



Martin Koopmann

Same but different? Lessons for Covid-19 from a decade of EU crisis management

Beyond its immediate effects as a global health crisis, the Covid-19 pandemic poses manifold political and economic challenges for the EU and its member states. Previous crises have shown that the EU's crisis management is dominated by intergovernmentalism and often limited to damage control. Nevertheless, common institutions and procedures such as those of the eurozone offer clear added value for the limited capacities of each member state and will make a difference in the long run.

Without any doubt, the coronavirus crisis has a global character as well as an important impact on globalisation, of which it might itself be a result. The speed with which it has spread, especially across the most industrialised countries and regions – China, Europe, the United States – underlines the vulnerability that the benefits of a globalised world offer. The coronavirus pandemic is, first of all, a health crisis. However, due to the rapidly increasing numbers of infected people and fatalities, and in the context of the expected serious economic effects of the lockdown of whole societies, it also raises questions regarding the political competence and efficiency of the governments and political authorities in office.

This crisis is a fundamental challenge for the European Union (EU) as a whole, for its member states as well as for its institutions. Expectations concerning effective and competent crisis management by the EU are not very high. In Germany, for instance, about 50% of citizens have a positive image of the EU in general (Eurobarometer, autumn 2019). However, according to a survey by Der Spiegel published on 30 March 2020, just 12% think that the Union plays the most important role

in the coronavirus pandemic, while 45% believe that the nation state comes first. These ratings by a traditionally »pro-European« member state reflect a largely prevalent perception of the EU as a crisis manager of minor relevance with regard to the Covid-19 crisis.

In the past ten years, the EU has been confronted with a series of important crises of which Covid-19 might turn out to be the most challenging. What lessons can be drawn from a decade of EU crisis management? Does the management of crises affecting the EU and its member states have to be European? Is the success of national crisis management automatically a defeat for European integration?

A decade of EU crisis management

Since the eastern enlargement in 2004 and followed by the failure of the constitutional treaty in 2005, the EU has been sliding from one crisis to the next. Each of these crises is perceived as a substantial challenge to the idea of European integration, at least in the way that it was understood from the 1950s until the Delors Commission, and has impacted the pillars of the open, liberal and supranational, of the »ever closer Union«.

The eurozone crisis laid bare the institutional deficits of the eurozone and the persistent cultural cleavages between its members. The management of the Greek government-debt crisis in particular underlined the lack of an existing crisis management mechanism. Nevertheless, even with the Maastricht criteria remaining unchanged, today's eurozone is no longer the one of 2009: a Banking Union has been set up with European

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competences to supervise the financial stability of banks and including the establishment of the Single Resolution Mechanism. The European Stability Mechanism (ESM) was established to assist member states in financial difficulties and its members decided in 2019 to provide the eurozone with a common budget. The case of the eurozone shows that – despite all difficulties and disputes – the EU is able to respond to serious challenges in the medium and long term, and that key member states are willing and able to make compromises even on sensitive issues.

The EU's handling of the influx of refugees and migrants, reaching its peak in 2015, shows how difficult it is to develop a common crisis management based on joint goals and solid burden-sharing in policy areas where member states still retain major competences. EU capitals have adopted strikingly different approaches in balancing the need for concerted action within the Union and the concern about eroding electoral support at home. Even though the immediate pressure of the 2015 crisis has – temporarily – been contained by the EU-Turkey agreement on refugees and other short-term measures, a common EU approach in migration policy is still lacking.

The Brexit case may look like successful crisis management at first glance. The other 27 member states managed to stand more or less united during negotiations and defended the vision of a coherent EU-27 against tempting alternative narratives of an even more differentiated EU than today. Nevertheless, the form that future relations with the United Kingdom will take is still pretty much unclear, and others have long taken over the UK's traditional role as »troublemakers« inside the Union.

Overall, this mixed record suggests that the EU is better able to respond constructively – also in the medium and the long term – to crises concerning common policies. The additional pressure built up by relevant

common institutions, such as the European Central Bank, may help member states to make genuine concerted efforts. On the contrary, crisis management related to intergovernmental policies and depending exclusively on member states often takes the form of damage control rather than long-term problem resolution. In any case, none of the crises has really been resolved to date.

