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The covid-19 crisis as a make or break moment for EU solidarity

The foreseeable economic recession calls for a collective European response in a spirit of solidarity into which France and Germany have injected fresh impetus. However, beyond financial commitments and corresponding mechanisms, European solidarity must be backed by a strong and tangible political commitment in order to shape public opinion as well as a geopolitical strategy.¹

The need for EU solidarity in the face of the Covid-19 crisis

“The climate that seems to prevail among Heads of State or government and the lack of European solidarity are putting the European Union in mortal danger,” warned Jacques Delors in the midst of Europe’s devastating coronavirus crisis. This climate undermining European solidarity needs to evolve during the upcoming negotiations on the Commission’s recovery plan in response to the recession following the pandemic.

Solidarity is at the core of European integration. The Schuman Declaration, whose 70th anniversary was celebrated on 9 May, called for “concrete achievements which first create a de facto solidarity”. The latter has developed as a result of the interdependence and interests linked to the preservation of integration’s “concrete achievements”, namely the internal market, Schengen and the euro, making European solidarity both altruistic and self-serving. At present, it has been

institutionalised through a wide range of rules, mechanisms, funds and programmes, financed by the European budget and which depend on the legal scope of EU competences.

European solidarity has not become automatic, however. It first depends politically on the “spirit of solidarity” shared by European leaders. The last ten years of crises have shown that this is not a given among member states. However, today’s situation is different. With its suddenness, global impact and tragic scope, the pandemic requires a strong, coordinated and symbolic response that, in the public perception, has failed so far. Of course, the European institutions – the Commission, the European Central Bank (ECB), the European Investment Bank, the European Parliament – have, for their part, taken the initiative in their respective roles. Some member states seemed, however, at least initially, to want to slow down or limit the scope and effectiveness of these initiatives. The decision of the German Constitutional Court that the EU Court of Justice and the ECB had overstepped the limits of their competences also raises the spectre of a legal nationalism in which the interpretation of EU law could diverge between member states.

The boldness and design of the recovery plan proposed by the European Commission and backed by unexpected Franco-German impetus includes commonly issued loans as well as grants for the worst-affected countries. This initiative offers another opportunity for the EU to shift towards greater European solidarity thanks to new support from Germany. However, various member states have displayed their opposition to this proposal, above all the so-called “frugal four” countries. Politically

¹ This article was inspired by a previous article with a broader scope: Chopin, T., Koenig, N., Maillard, S. 2020. “The EU facing the coronavirus. A political urgency to embody European solidarity”, policy paper, Jacques Delors Institute, 10 April.

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speaking, a failure of the negotiations would put European integration in jeopardy and fuel nationalist trends. In economic terms, the severe recession and rising unemployment are crying out for a collective response to boost growth in the single market.

National positions and public opinions

European solidarity is very much at stake when citizens from badly hit economies such as Italy expect sweeping solidarity through unconditional grants while taxpayers from certain northern countries cannot see why their hard-earned savings should benefit others. Understanding and taking into account the different perceptions underlying public opinion is necessary for European solidarity to meet with acceptance at the political level.

The budgetary and financial forms of solidarity stem largely from the northern countries (but not only since France and Italy are also net contributors ahead of the Netherlands, Sweden and Austria), leading some of them to anticipate a threefold risk behind the idea of common debt: the economic risk, the moral hazard – “solidarity” without “responsibility” – and the “political hazard”, i.e. the risk of seeing populist or even extremist anti-European political forces coming or returning to power, both in their own constituencies and in the countries in difficulty, who could then refuse to cooperate and to pay back disbursed funds. In such a perspective, these countries need political and legal guarantees also with regard to the new funds under discussion to finance solidarity and mutual aid. It is not through stigmatisation or even insults that positions will be changed. For solidarity to be accepted, it is necessary to show that the national interests of the respective countries are convergent with the common EU interest.

If we consider public opinion in the EU in the context of coronavirus crisis, the survey “Public opinion in the EU in time of coronavirus crisis” by the European Parliament shows that more than half the respondents are not satisfied with the solidarity between EU member states in fighting the pandemic.

