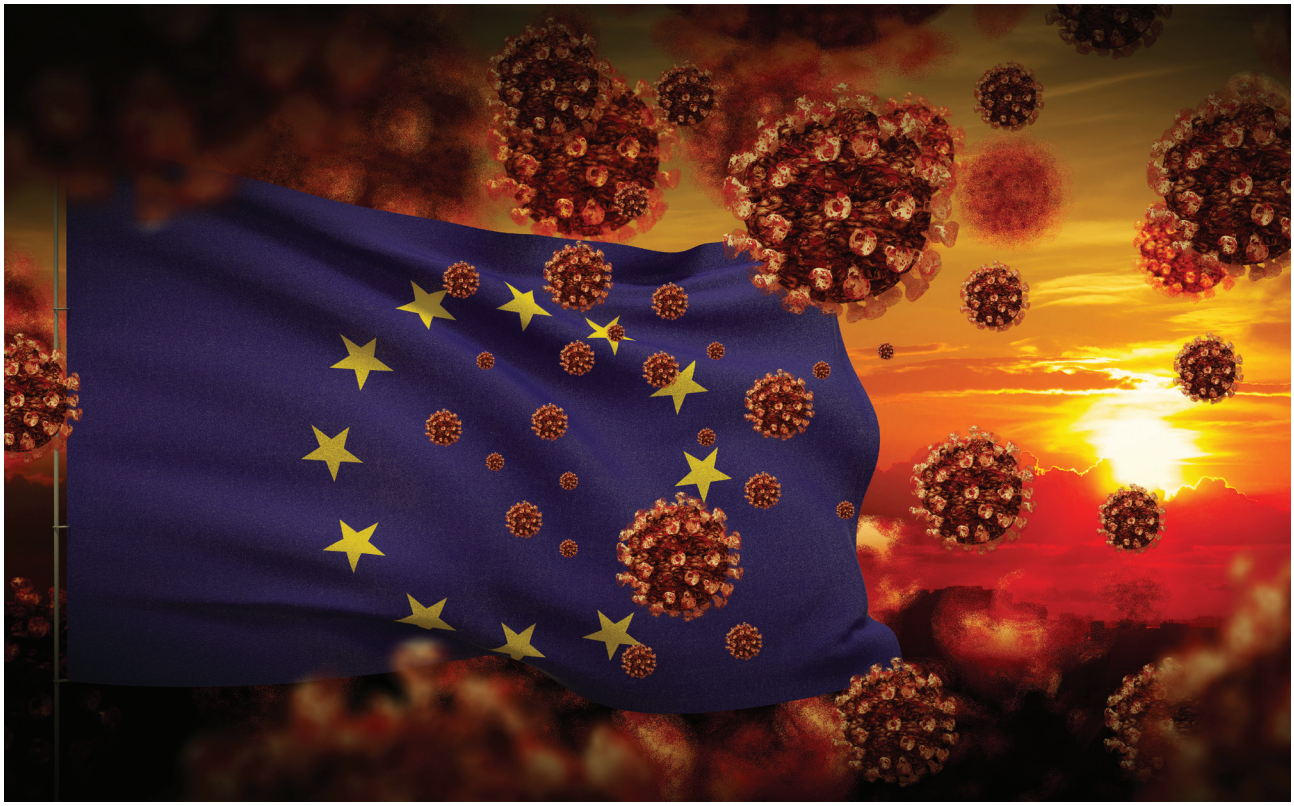
IPC–MERCATOR POLICY BRIEF

May 2020

A FUMBLING OR AN ENABLING EUROPEAN UNION: ENVISIONING MULTILATERALISM IN A POST-CORONA WORLD

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We live in extremely difficult times, facing unprecedented challenges confronting the globe as a whole. The coronavirus outbreak (COVID-19) has turned into a global pandemic, giving rise to multiple crises ranging from health to the economy and the provision of basic needs. The coronavirus pandemic came at a time when the international system was experiencing turbulent changes, undergoing major paradigmatic shifts. The pandemic and its subsequent crises both reflect and reinforce these paradigmatic shifts and resultant global trends. Two paradigmatic shifts that affect all global actors and their relationships to each other are particularly striking in this context: the rise of a multipolar system and the proliferation of populist/authoritarian tendencies. Both developments have been feeding off each other and leading to an increase of unilateral and bilateral tendencies, the decline of rules-based multilateral orientations, and the rise of alternative geopolitical modes of governance (as reflected in Russia, China, and others).