Covid-19 – the need for EU crisis management

Where can the coronavirus crisis be situated against the backdrop of these past experiences? First of all, the current situation is primarily a health crisis, at least for the time being, and thus concerns a policy field for which EU competences are weak, with some exceptions such as research or medical equipment. An assessment of EU (non-)action should therefore be made in light of the necessities and demands, as well as the existing allocation of competences and the EU's contractual and political limitations in this field. This represents a parallel to the area of migration to a certain extent.

Second, as a corollary of the measures taken to contain the virus, we can expect a serious economic downturn in all member states, but again hitting some of the southern members most. On the economic front, the EU will, in all likelihood, assume the role of the most decisive crisis manager from national governments. The easing of state aid rules and the suspension of the Maastricht criteria have already pointed in this direction. Furthermore, heated debates about adequate forms and volumes of financial aid for those hit hardest by the crisis are evolving that, to some extent, resemble those in the eurozone crisis context ten years ago. The agreement of the EU finance ministers on a package of measures to the tune of 540 billion euros just before Easter was late in coming. However, it avoided, at least for the time being, an intensification of the debate on

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solidarity among the EU-27. Relying on strong institutions (the ESM and European Investment Bank) that are linked to pillars of EU integration such as the eurozone and the single market, it shows where and how effective EU crisis management is possible.

Third, although the supranational institutions and especially the Commission are now visibly entering the scene, it is obvious that the nation states feature very prominently in all these crises and appear to be (re-) gaining in importance in relation to the supranational level. Today's EU is probably more intergovernmental than most observers would have expected two or three decades ago. This is even truer in situations of acute crisis. But that does not mean that the Union is replaceable by the hypothetical sum of member states' national sets of measures. EU capitals will have the opportunity this year to actively shape the post-crisis impact of the Union by furnishing it with a convincing and well-adapted new budget.

Which role for the Weimar Triangle?

This last point leads to the question of leadership within the EU and, in more concrete terms, to the role that the Weimar Triangle might play in European crisis management. Ever since its foundation in 1991, high expectations have accompanied this German-French-Polish cooperation mechanism – often followed by great disappointment. Instead of functioning as a »clearing house« among member states where northern and southern, eastern and western positions on certain issues could be reconciled in advance before taking them to the EU-28 arena, the Weimar Triangle was largely absent from the last ten years of crisis management. It did not inject any relevant impetus into any of the cases mentioned above.

Even the Franco-German »tandem« only played a semi-constructive role in the management of the

eurozone crisis in the light of obvious and profound differences in national preferences. Poland was only indirectly affected by the eurozone crisis (as a non-member), and the Polish government chose to resist any attempts to manage the 2015 migration crisis at the EU level. It remains to be seen whether this pattern will be repeated in the coronavirus crisis.

Acting European!

The coronavirus crisis adds to the other fundamental challenges of recent years that have yet to be fully resolved. Its (socio-)economic consequences might be more serious than those of the eurozone crisis, and perhaps even devastating. It also reveals the tension that exists in the EU between collaboration and competition in tackling crises that do not directly and exclusively concern the EU's common policies. Poland, France and Germany represent no exception to this assessment. Nevertheless, it is clear that the countries of the Weimar Triangle will have a crucial role to play in paving the way for an economic recovery strategy that guarantees social cohesion and political stability in all EU member states – as well as internal cohesion among the EU-27.

Solutions to the coronavirus crisis on European soil very much depend on the efficiency and consistency of the political measures taken by national governments. However, for each of them it would be, especially in the long run and beyond health policy in a narrow sense, a much more arduous task without the benefits of close cooperation and support from the EU. By contrast, blaming the EU for alleged non-action in policy areas where member states have not been willing to share or transfer competences in the past is irresponsible and will damage the Union more than the coronavirus crisis itself. There is no alternative to acting European.

Paper Series

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Publisher

Genshagen Foundation
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The series

The series »Acting European? The European Union and the Weimar Triangle in the Coronavirus Crisis« sheds light on current responses and new policy approaches in tackling the long-term consequences of the pandemic both within the countries of the Weimar Triangle and at the EU level. The first part of the series looks at the national policies pursued by France, Poland and Germany, cooperation among them, and their visions of what a European response to the crisis should look like. The second part focuses on the EU level and examines how the present crisis is likely to impact key dimensions of cooperation within the Union and beyond its borders.

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This publication was funded by the Federal Foreign Office

