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The EU and the global response to Covid-19 – can “Team Europe” make a difference?

After a bumpy start, the EU has drawn up a comprehensive response to the global Covid-19 pandemic by activating multilateral forums and providing assistance to third countries in need. If EU decision-makers can avoid the instinct of withdrawal that occurred during the sovereign debt crisis a decade ago, the coronavirus crisis also offers an opportunity for the Union to enhance its support for its neighbourhood and the Global South and, in so doing, to increase its global standing in a new geopolitical environment.

The outbreak of Covid-19 confronted the EU with a double challenge. While EU institutions were busily engaged in setting up and coordinating a joint crisis response within the Union, they also needed to address the further spread of the global pandemic in their external action. After several weeks of paralysis, the EU finally started to become an actor on the global stage in early April. In the context of “mask diplomacy” and the “geopolitical imperative” to provide assistance to countries in need, this aspiration cannot only be understood as an act of solidarity, but also as a necessity if the EU wants to have a say in a post-coronavirus world order. Against this backdrop, the question arises as to what extent the EU has translated its will to lead the global response to the pandemic into action so far and will be capable of doing so in the medium to long term.

From a late starter to a leading force

Struggling with the scale of the pandemic as well as with a joint internal approach, the EU was a late starter

in the soft power race for international assistance. On 15 March, the EU even restricted the export of protective medical equipment beyond its borders. While this move was intended to strengthen collective action within the bloc, it sent a troubling signal to the outside world. Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić, for example, stated that EU solidarity was nothing more than “a fairy tale” when he welcomed Chinese aid deliveries at Belgrade Airport, kissing the Serbian and Chinese flag to mark the occasion.

The EU was, however, quick in seeking to correct this initial reluctance. The European Commission in particular attempted to live up to its own ambition of being a “geopolitical Commission” and explicitly stated that it wanted to play a leading role in tackling the global ramifications of Covid-19. At the bilateral level, the Commission announced on 8 April, together with High Representative Josep Borrell, that the EU institutions, member states, the European Investment Bank and the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development would contribute a total of 20 billion euros to help partner countries worldwide. This so-called “Team Europe” approach was recently updated and now comprises a total of 36 billion euros.

In general, the EU’s bilateral coronavirus aid mirrors a familiar pattern of assistance and engagement vis-à-vis third countries: geographic proximity, the degree of EU association and the EU’s strategic interests in specific regions have a decisive impact on the level of support. It is thus not surprising that the six accession candidates of the Western Balkans alone were granted a 3.3 billion euro recovery package to mitigate not only the immediate health crisis, but also its longer-term social and

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economic repercussions relatively early on while the whole of Sub-Saharan Africa had only received 4.8 billion euros by June. To put things into perspective, it is also important to note that the lion's share of the bilateral and multilateral coronavirus aid announced by the EU consists of reallocations of regular assistance schemes and loans under favourable conditions to provide emergency budget support as well as leverage investments.

Largely paralysed itself during the first weeks of the pandemic, the EU also got off to a slow start with regard to its role as an actor within global multilateral forums. However, while it quickly became clear that other major players such as the US and China were unable and unwilling to take on a leadership role, the EU stepped up its engagement. The most notable development in this light is its leading role in the Coronavirus Global Response, an international donor initiative that aims to raise funds to develop diagnostics, treatments and vaccines against coronavirus for universal use. In early May, the Commission co-hosted a virtual pledging event as a starting point for a pledging marathon that has raised 15.9 billion euros (as of 29 June), with 11.9 billion euros coming from EU institutions and member states themselves.

In the same vein, the EU spearheaded a High-Level Event on Financing for Development in the Era of COVID-19 and Beyond, at which Commission President Ursula von der Leyen proposed a “green, digital and resilient” global recovery initiative that links investment and debt relief to the Sustainable Development Goals. Brussels has also been a staunch advocate of measures at the G7 and G20 level to ensure debt relief for those countries most affected by the coronavirus crisis. France, in particular, has been a driving force behind advancing efforts to achieve a debt moratorium, especially with African countries in mind.