In this turbulent context, the COVID-19 crisis has also presented an opportunity for populist/authoritarian regimes to promote their nationalist/protectionist narratives and policies. As usually happens in times of crisis, we witness the global rise of statist and protectionist narratives and policies. The timing of the COVID-19 pandemic was rather unfortunate, following the long, disruptive financial crisis and the prolonged refugee crisis, which had already created a conducive environment for populist/authoritarian tendencies globally as well as in Europe. The rise of protectionist measures amid the pandemic and the introduction of border controls also gives the image that the EU and its member states have been unable to cope with the crisis. The pandemic provides an important opportunity for alternative geopolitical models of governance—namely statist and authoritarian governments as represented by China as well as Russia—to give a more successful image in addressing the present challenges. Whilst the European help was not forthcoming, the Chinese aid of much-needed respirators and masks to Italy during the worst days of the pandemic is an important reflection of the difficulties and challenges faced by the EU and its member states.

Multilateralism and European Integration

In this changing global context, multilateral orientations and rules-based relationships, which were already fragile, have become increasingly challenged. Among all the actors in the international system, multilateralism matters highly for the EU; more than any other actor, it is an existential issue for the Union.[1] As the new Commission President Ursula von der Leyen succinctly stated in her political guidelines, multilateralism is in the DNA of the EU.[2] This issue was also clearly stated in the strategic agenda of the European Council adopted in June 2019.

The COVID-19 pandemic creates strains in the already fragile multilateralism of the European Union and raises important discussions about the future of the European integration project and multilateralism in general. As the pandemic reinforces the roles of the states and protectionist measures, we observe the increased questioning of the usefulness of the multilateral, rules-based European project. The "return of the nation state" narrative therefore raises high political stakes for the European Union and its multilateralism.

The "nation state versus European integration" debate is not new: it recurs particularly in crisis periods. This was an early challenge in the process of European integration, even in the 1960s by the French President Charles de Gaulle and in the 1980s by the Prime Minister of the United Kingdom Margaret Thatcher. However, these challenges were not too frontal; they challenged the supranational nature of the European integration project and argued for a more intergovernmental one. The challenges toward the European integration project came to the forefront particularly after the 2008 financial crisis and the more recent refugee crisis. These two crises created major divisions within the EU—perpetuating the economic crisis between North and South and the refugee crisis between West and East. Both crises demonstrated the weakening of solidarity among the member states, an issue that is critical for the project of European integration. These crises also led to the rise of populist/authoritarian tendencies that directly challenged the project of European integration. In

some countries such as Hungary and Poland, such populist/authoritarian tendencies took hold in the government; in others, even in major member states such as Germany and France, they gained leverage to influence the agenda of the governments. The COVID-19 pandemic presents a conducive environment for such challenges to reinforce the "return of the nation state" narrative and undermine the already fragile multilateral European integration project.

Globally and in Europe, we are experiencing the recurrence of the same debate, but this time the political stakes for multilateralism and European integration are higher, primarily because the global context and times are different. Not only is multilateralism presently and increasingly challenged by the rise of unilateral/bilateral orientations among major actors coupled with the proliferation of populist/authoritarian tendencies, but there is also the challenge of alternative modes of governance with the rise of China and Russia. With their statist and protectionist measures during the pandemic, these governments aim to present a more effective and alternative normative, state-centric/sovereignist orientation. The "Trump factor" in the United States and the change of the American orientation from a multilateral narrative to a protectionist "America First" narrative has also weakened rules-based multilateralism and left the EU in a more difficult situation. The exit of the United Kingdom from the EU and the prolonging of the Brexit agreement within the UK Parliament have also put more strains on the rules-based multilateral orientation of the EU in turbulent times.

