively to this call for help.

Serbian President Aleksandar Vucic, who criticized the EU after Italy and Spain, asked for support from the Beijing government with a video in which he addressed the Chinese as

36 Benjamin Wolf, "The Coronavirus in Austria & Vienna What Happened in May", 31 May 2020, <https://metropole.at/coronavirus-in-austria-may/> (Accessed 31 December 2020).

37 Maurizio Massari, "Italian ambassador to the EU: Italy needs Europe's help", *Politico*, March 10, 2020, <https://www.politico.eu/article/coronavirus-italy-needs-europe-help/> (Accessed 12 October 2020).

38 Alyssa McMurtry, "Coronavirus puts EU's future to test: Spanish premier Pedro Sanchez says unless Europe responds with unwavering solidarity, EU will fail", 05 April 2020, <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/europe/coronavirus-puts-eu-s-future-to-test-spanish-premier/1793275> (Accessed 1 December 2020).

‘my brothers’ since he could not find solidarity with Europe during his country’s troubles. China, on the other hand, pledged donations and expert support on March 17 in response to Serbia’s call. Vucic said: “Now we understand that there is actually no great international solidarity. There was no such thing as European solidarity, it was just a fairy tale on paper. We cannot buy medical equipment from Europe.”³⁹ He harshly criticized the EU countries, which banned the export of medical equipment to other countries, using the expressions “China, which can only help us in this difficult process.”⁴⁰ It is clear that the image of the EU in the Balkans was also seriously damaged as a result of this process.

From the legal perspective, none of EU members ‘had to’ invoke the solidarity mechanism to one another. Although legal bases justify a broader solidarity role for the EU in health emergencies, including infectious disease and pandemics, and the second paragraph of Article 222 refers to the duty of the Member States to assist the affected Member States ‘at the request of its political authorities’ and to ‘coordinate between themselves in the Council’ and Declaration (No 37) on Article 222 of the TFEU⁴¹ states that a Member State can choose the most appropriate means to comply with its own solidarity obligation towards another Member State; there is no obligation. Member states ‘shall act jointly in a spirit of solidarity’ as stated in the first paragraph of the same Article. However, emphasizing the spirit of solidarity, this paragraph thus suggests that member states must actually give something in response. Although such cooperation among member states is voluntary, in general, media attention and public expectations press member states to show aid and solidarity across national borders, appealing to feelings of compassion and moral responsibility. Member states often provide mutual assistance and act in cooperation in disasters however, this time in corona crisis, they came up with several reasons to disappear into the woodwork.

Covid-19 Crisis and the EU: Solidarity in Action

Meanwhile, hesitations of European countries to help southern member states highlights the seriousness of the situation in Brussels. It is also useful to remind the measures taken by the EU, especially since mid-March, which started to pay the price of the unresponsiveness and lack of coordination in the first weeks. Although the perception of vulnerability in the first weeks has remained in memory, the EU has taken or planned to take a series of measures so far in order to ensure the control of the virus, supply medical equipment, encourage vaccine treatment research and combat socio-economic effects. With European solidarity in pieces and markets reacting anxiously, leaders finally cut in on March 10, 2020 and an EU leaders’ videoconference was held. The leaders agreed to work on four pillars: containing the virus; ensuring EU countries had sufficient medical equipment; supporting research toward medical treatments and a vaccine and addressing social-economic consequences.⁴² Economies

39 Julija Simić, “Serbia turns to China due to ‘lack of EU solidarity’ on coronavirus”, 18 March 2020, <https://www.euractiv.com/section/china/news/serbia-turns-to-china-due-to-lack-of-eu-solidarity-on-coronavirus/> (Accessed 25 November 2020).

40 Ibid.

41 OJ, https://eur-lex.europa.eu/resource.html?uri=cellar:2bf140bf-a3f8-4ab2-b506-fd71826e6da6.0023.02/DOC_5&format=PDF (Accessed 3 July 2020).