Challenges and pitfalls ahead

Although the EU has demonstrated its capacity to act under the strain of a severe global crisis, there are a number of factors that make it uncertain whether its assistance will be successful in the long run. The coronavirus crisis will be a decisive setback in the economic, social and possibly also democratic development of third countries, and is likely to exacerbate pre-existing vulnerabilities and crises. Under these conditions, providing effective support to its immediate neighbourhood and the Global South will be an uphill struggle for the EU.

First, the EU's post-coronavirus support is burdened by a legacy of hesitant external engagement, with the Common Foreign and Security Policy still experiencing difficulties in getting off the ground. The sovereign debt crisis that started in 2009 left the EU more inward-looking, with the result that it often refrained from backing up rhetorical commitment with political clout in its relations with partner countries. In the Western Balkans, for example, the EU has so far failed to resolve remaining conflicts and has turned a blind eye to democratic backsliding. Moreover, with regard to the countries of the southern Mediterranean, the Union has largely given up its hopes of promoting further democratisation and defines its relations mainly through the lens of migration and security policy. It will be all the more challenging for the EU to adopt a more unified and strategic approach in the aftermath of the coronavirus crisis, when attention and resources will be scarce.

Second, compared to the challenges the world is facing, the financial efforts made by the EU are relatively modest. In the light of the 750 billion euros that the EU intends to invest in its internal recovery, the 36 billion euros that external “Team Europe” currently plans to spend are a drop in the ocean. This is why the EU needs to place an even stronger focus on external action when

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the new Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) for the period from 2020 to 2027 is negotiated. The latest MFF proposal by Josep Borrell and the Commission is most commendable in this regard. It foresees an increase in the funds for external action policies of 16.5 billion euros to 118 billion euros, with an additional 10.5 billion euros going to the new Neighbourhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument (NDICI) and 5 billion euros to the humanitarian aid budget. However, even if approved by EU capitals, which is rather unlikely, the increase is far from representing a paradigm shift.

Third, while the EU's increased multilateral engagement certainly has to be welcomed, it is questionable whether it will be sufficient. With major actors such as the US, China and Russia pursuing unilateral approaches, "Team Europe" is struggling to make a tangible difference. This has been particularly apparent at the UN level. The EU has been largely powerless so far with regard to the conflict between the US and China over the role of the World Health Organization (WHO) in fighting the virus. The EU has neither been able to stop US President Donald Trump from carrying through with his plans to leave the WHO, nor has it indicated that it intends to assume a bigger role in the organisation if the US leaves. The US-Chinese conflict surrounding the WHO also curtailed efforts spearheaded by France to draft a UN resolution in early May that intended to achieve a ceasefire in all major global conflicts with a view to tackling the Covid-19 outbreak more effectively.

Fourth, despite the EU's assistance being by far the most comprehensive of any external actors in many regions, it has often not been perceived as such by local populations. On the one hand, this is due to systematic and large-scale (dis)information campaigns, conducted mainly by Russia and China and also targeting the EU's "chaotic" response. On the other, the Covid-19 crisis has revealed the lack of a clear EU communication strategy

that could have opposed such claims and raised the profile of the EU's activities. In this regard, it is imperative that the EU increase its outreach to citizens not only at home, but also in partner countries.

Time for stronger commitment

It has often been claimed that the coronavirus crisis could help the EU to find its role as a major and independent player in a new geopolitical context, dominated by the US and China. In the first few months of the crisis, the EU has shown that it can be a global player and bring the actions of its diverse stakeholders and institutions together as part of a coherent approach. However, with many pitfalls and competing priorities looming, the EU's external engagement needs, more than ever before, to be a political and strategic choice. The crisis in line with the original meaning of the Greek term as a decision or decisive turn represents both the risk of dwindling EU support and also a prime opportunity for the EU to reassess, concretise and level-up its commitment beyond its borders. In fighting the corollaries of the pandemic, concrete outcomes will matter more than abstract strategies or declarations of intent. There will thus be a need for the EU to focus more on the actual impact of its assistance on the ground. This will be paramount since support for third countries clearly has a geopolitical dimension, or, to quote Josep Borrell, "power starts with financial power".

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