In this context, the "return of the nation state" and the rise of statist/protectionist/sovereignist narratives find fertile ground. These arguments are voiced not only by populist/authoritarian circles but also by opinion leaders on Europe and European integration such as Krastev, who argues that the pandemic will help the nation state reassert itself, and there will be a need for big government.[3] At present, this argument sounds credible: the EU was caught unprepared for the crisis as the health sector falls within the competence of member states, in which the EU does not have a direct role. Furthermore, EU member states were caught in the climate of national survival and had to implement border controls. However, the pandemic also shows that these are short-term measures; borders do not matter, and countries cannot work in isolation and tackle this crisis alone. There is an urgent need for cooperation and multilateral solutions.

The crisis clearly reflects that the problem is not an either-or issue, i.e., it is not a simple matter of the return of the nation state versus European integration or multilateral cooperation. Rather, it is an issue of governance both at the level of nation states and multilateral organizations. Those states that have more inclusive mechanisms of checks and balances and better state capacities, such as Germany and South Korea, were able to cope with the challenges of the pandemic more effectively, as aptly described by Aydın-Düzgit and Keyman.[4] The crisis also demonstrated the significance of state capacity in relation to critical issues, such as healthcare, which raises the more fundamental question of "what kind of state" rather than the "return of the nation state." During the pandemic, the negative outcome of neoliberal autarchic polices become quite evident in the tragic cases of Italy and Spain, which clearly showed the need for more effective state policies in addressing crucial social issues such as health, education, and employment. In addition to governance issues at the state level, the COVID-19 crises also classified both the need and the challenges/limits faced by multilateral organizations such as the World Health Organization (WHO). Whilst it has demonstrated the significance of cooperation at the international level and the need for reliable information and merit-based guidelines, it also provided important lessons as international organizations such as WHO face over-dependence on powerful members, such as China and the United States.

The problematic performance of the WHO clearly demonstrates the need for an effective social-oriented public sector. Such an effective and accountable public sector does not necessarily mean the return of the nation state, as succinctly pointed out by Zielonka,[5] but multi-level, rules-based governance that fosters multilateral cooperation. Member states need to work within the EU framework to address the pandemic and the ensuing societal and economic challenges. As societal and economic challenges increase over time, the need for

cooperation and multilateral solutions will be more evident. On this crucial issue, it should be emphasized that the EU and its member states need to work together effectively; they are not mutually exclusive but complement each other. In the past, the process of European integration has reinforced the capacity of nation states as aptly characterized by A. Milward in his seminal work "The Rescue of the Nation State."[6] As Milward showed in detail, the integration process was highly important in "rescuing the nation state," which was facing major challenges after the Second World War. The European integration project could gain more credibility if it is able to address not only the pandemic but also, more importantly, the societal and economic challenges during and after the crisis. In order to do this, however, the EU needs to critically assess its DNA, its multilateral framework, and redefine and reinvent it in a changing, turbulent context.

From Exclusionary to Inclusionary Multilateralism

The project of European integration has been a turning point in the long history of Europe. It aimed to challenge prevalent unilateral orientations based on nationalist/protectionist power politics and foster a multilateral orientation based on a rules-based institutional system. This attempt has been crucial in addressing long-lasting conflicts in Europe such as the German-French dispute through minimizing conflictual relations with mechanisms of cooperation and integration. In the first decades of the project, it was not based on a "neoliberal orthodoxy" in terms of economic and political orientation but on "embedded liberalism" in which liberalism was embedded in the welfare state, including crucial social welfare policies in education, health, and employment. Europe's rules-based multilateral orientation was also supported by the United States, which aimed to create a new style of leadership and hegemony in the post-war international system based on multilateral institutions. However, this multilateral order primarily remained as a Western, transatlantic project in the post-war bipolar system. It also took on a hierarchic character when the United States emerged as the hegemonic power crucial in supporting the rules-based multilateral orientation of European integration.