42 Michael Anderson, et al., “Covid-19 exposes weaknesses in European response to outbreaks”, *British Medical Journal*,

were put on life support, while ‘green lanes’⁴³ kept the Single Market going by ensuring the flow of goods which was damaged by the rapid and uncoordinated closure of borders. During the conference von der Leyen proclaimed a Corona Response Investment Initiative (CRII) which would enable around €60 billion of unused cohesion policy funds to be redirected to the battle with COVID-19 that entered into force on the April 1, 2020.⁴⁴

It is not wrong to say opinion makers are more important than policy makers in the EU, and it is European public opinion which is embodied first and foremost in the European Parliament (EP). Meanwhile on the EU Parliamentary side, we witness that the Parliament approved crucial EU support measures less than two weeks after the Commission’s proposal, almost unanimously as the EU’s joint response. With the amendment, the EU Solidarity Fund (EUSF)⁴⁵ has extended to cover public health emergencies including medical assistance and to prevent and control the spread of infectious diseases. “Allowing the EUSF to be used to deal with COVID-19 makes sense, given its extreme impact on people, health and the economy in all parts of Europe,” said French GUE/NGL MEP Younous Omarjee, the chair of Parliament’s regional development committee. “These regulations were always intended to be adapted to emergencies and new challenges. This will allow the EU to act in solidarity.”⁴⁶

As seen, the Union has actually taken precautions and tried to activate crisis management and rapid aid mechanisms both in Italy and in the member countries. But the virus spread so rapidly. Therefore serious unprecedented coordination challenges emerged within the EU institutions. The EU’s institutional fragmentation damaged response effectiveness that approval and enactment of the actions planned to be taken on March 10 and March 13, did not come into effect until the April 1st. In such a short period of time, when conjuncture was changing, such inaccurate decision-making also undermined the rapid intervention. Certainly, actors at all levels- in Brussels, national capitals, countries, and regions- could have reacted more quickly and comprehensively to lessen the impact of the virus, reduce suffering, and ward off economic crisis keeping in mind that a crisis might be a moment to get to solutions that are unthinkable in normal times. Then, perhaps, there would not have been such a displeasure in the member states.

On March 11, 2020 the WHO declared COVID-19 a pandemic. In close cooperation and at the request of the ECDC, the Union has decided to follow the Italian model. The Member States, starting with France, have begun to replicate the measures of social distancing, the closure of schools and public places, the prohibition of gatherings. By March 13, Europe had become the active center of the coronavirus epidemic with more confirmed cases and deaths

2020;368:m1075, p.1.

43 European Commission https://ec.europa.eu/transport/sites/transport/files/legislation/2020-03-23-communication-green-lanes_en.pdf (Accessed 1 December 2020).

44 European Commission, https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_20_440 (Accessed 3 July 2020).

45 Created as a reaction to the severe floods in Central Europe in 2002, the EUSF’s main objective is to provide financial assistance to EU member states dealing with natural disasters. European Parliament, <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/en/headlines/priorities/eu-response-to-coronavirus/20200323STO75625/coronavirus-eu-countries-to-get-help-from-solidarity-fund> (Accessed 16 July 2020).

46 Ibid.

than the rest of the world.⁴⁷ On March 17, 2020, the EU closed its external borders for a month. Likewise, a similar attitude was growing among the Schengen member countries, and they also pursued an inward-looking policy of emergency by closing their land, sea and air borders with each other. Many countries, particularly the geographically peripheral ones and those that rely on the remittances of posted workers, such as the Baltic states, Romania and Bulgaria, struggled to function without the free movement of labor and goods across Europe.

On April 2, 2020, the Commission increased its crisis intervention more by offering to build a solidarity instrument, named Support mitigating Unemployment Risks in Emergency (SURE), with €100 billion in order to help workers keep their incomes and help businesses stay debtless.⁴⁸ The Council adopted the proposal on May 19. In her video message on that initiative von der Leyen emphasized the importance of European solidarity stating “It is European solidarity in action. It is for Italy, Spain and others and it is for Europe’s future.”⁴⁹ Although it could not activate the CPM quickly and effectively within itself as expected, we have to hand it to the EU that it has confirmed its role by highlighting solidarity very often. From mid-May onwards, the EU started to restructure itself for the future.

