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## THE GEOGRAPHY OF PANDEMICS: THE EU AFTER COVID19

by

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## The Geography of pandemics: the EU after Covid19

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### INTRODUCTION

After the financial and the migration crises, the Covid19 pandemic represents a new major stress test for Europe, for its projection on the regional and global order and for the role it wants to play at the multilateral level.

Each of these three crises has affected Europe in different ways and through very different features, however with one common denominator: the transformation of Europe's social, political and economic geography, which, in the case of Covid19 has been of a 360-degree impact, with still very unpredictable medium-long consequences.

The economic-financial crisis represented a major obstacle after years of economic and political integration processes, with a very strong South-North intra-Europe divide. In this already delicate context, the migration crisis further complicated things by igniting public opinion on two key issues: the critics to the lack of humanitarian dimension in EU migration policy, which has led to the relaunch of the discussion around the need to reform Dublin; and the necessity to overcome the terrorism-migration nexus which has influenced the political public debate in many EU member states, becoming soon a successful electoral tool for populists and Eurosceptics across Europe.

All these developments, led to a freezing moment for Europe, stuck as well in Brexit difficult negotiations, which found itself unable to move forward towards more integration and more political dialogue. Then, the 2019 European elections seemed to re-open the case, with European citizens giving a clear mandate to Europe and its institutions for a more coherent and effective EU foreign policy in a dangerous, competitive world and for [the EU to come of age as a geopolitical actor](#). The new European Commission seized on the momentum, with clear geopolitical objectives and very innovative ambitious plan, like the New Green Deal, an unprecedented step for further European integration.

The Covid19 pandemic disrupted all these processes with an unprecedented impact. It interlinked the two above mentioned features, intra-EU divide and a more conscious public opinion, with three new ones: the way it affected health security, now considered as a fundamental priority; the way it hit all member states with no distinction; the way it obliged EU institutions and member states to start a new process of urgent strategic thinking for a more strategic Europe.

While the short term consequences of the Covid19 pandemic have already been analysed and processed by EU institutions and public opinion, the medium-long term are still very unclear and blurred. Much will depend on how Europe will be able and capable to re-adapt and transform itself at the domestic level, through new economic reforms and strategies, and at the regional and global one. The objective should be to be a reliable multilateral actor and as a sovereign competitor in the Great powers competition game. All these will happen in the current framework where covid19 has already reshaped the geography of Europe, economically, socially and politically.

## A NEW GEOGRAPHY FOR EUROPE?

### The social impact of Covid19: the role of emotions

On the domestic front, the social and economic consequences of the pandemic are already visible. Covid19 had a massive impact on European citizens, affected directly in their very personal lives at different levels. As at the [end of June](#), Europe reported 2,673,131 confirmed cases, only second to the Americas, with 196,835 deaths. The way Europeans will look at themselves and Europe will never be the same again, as well as the way they will look at non-European partners and allies. Emotions and fears played a determinant role during the covid19 crisis, mainly in those EU member states where the pandemic was among the most shocking events after the end of the Second World War. As showed in a new [ECFR report by Susi Dennison and Pawel Zerka](#) published on June 29<sup>th</sup>, Europeans are traumatized by the covid19 pandemic and during the hardest part of the crisis, namely the medical emergency one, they felt alone, vulnerable and abandoned by international partners. When asked who their greatest ally during the coronavirus pandemic has been, European citizens opted for different answers. This reflect the peculiarity of how Covid19 affected differently each member states as well as the influence that politics have in each polled member state. A common denominator in most polled countries was the feeling of abandonment by international allies: within a range between 22% and 30% as first ranked answer, European citizens felt that no one provided support during the medical emergency, with the highest rates in Poland, followed by Denmark, Sweden, Italy, Germany, France and Spain.

Going through the ranking, if Italy, as the only among polled countries, saw China as its greatest ally, Sweden, Spain, France, Germany and Denmark opted for the WHO, while Poland chose the EU: apart from Rome and Warsaw, at the Southern and Eastern borders of the EU, all other polled member states looked at European and International institutions for aid and support. The Italian and Polish case are very peculiar and confirm the diversity of perceptions across the EU continent, especially when we think at current domestic Italian and Polish politics: Italy has never looked at China as a privileged partner until the ruling 5 Star Movement decided to fully commit to the Belt and Road initiative; the Polish domestic political landscape governed by the Eurosceptic Pis would have never led to imagine Poles looking at the EU as key partner during covid19.