The rules-based orientation of the European integration project was faced with two major problems at the time. The first was the retreat from "embedded liberalism" and welfare state measures with the rise of neoliberal orientations in the 1980s. This development led increasingly to the distancing of the European integration project from the needs of the people and reinforced the image that it is a project of the elites. The second important change was the weakening support of the United States for the European integration process, which started as early as the 1970s with rising economic and political tensions between the United States and Western Europe. Nevertheless, the support of the United States for a multilateral institutional system and order continued with ups and downs until the Trump administration. With Trump's presidency, there was a dramatic change in the United States from multilateralism to unilateralism, which increased tensions not only in transatlantic relations but also made the post-war multilateral system more fragile. In this context, the EU continued to underline the need for a rules-based multilateral system, because it is in the essence of the project of European integration. The EU emphasized the significance of an effective multilateral system and, more recently, an even more inclusionary multilateral system to meet the challenges in Europe and globally. With historical hindsight, however, it could be said that these expectations were not met; there was a gap between expectations and capabilities, and the multilateral orientation of the EU remained rather exclusionary.

The exclusionary nature of the EU's multilateral orientation can be observed even in its highly successful enlargement policy, particularly in the case of enlargement toward Central and Eastern Europe. As Krastev and Holmes clearly show in their recent book, the enlargement toward Eastern Europe was seen as a reflection of "neoliberal orthodoxy" by the people at large, reminiscent of "Soviet orthodoxy," and led to anti-European tendencies rather than a return to Europe.[7] Krastev and Holmes argue that this development was important in creating a conducive environment for the rise of populist/authoritarian tendencies in Central and Eastern Europe, primarily in Hungary and Poland. In addition to this enlargement policy, a similar pattern could also be observed in the case of the EU's neighbor-

hood policies. These neighborhood policies, which aimed to create a ring of friends in the EU's neighborhood and enhance cooperative multilateral orientations, unfortunately did not meet such expectations. They were seen as manifestations of the Eurocentric and neoliberal agendas of European elites—therefore, not owned locally. It is also possible to observe the reflection of this exclusionary and discriminatory tendency in the long-lasting Turkey-EU relationship. In the critical juncture of the EU-Turkey relationship as the accession process was starting in 2006-2007, the leading EU member states (Germany and France) emphasized more essentialist criteria such as culture and geography, rather than the "Copenhagen criteria" in meeting the requirements for accession.

The exclusionary orientation of the EU has not only manifested itself in past policies but also in the recent Future of Europe discussion, which mainly focuses on issues and changes inside Europe, and even more narrowly inside the EU, neglecting challenges in the neighborhood and globally. The recent discussions on flexible integration and differentiation in this debate show such a bias with a focus on internal differentiation, but not much concern over the vital issue of external differentiation. Whilst it is not easy to proceed with differentiation without external differentiation, particularly in the turbulent global context, the EU has not been able to move from an exclusionary to an inclusionary orientation. Whilst it is crucial for the EU to achieve partnership relations with third countries and further external differentiation on critical security, foreign policy, and refugee issues in order to enhance a rules-based multilateral system, the EU has been unable to meet these expectations.

The pandemic has put pressure on the EU to redefine and reinvent its multilateral orientation into an inclusionary one, as it raises the political stakes for the European integration project. As the EU remains exclusionary, it will not be politically feasible to address the challenges of the pandemic and the ensuing societal and economic crises. Both the epidemic and the resulting socio-economic challenges are pan-European problems, and they require multilateral global solutions. No actor can address these drastic challenges alone, and nationalist/protectionist/sovereignist policies can only scratch the surface of these problems in the short term. The EU, nevertheless, has the advantage of a rules-based institutional system that has the potential to provide multilateral mechanisms for coordinating national policies. Until now, it has not been successful in fulfilling its potential as a multilateral mechanism.

Different from the previous financial and refugee crisis, the EU also has the advantage of creating ties of solidarity between member states. The epidemic is a pan-European and a global issue. Therefore, it could be easier to create pan-European multilateral mechanisms if they are more inclusionary. As Derviş rightly underlines, the issue of solidarity will be a critical litmus test for all actors, including the EU, in the present crisis.[8] The EU has been unable to pass any solidarity tests in the previous crises, but this time, failure will put the integration prospect into grave danger. As Pierini suggests, the coordinating role of the EU is also important in order to formulate a more comprehensive plan for strategic industries such as pharmaceutical and medical industries as well as in coordinating national research on the epidemic.[9]