Taking over the presidency as of July 1st, 2020, Germany decided to keep the IPCR mechanism activated in full mode. One of the most important steps took place on July 21, when EU leaders met physically in Brussels, and agreed to a €750 billion deal on the recovery package named Next Generation EU (NGEU)⁵⁰, which aims to address the harm caused by the pandemic, and on a €1074 billion multiannual financial framework (MFF) budget for 2021-2027. They stressed that the socio-economic consequences of the COVID-19 crisis require a joint effort and EU assistance to support the recovery and resilience of member states’ economies. Von der Leyen also stressed the importance of the steps taken by proposing that “every Euro still available in the EU’s annual budget be spent on tackling the crisis”.⁵¹ As mentioned before, the EP had agreed on two very important resolutions before this package, where it gave a clear signal to the Council and member states that solidarity was the only path to take so there was no other option. MEPs also accelerated the procedure that fast-tracked their legislative opinion on the Own Resources Decision (ORD), which is the legal basis that provides the revenue sources of the EU budget. The new ORD would constitute the legal basis authorizing funds to be borrowed on the financial markets to finance the NGEU. This removed an important barrier and speeded up the procedure to implement the key EU law to restart the economy.⁵²

47 WHO Director-General’s opening remarks at the media briefing on COVID-19, 13 March 2020, <https://www.who.int/dg/speeches/detail/who-director-general-s-opening-remarks-atthe-mission-briefing-on-COVID-19---13-march-2020>. (Accessed 25 October 2020).

48 For further information see: European Commission, https://ec.europa.eu/info/business-economy-euro/economic-and-fiscal-policy-coordination/financial-assistance-eu/funding-mechanisms-and-facilities/sure_en (Accessed 27 November 2020).

49 European Commission, <https://audiovisual.ec.europa.eu/en/topnews/M-004631> (Accessed 1 October 2020).

50 For further information see: European Parliament, <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/en/headlines/priorities/eu-response-to-coronavirus/20200513STO79012/COVID-19-the-eu-plan-for-the-economic-recovery> (Accessed 12 December 2020).

51 “More EU solidarity needed to fight coronavirus -von der Leyen”, Reuters, 2 April 2020, <https://www.reuters.com/article/health-coronavirus-italy-vonderleyen-idUSL8N2BQ0YR> (Accessed 3 September 2020).

52 European Parliament, <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/en/headlines/priorities/eu-response-to-coronavirus/20200910IPR86815/vote-on-own-resources-meeps-clear-way-for-COVID-19-recovery-plan> (Accessed 14 September 2020).

By July, not only was there an agreement, there was also another principle strengthened: EU responsibility to help member states in crisis unconditionally. European countries began to gather their resources for joint benefit. The EU has made a turn for the better by showing its value to citizens and to the governments of the tightly integrated Union.⁵³ The absence of EU solidarity observed in the beginning of the pandemic, however, caused the EU to realize its unwieldiness and mistake and, subsequently, support and sustain solidarity with measures. As evident in President von der Leyen's words in Brussels, again we witness an acceptance and apology for ruined solidarity of the Union:

"(...) You cannot overcome a pandemic of this speed or this scale without the truth. The truth about everything: the numbers, the science, the outlook- but also about our own actions. Yes, it is true that no one was really ready for this. It is also true that too many were not there on time when Italy needed a helping hand at the very beginning. And yes, for that, it is right that Europe as a whole offers a heartfelt apology. But saying sorry only counts for something if it changes behavior. The truth is that it did not take long before everyone realized that we must protect each other to protect ourselves. And the truth is too that Europe has now become the world's beating heart of solidarity. The real Europe is standing up, the one that is there for each other when it is needed the most."⁵⁴

Similarly, at the very beginning of the pandemic we witness the same acceptance and apology in von der Leyen's speech during press conferences where she emphasized the importance of European solidarity while tackling the COVID-19 pandemic.⁵⁵ Also, von der Leyen told Italy on April 1st that European nations were ready to help it deal with the coronavirus after initially focusing on 'their own home problems': "Today Europe is mobilizing alongside Italy. Unfortunately, this has not always been the case," she wrote in Italy's newspaper. "It must be recognized that in the early days of the crisis, in the face of the need for a common European response by demonstrating European solidarity, too many have thought only of their own home problems. Only solidarity will allow us to emerge from this crisis," von der Leyen wrote "The distance between European nations puts everyone at risk."⁵⁶