In the southern countries, less than a quarter (22% in Greece, 21% in Spain and 16% in Italy) stated that they were satisfied with the solidarity between the EU member states.

Last but not least, we need to distinguish between the position of national governments and public opinion in the “frugal” countries, which are both obviously not monolithic. For example, surveys such as the ZDF PolitBarometer show that a large majority of Germans support “EU financial aid to hard-hit countries like Italy and Spain” across all political parties except the AfD. Even if this says nothing about precise forms of solidarity, it shows that German public opinion does not want to abandon its EU partners in the crisis.

In such a context, attention should be paid to the resurgence of stereotypes that are not only reappearing in the divisions between national governments, but which can also open the door to the return of antagonisms between the European peoples themselves. These divisions can also be fuelled from outside. European solidarity should therefore be flanked by a geopolitical strategy to implement its international dimension.

EU solidarity in the global battle of narratives

The lack of European solidarity observed at the beginning of the pandemic has been amplified by geopolitical developments. When especially France and Germany failed to respond to Italy’s requests for protective equipment, others intervened. Chinese leaders

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immediately sent a signal of solidarity and provided protective equipment and medical experts. Russia and Cuba also provided assistance. While all support was certainly welcomed, these actors ensured that it was widely publicised, further highlighting the lack of intra-European solidarity.

This “diplomacy of masks” has been accompanied by general widespread disinformation. The EU has been subjected to the global battle of narratives waged by the United States on the one hand, and by China and Russia on the other. Each side has accused the other of being the source of the virus or of failing to contain it. However, Europeans cannot win this battle of narratives by simply correcting the facts. The credibility of a “geopolitical” Commission is at stake here, including its global communications strategy. The primary objective is not to “win” the global battle of narratives, but rather to regain the support of Europeans and to demonstrate the EU’s internal solidarity abroad.

At the same time, the EU must also prepare its own contribution to global solidarity. Even without an escalation of the pandemic in Africa, a serious economic and humanitarian crisis in poor countries could aggravate pre-existing conflicts and lead to further state fragility. As the world’s largest collective donor and trading bloc, the EU must adapt its regional strategies, such as the New Partnership for Africa. Europeans should take the lead in cancelling the poorest countries’ debts as another concrete example of their solidarity.

Conclusion: the need to embody European solidarity politically

In order to show European solidarity both externally and internally, a broader and more concrete demonstration of it is needed. For instance, the unanimous activation of the solidarity clause (Art. 222 TFEU) by the

European Council would have sent a symbolic yet strong signal of acting “jointly in a spirit of solidarity” as suggested by German Foreign Minister Heiko Maas. This proposal has never been considered seriously, however.

Above all, there is an urgent need to politically embody a unified response in a spirit of solidarity at the highest level of the Union. France and Germany must support the European Council – slow and divided as it often was in previous crises – in enabling a compromise on the Commission’s recovery plan that they have inspired. Public opinion must be able to pin European solidarity to a face or a political actor. Naturally, the pandemic places national leaders in the front row. At the EU level, the President of the Commission Ursula von der Leyen, Commissioners such as Thierry Breton (Internal Market) and Paolo Gentiloni (Economic Affairs), as well as the President of the ECB Christine Lagarde, come to mind. European solidarity would benefit from a galvanising figure who would politically embody the joint action decided at Union level. Such a high-profile figure would play a role comparable to that of Michel Barnier, who embodies in the eyes of public opinion the cohesion among the 27 member states during negotiations on Brexit. Similar to Barnier, such a figure should be attached to the Commission, but mandated by and accountable to the 27 member states and to the European Parliament.

If solidarity and trust between the EU member states cannot be restored through the recovery plan under negotiation and demonstrated in a tangible way to European public opinion and to the world, the coronavirus crisis will give way to nationalist withdrawal in the medium term. Acrimony towards “Brussels” would gradually turn into resentment among member states, especially under the guise of a north/south divide. Responding to this demand for solidarity is the true foundation of European integration. In the words of Jacques Delors, it is “solidarity that unites”.

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