The role of the EU will be even greater in addressing socio-economic challenges and the resulting economic crisis. The crisis has high social costs, with rising levels of unemployment as well as greater levels of social and economic inequality. In this context, it will be extremely difficult for national governments with their protectionist measures to tackle such immense problems by themselves. The EU with its multilateral mechanism has significant potential in this area. However, EU policy-makers need to rethink the political economy of multilateralism. In order to redefine and reinvent a more inclusive multilateralism, there is a need to critically question the neoliberal orientation of the EU's policies during the last three decades. The pandemic clearly showed the damage of neoliberal austerity measures over the health systems of Southern European countries, as severely reflected in the cases of Italy and Spain. It is evident in the present crisis that there is a need to address socio-economic inequalities in Europe with the aim of transforming European systems toward a more socially inclusive and environmentally responsible system. The Social Europe program of J. Delors, which was cast

aside during the critical Maastricht negotiations at the end of the Cold War, should be redefined and revitalized in the present context. An inclusionary and social-oriented Europe could lessen the widening gap between the EU and the citizens of Europe and would provide a more responsible public institution, which would lessen the appeal of protectionist/nationalist/sovereignist narratives. With a more inclusionary attitude, the EU could also help build much-needed global solidarity during the present crisis. Such an orientation could also increase the attractiveness of the EU, which has been dramatically diminished in the last decade vis-à-vis competing modes of geopolitical governance.

As it is reinvented, the multilateral orientation of the EU needs to be more inclusive not only in Europe but also outside of the EU, with more global awareness and responsibility. The EU has emphasized the need to create partnerships to foster a rules-based multilateral system globally as it has underlined in all strategic documents in recent years. Unfortunately, this emphasis has remained largely at a rhetorical level, without much substance. As noted, this tendency was quite prevalent in the Future of Europe debate, which focused mainly on issues inside the EU, neglecting crucial issues outside the borders of Europe. Whilst it is evident that a rules-based multilateral system cannot be furthered without concern of the vital issues of external differentiation and partnership, the focus has been on internal differentiation. Although the EU is turning inward in the present crisis, the credibility of the EU as an inclusive multilateral actor will also depend on how it acts in its neighborhood, particularly regarding critical refugee and humanitarian problems. An inclusive multilateralism cannot be based solely on the opinions of EU actors and debated inside EU discussions. The EU needs to build coalitions, associations, and partnerships in order to further a rules-based multilateral system.

Conclusion: Policy Recommendations

The pandemic prevents the EU from rethinking its multilateralism and addressing some of the basic problems of its existing exclusionary and hierarchical multilateral orientation. As noted by N. Tocci, the EU cannot survive the present crisis with piecemeal adjustments, as it did its previous crises, because the global context and time are different, and this pandemic reinforces global trends that are not so favorable to the EU.[10] In this context, there is an urgent need for a more inclusive, comprehensive recovery program to address both the pandemic and the ensuing socio-economic crisis.

The European Union and its member states were not effective in addressing and managing the COVID-19 crisis, but they still have high potential to implement multilateral mechanisms in order to redefine and reinvent the present problematic multilateral orientation in the turbulent global context. However, time is critical. The EU cannot remain active only at the rhetorical level; it has to deliver in these difficult times. The EU has a good opportunity to show its commitment to action with the revitalization of the "Future of Europe" debate, which will be launched with the Future of Europe Conference, planned on May 9, Europe Day. This could be a historical moment to define and reinvent multilateralism in a more inclusionary manner. Multilateralism is an existential issue for the EU, as emphasized many times by key EU policy-makers.

Based on this analysis, the main recommendations for the aforementioned conference are as follows:

- The successful cases in terms of effectively tackling the pandemic, such as South Korea, New Zealand, Singapore, Germany, and Scandinavian countries, have indicated that rather than reducing our discussions to a false opposition between globalization and the nation state, what is needed is "inclusive governance" between the nation state, civil society, and global institutions. In these cases, governments have increased their capacities in their fight against the pandemic by (a) acting as transparent, accountable, and effective actors and (b) enhancing their interaction with civil society organizations as well as global organizations, starting with the WHO.

In doing so, not only have they become effective, but also they have increased the degree of "social cohesion" between state and society and intra-societal relations. The EU and some of its member states so far have failed to initiate inclusive governance and building solidarity mechanisms. Yet, in a time where the process of returning to "normal" is just about to begin, the EU still has the potential to do so if it is able to derive the necessary lessons from the present crisis.