On the Special European Council, October 1-2, 2020, the Council and the Commission decided to further step up the overall coordination effort and work on the development and distribution of a vaccine at the EU level.⁵⁷ Afterwards, during European Council on October 15-16, the Commission assessed the current epidemiological situation, which is unprecedented and gives rise to very serious concern for Europeans. Leaders welcomed the progress achieved so far on overall coordination against COVID-19 at EU level, including

53 Scott L. Greer, et al., "How Covid-19 just transformed entire EU health policy", Edinburgh, Amsterdam, 20 July 2020, <https://euobserver.com/opinion/148930> (Accessed 1 August 2020).

54 European Commission, https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/SPEECH_20_675 (Accessed 28 September 2020).

55 European Commission, <https://audiovisual.ec.europa.eu/en/video/I-186532> and <https://audiovisual.ec.europa.eu/en/topnews/M-004569> (Accessed 28 September 2020).

56 Ursula Von Der Leyen, "Lettera di Ursula von der Leyen, presidente della Commissione europea a Repubblica", 1 April 2020, https://rep.repubblica.it/pwa/commento/2020/04/01/news/europa_ursula_von_der_leyen_bruxelles_scusateci_ora_la_ue_e_con_voi-252912437/ (Accessed 30 September 2020).

57 European Council, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/meetings/european-council/2020/10/01-02/> (Accessed 23 October 2020).

the recommendation on a coordinated approach to the restriction of free movement. They discussed the next steps to assure the development and distribution of COVID-19 vaccines and stressed further the need for a solid authorization and monitoring process, the building of vaccination capacity in the EU, and fair and affordable access to vaccines.⁵⁸

One of the biggest problems the EU had dealing with the COVID-19 crisis is that member countries had different attitudes toward the epidemic (herd, quarantine, curfew, health services are free or paid, etc.), and that this negatively affected the principle of solidarity. The COVID-19 outbreak has shown the need for EU countries to better cooperate and coordinate in times of crisis and to harmonize health assessments and measures and maybe most importantly to strengthen the EU's capacity to respond effectively to new cross-border health threats. Drawing on the lessons learnt, the EU launched the new EU4Health programme on November 11, which fosters innovation and investment in the sector as well as supports member states' healthcare systems to fill the gaps revealed by the pandemic.⁵⁹

On December 18, the Commission approved the political agreement reached between the Parliament and the Council on Rescue and Resilience Facility (RRF), the key tool at the heart of NGEU, that will provide €672.5 billion in loans and grants to support the reforms and investments of EU countries.⁶⁰ Finally, On December 21, 2020 the European Commission decided on a conditional marketing authorization for the COVID-19 vaccine named BioNTech- Pfizer, making it the first authorized COVID-19 vaccine in the EU.⁶¹ We put a comma here in order to narrow the period of the study. However, we should keep in our minds that this is an evolving situation and period of time for the EU. Until now, many big steps have been taken in the battle with the Covid-19 pandemic, but it remains to be seen if all these cautions, instruments and budgetary plans will be successful or not; the same goes for the solidarity principle as well.

So far, we have analyzed the one-year history and current status of COVID-19 in the EU. What measures did the EU take and what will the EU do for the future? After their failure to act in a timely and effective manner, the member states demonstrated their commitment to solidarity and agreed on a multi-year financial framework and EU rescue fund in the NGEU. Will financial efforts be translated into a comprehensive policy package delivering results from which citizens could benefit in the not-too-distant future?

The EU had a Civil Protection Mechanism since 2013, which was strengthened in 2019 by the creation of rescEU⁶² in order to respond to a wide-ranging, massive emergency af-

58 European Council, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/meetings/european-council/2020/10/15-16/> (Accessed 25 October 2020)

59 For detailed information about the programme: OJ, <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX:52020PC0405> and EP, https://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/en/headlines/society/20200604_STO80507/health-threats-boosting-eu-readiness-and-crisis-management and EC, https://ec.europa.eu/health/sites/health/files/funding/docs/eu4health_factsheet_en.pdf (Accessed 26 November 2020).

60 Council of the European Union, <https://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-14310-2020-ADD-1/en/pdf>, <https://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-14310-2020-ADD-2/en/pdf> and <https://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-14310-2020-INIT/en/pdf> (Accessed 25 December 2020).

61 For further information, see statement by President von der Leyen on the authorisation of the BioNTech-Pfizer vaccine <https://audiovisual.ec.europa.eu/en/topnews/M-006027> (Accessed 31 December 2020).

62 Decision (EU) 2019/420 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 13 March 2019 amending Decision No

fecting several Member States at the same time. The motivation behind the creation of rescEU seems like cautionary: ‘Recent experience has shown that reliance on voluntary offers of mutual assistance, coordinated and facilitated by the CPM, does not always ensure that sufficient capacities are made available to address the basic needs of people affected by disasters in a satisfactory manner.’⁶³ A bitter lesson from the pandemic is that Europe must be able to act more quickly and flexibly to initiate a coordinated European response when a serious large-scale emergency takes place. It is hoped that this lesson will lead to the emergence of a new institutional aspect of European solidarity and the CPM operations would probably be handled centrally by the EU, well beyond the fight against forest fires. Although the EU reinforced rescEU in 2020,⁶⁴ by creating a strategic medical reserve and distribution mechanism under the umbrella of the CPM which allows the EU to react to health crises more quickly, the actual capacity of this tool is still intergovernmental and depends largely on the willingness of member states to donate. It is doubtful that EU internal funding for medical practices is comparable to what can be organized at the national level. Transnational mechanisms of crisis management and resolution in the EU still remain *ad hoc* and limited.

The EU institutionally kept repeating solidarity in discourse but was weaker in action. Since solidarity in health is a technical field in which the EU is inexperienced and not fully autonomous, therefore did not function effectively. In addition, public health is largely a national competence, therefore the EU’s response to COVID-19 has been limited to supporting and coordinating the implementation of health measures adopted by individual states.⁶⁵ Consequently, the capacity to organise a true European solidarity response to infectious disease is limited as we witnessed during COVID-19 pandemic.

However, during corona crisis economic solidarity became more effective, prompt and coordinated- with the experience coming from the EU’s foundations- compared to the 2008 financial crisis when EU leaders faltered to do the bare minimum to keep the EU together and to save the Euro. In current crisis, EU’s economic solidarity has been shown through an expedite response in the form of financial support to address the immediate impact on Europe’s economies and boost its economic recovery which has arrived sooner than expected. It seems, leaning on the notion of solidarity, the EU and its member states will work together to rebuild and prepare the economy and internal market for another unpredictable pandemic. The road to recovery will be difficult, but the financial measures provided by the EU will relieve some of the burden on Member States and prompt a rapid recovery of the EU from the COVID-19 crisis.⁶⁶

From the discursive solidarity perspective, when we focus on political leaders’ references to European solidarity and declared commitments on COVID-19; we figure out that,

1313/2013/EU on a Union Civil Protection Mechanism (OJ L 77I, 20.3.2019, p. 1–15). For detailed information see: EC, https://ec.europa.eu/echo/what/civil-protection/resceu_en (Accessed 12 December 2020).

63 Beaucillon, “International and European emergency assistance to EU Member States in the Covid-19 crisis”, p.397.

64 Decision of The European Parliament and of The Council amending Decision No 1313/2013/EU on a Union Civil Protection Mechanism, Brussels, 2.6.2020 COM (2020) 220 final 2020/0097 (COD).

65 According to Article 6(f) of the TFEU the Union is limited to support, coordinate or supplement the actions of the Member States when acting in the field of civil protection.

66 Jonatan Echebarria Fernández, “A Critical Analysis on the European Union’s Measures to Overcome the Economic Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic”, *European Papers*, Vol. 5, No 3, 2020, p. 1422.