- The coronavirus pandemic has also demonstrated the need for building necessary state capacities in relation to the provision of basic human needs. State capacity has become a more important and necessary quality than state power. In successful cases, states increased their capacities in the areas of health, science, economy, and social cohesion. By augmenting their capacity rather than power, they were able to cope with the unprecedented challenges created by the pandemic. This has also meant that the return of the nation-state argument without discussing why some states have failed in addressing the crisis (Italy, Britain, Spain, United States, Brazil) and some have been successful is untenable. Instead, the discussion should be focused on how to enhance state capacity vis-à-vis the coronavirus pandemic. This discussion, and its connection to the idea of inclusive governance, is not new to the EU. In fact, the very idea of the EU as a post-sovereign community has rested on enhancing "state capacity" through integration and cooperation in order to create a resilient community of states. The EU can be effective in terms of helping its members increase their state capacities by fostering Social Europe with welfare measures as well as strengthening the culture of unity and solidarity within diversity, which could also function to counter the rise of populist-authoritarian tendencies both in Europe and globally.

- The EU could play a relevant role in the turbulent multipolar system in decoupling the increasing tensions between the United States and China and addressing the multiple crises, if it is able to redefine and reinvent its multilateralism.

- In order to meet such challenges, the EU needs to critically assess the main problems of the present exclusionary multilateral orientation. It should aim to create a more inclusionary orientation between the member states, among the member states, and in relation to the outside world.

- The inclusionary orientation should address both the immediate short-term health issues as well as the longer-term socio-economic challenges to social, economic equality, and employment.

- The EU should critically focus on multilateralism in politics and the economy and address the problems of neoliberal autarchy policies, which were effective in undermining crucial state capacities in areas of health and employment.

- The EU and its member states need to formulate a comprehensive recovery plan, which should include but not be reduced to a recovery fund. This comprehensive plan should focus on reinventing multilateralism in a non-inclusionary manner. It should be based on participatory mechanisms and prioritize basic human needs and rights to health, food security, education, and employment as well as concerns over climate change. It should address not only social and economic inequalities within nations but also dividing lines between the North and South and West and East of Europe.

- The inclusionary multilateralism of the EU should not only focus on intra-European problems but also needs to be outward looking. It has to open up and build partnerships and effective working relationships with other actors and international organizations on concrete humanitarian issues, such as refugee/migration issues.

- The roles of particular member states, such as Germany, are critical in these difficult times in the process of redefining and reinventing an inclusionary multilateralism. Germany will have crucial importance, not only because it has been one of the cornerstones of multilateralism in Europe, but it will also assume the EU Presidency in the second semester of 2020, which will be a critical time in terms of the Future of Europe Debate and Conference.

At this critical juncture, Europe faces a severe test of its capacity for unity in diversity and solidarity as well as to effectively contribute to the creation of a much-needed fair, democratic, and resilient global governance. The EU is expected to play, and in fact can play, a crucial role if it is able to redefine and reinvent its multilateral orientation in an inclusionary manner. It could then help in building much-needed global governance and solidarity, which is a critical issue lacking in the present crisis, as noted by Yuval Noah Hariri.[11]

Endnotes

1 | On how multilateralism matters for the EU, see Atila Eralp, "Multilateralism Matters: Toward a Rules-based Turkey-EU Relationship," *IPC-Mercator Policy Brief* (Istanbul: Istanbul Policy Center, May 2019).

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9 | Marc Pierini, "The EU Needs a More Comprehensive Vision to Tackle Pandemic," carneigeeurope.eu, March 24, 2020.

10 | On the linkage between the international order and the European project during the present crisis, see Nathalie Tocci, "International Order and the European Project in Times of Covid-19," *Dahrendorf Forum*, March 30, 2020.

11 | Yuval Noah Hariri, "The World After Coronavirus," *Financial Times*, March 20, 2020.

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A Fumbling or an Enabling European Union: Envisioning Multilateralism in a Post-Corona World
10 p.; 30 cm. - (Istanbul Policy Center-Sabancı University-Stiftung Mercator Initiative)

ISBN 978-605-2095-88-1

Cover Design and Page Layout: MYRA

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