European leaders, MEPs and policymakers substantially emphasize the importance of solidarity for the EU. May 9, 2020, Europe Day marked the 70th anniversary of Schuman's declaration of 1950, which was a powerful expression of intent to unite Europe and create a *de facto* solidarity. 70 years later, Schuman's dream of a united Europe is highlighted by prominent European figures through emphasizing his precious principle.

What else has been done to ensure that European countries will be more prepared in the case of future crisis? EU member states' representatives settled unanimously on the EU4Health programme. As stated before, the EU currently has very limited competences in area of health care and is now paying the price for a lack of centralized policy in the face of European health threats. The current pandemic has shown the devastating costs of a lack of central policy for infectious diseases and if they are confronted with circumstances alike, they need to be able to act in a coordinated manner across the EU. There are already promising plans to work on European health autonomy and a growing awareness that Europe needs a kind of European database for this and more cooperation in research and development. It would not be wrong to state that Europe needs a coordinated crisis center which would be crucial in handling security threats of various kinds. European leaders should keep in mind that health, as well as security and education, is a common good. Therefore, the Union needs a formal, officially established permanent structured centralized coordinated crisis center where information flows Europe-wide, in order to avoid the inefficiencies of the current voluntary intergovernmental process. COVID-19 is a natural experiment going on in nature, of which over 400 million Europeans are its subjects, and the various results and data can be studied and analyzed to take steps for the future on how to respond in a similar crisis situation. In addition, the responsibility and capacity of the ECDC should also be extended with a significant funding increase and enabled to systematically alert people for health or other risks. Working closely with WHO, more mandate should be given to the ECDC for surveillance, preparedness, planning, scientific advice and responses to infectious disease pandemics in all of Europe.⁶⁷

A remarkable finding of this study is that despite their closer unification commitments, EU countries reacted self-interestedly and chaotic when danger arose. Although the problem is global, EU countries did not hesitate to take only national steps in the fight against the virus in the beginning and to put aside EU principles. In this context, countries have put into force border controls by suspending the Schengen agreement and have not fulfilled the obligations of the common domestic market by imposing unilateral export bans on masks and respirators. European health ministers were in conflict, governments misinformed Brussels that they were prepared, then stored basic equipment and shut down at the cost of disrupting trade and stranding citizens. In other words, once a disease outbreak has started, cooperative agreements were not credible as seen. However, lessons learned and the EU understood that the 27 countries, of course with differences and with different narratives, should be uniting and standing together to defend the European architecture both politically and economically. They saw that there is no other way out other than fighting for the single market, for the Euro and for many other things that go hand in hand within the Union. There is a silver lining; it is possible and likely that the COVID-19, by far the biggest unprecedented public crisis of the

67 Anderson et al., "Covid-19 exposes weaknesses in European response to outbreaks", p.1.

EU's history, would lead to a greater solidarity among Europeans and could prompt the biggest and most valuable steps yet.

In March 2020, the EU did not have many answers on the table but today they do. What we've seen in July 2020 is, much faster than many people predicted, the heads of state and government were able to come together and approve the recovery package and the European budget for 2021-2027. It was a historic achievement never witnessed before. Many countries, especially the frugal ones, were very reticent and reluctant about this idea, but what this crisis exposed was, an important lesson for crisis response in general; that the individual EU countries had a very different level of preparedness and ability to respond. However, the crisis was hitting everyone in the same way. No one was exempt and the EU really needed to come together to act in line with the principle of solidarity. Leaving other European partners behind would really be a serious risk for this principle, so the EU managed that risk by coming together to pass that historic package. However, some criticize this package and claim the opposite that, as a solution to the COVID-19 crisis, the EU seeks to send it to a future date by providing abundant financial aid to the member countries that have suffered the most from this crisis. They believe, trying to portray the hundreds of billions of Euros of borrowing as a 'historic success' and worm their way out of political criticism, EU leaders have thus ignited the debt swamp wick that may cause completely different problems for the Union in the future. EU still does not know that they've not yet seen the full depth of an economic crisis in the Union and, as Valdis Dombrovskis, Executive Vice-President of the EC indicated, they are still in trilog debates negotiating when and how to actually unleash this money.⁶⁸ Alongside these, probably the most dangerous challenge the EU would face is the second wave of the pandemic which is surging all across Europe. They need to actualize the decisions they have made rapidly. Otherwise, a harsh second wave will be unavoidable.

Conclusion

COVID-19 is not only a health problem for the EU, but also a phenomenon, which can determine its own fate. With COVID-19 pandemic, the EU is faced with a threat it has never seen and encountered before. This crisis is a further challenge to the European democratic model and to European integration. The Union has noticed how important to defend its foundational values such as the rule of law, respect for individual rights, protection of democracy and its core achievements like the single market, including the freedom of movement. It should not be forgotten that; the EU will come out of this existential crisis with serious damage. However, this pandemic is not an issue that can disrupt the EU. They messed up, but they immediately got themselves back together as a crisis management approach. The European Union and its institutions are learning organizations. They quickly evaluate their mistakes and urgently do what needs to be done. The capacity for adaptation and solidarity that the Member States and EU institutions have shown so far should not be underestimated. When it has come to preserve the symbolic achievements of European integration, instead of returning to national independence with various costs, they chose to strengthen the European

⁶⁸ Julian Lindley-French, "Covid-19 Europe's Defence and The Riga Test", 12-13 November 2020, *The Riga Conference Policy Brief*, Riga, p.10.

cooperation and solidarity. It's important to emphasize right from the start that the European Union is based on an idea, an idea of solidarity and cooperation instead of armed conflict or conflicts of another sort. Differences of opinion of course are part of such a very gradual process of integration. It has been difficult at times, but it is a work in progress so that the resiliency of the EU is always proven and manifested by how the Union is able to react to the unpredicted over the decades. Challenges by the COVID-19 on solidarity has also served and still serving as a litmus test for seven decades old European integration.

Our findings demonstrate that there was a lack of European solidarity observed at the beginning of the pandemic. However, the EU showed that they did not give up on solidarity with the measures they took later. Did it work? We will find out later in the future keeping in mind that the COVID-19 crisis is an evolving process. Final judgments can therefore not yet be made. However, this is neither the first nor the last crisis Europe will face. The EU is already a crisis' result; it is the fruit of the crisis itself. It has such a capacity and power to overcome this crisis. The ultimate goal should be using the crisis to refresh the normative power of a democratic Europe.

The response to the crisis should be paving the way for more permanent changes in terms of Union. How will the structure of EU be shaped after the impact of the pandemic? What awaits Europe in the future? In our opinion, the answers to these questions will be closely related to the question of whether European countries can manage this crisis process by protecting participatory democracy institutions. If European countries can demonstrate the ability to manage this crisis in a participatory democracy based on solidarity and tolerance in line with the analysis of transparent and scientific reason, this will be a great gain for the EU. Otherwise, if they are pushed to solve the social problems likely to be caused by the crisis by resorting to violence and narrowing the institutions of democracy, without taking any lessons from the past century's experiences, the result will be more violence and destruction. In the end, the EU succeeded with a comprehensive contingency plan in building up and strengthening the resilience needed in the future. It is clear, though, that European solidarity was an important part of this crisis-demonstrated by decision-makers and virologists, primary school teachers and doctors, and European citizens across the continent. It is time to realize this as well. Will the implementation of those policies demonstrate the willingness of countries to go beyond their differences and national preferences? It had better be. Otherwise, Europe will have to deal with the recent growing popularity of Euro-skeptic populist or far-right parties across the continent which won more seats, even in the EP, than ever before and more renationalization which endangers the European project. There is a possibility that this situation may bring new 'exit' scenarios, such as Brexit, to the agenda in countries where dissatisfaction is increasing. In brief, there will be no return to the pre-crisis situation for the EU after COVID-19. If the crisis does not become extraordinarily severe and push the Union to the dissolution process, which is very unlikely, a new structuring process will begin. To demand for solidarity as a real basis for unity in the EU would be in the interest of all member states and of EU citizens together.⁶⁹

69 Erinç Yeldan, "AB'nin Başarısız Ortak Değerler Sistemi", 26 April 2020, <https://www.uikpanorama.com/blog/2020/04/26/panorama-soruyor-ii/> (Accessed 31 December 2020).

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