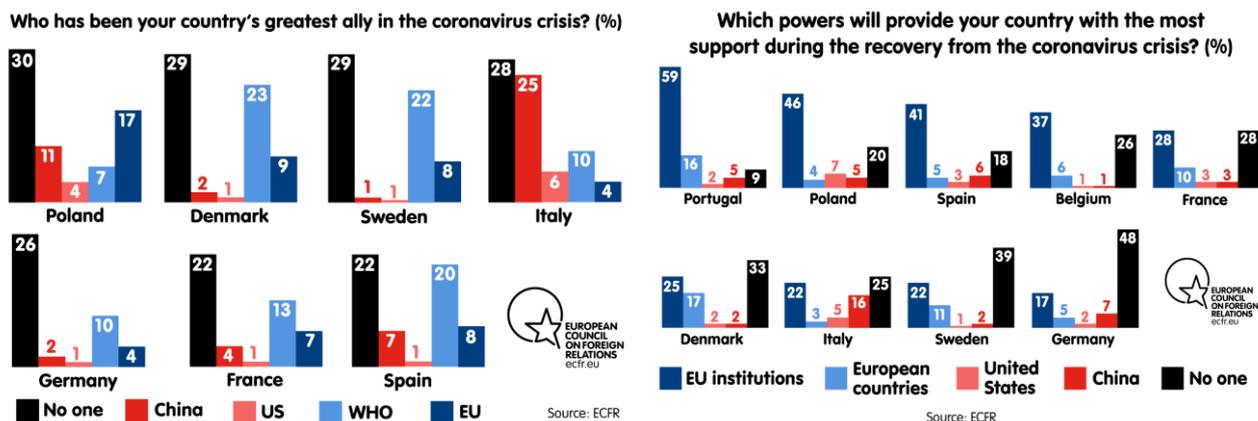
Apart from Poland, no other polled EU member state chose the EU. This could lead to think that this perception of abandonment by EU institutions would have continued. However, as ECFR numbers show, this is not the case: if in the emergency phase of the crisis the EU seemed to have failed, when asked which power will provide with the most support, the EU was back on the top of the ranking in Portugal, Poland, Spain, Belgium, France; and as a second option in Italy, Denmark, Sweden and Germany where, however the sense of abandonment seems prolonged with “no one” as first chosen answer.

A very poor performance is also visible when European citizens were asked about how they looked at other member states: no one of the polled countries chose its fellow member states as first ally in the recovery from the coronavirus crisis.

The same poor performance applies to Great Powers, notably China, Russia and the US, whose view at the eyes of Europeans have generally worsened, with some specific cases. China has worsened at the eyes of all Europeans with the exception of Italy, probably because of the outspoken Mask Diplomacy, and of Bulgaria; Russia worsened less than China with no significant change in perceptions,

probably due to the domestic difficulties the Russian government was facing in dealing with Covid19, which led to less international exposure.

The US instead played a very marginal role as an ally to be relied on, a quite distinctive result if we think at the role Atlanticism plays in European history, however reasonably explicable by the perceptions Europeans have of President Trump public role.



### A new economic plan for Europe to overcome the NEWS framework

In addition to social changes, the second direct effect of the Covid19 was the way it has obliged EU leaders to act with an unprecedented urgency to work on a new economic strategy for Europe. If the social consequences are already visible and easily confirmed by daily polls across Europe, the economic uncertainty and its medium-long term features are very unpredictable and blurred. Although uncertain, however, it is already clear that economy will play a major role for the future of the European project.

The current Recovery plan is ambitious and requires high level negotiation processes which much recall the 2008 financial-economic crisis times and the North-South strong divide. If, at that time, the most affected countries, the Portugal, Italy, Greece, Spain and Ireland, were under the light of European debate, what we face today is a 360 degree confrontation which involves all geographical components of the EU: from a North-South traditional divide, we have today entered into a NEWS framework (North, East, West, South) with very different, sometimes unusual coalitions of interests and views which makes negotiations harder and more unpredictable.

The economic geography of Europe is under a strong reshaping process which would hopefully see an unprecedented relaunch on the occasion of the 17-18 of July European leaders meeting: recovery, sovereignty, solidarity, solidity could represent the 4 pillars of the ambitious 750 billion plan and 1.100 billion pluriannual strategy around which European leaders should relaunch the idea of a new Europe, with a special focus on health, employment, digitalization, climate change, social, economic and the industrial crisis.

The very delicate equilibrium between loans and subsidies will be central to the ongoing EU negotiations and could lay the basis to push forward the "European Model" as President Macron underlined. Much will depend on the role the German Presidency decides to play and the results it desires to reach.

All those domestic economic dynamics could not be tackled without considering global economy developments which will affect Europe, if not sooner, certainly later.

Last April [IMF World Economic Outlook](#) -titled the Great Lockdown, speaks for itself: in 2020, we might expect a contraction of sharply 3% of the global economy, even worse than the 2008–09 financial crisis. If the pandemic slows down in the second semester of 2020, currently the best scenario, global economy might go back to a 5.8% growth in 2021. Among advanced economies as well as most affected Covid19 EU member states, Italy's GDP will contract of 9,1%, France's of 7,2% and Spain of 8,0% while the overall [Euro area](#) will contract of 7,5%. The current 2021 forecast growth of 4,7%, is a remarkable result if we look at 2019 growth rates of only 1,2%.

All these numbers, combined with the success or failure of EU plans for recovery, will be determinant in the upcoming years for the role Europe will intend to play as a geo-economic actor, vis-à-vis its closest economic partner, as well as the global and multilateral level where the competition between Great Powers is on-going.

### **Will Covid19 reshape European politics?**

2020 has been a busy year for European politics, with electoral appointments in several EU member states, many of which have been consistently hit by Covid19.

President Macron had to face municipality elections, with the first turn just at the beginning of the Covid19 crisis and with the second one when the emergency phase was almost over. The Greens result of the elections will likely have an influence on how the French president will decide to act internally and it will be interesting to see how he will decide to convey the Green message outside France and in Europe where Green parties govern Austria, Ireland, Sweden, Finland and Luxembourg. Polish presidential elections, postponed because of Covid19, will end up in the second turn planned for July 12<sup>th</sup> : Poland will be asked to make a strategic choice between keeping the current anti-European and traditional status quo embodied by the ruling PiS or make a courageous and pro-European choice which would nable the country to exit the current position it holds inside Europe, closer to Budapest while quite far from Brussels and Berlin.

Not involved in any elections, we find Germany, Spain and Italy, strongly influenced by national politics which might reshape their role in Europe.

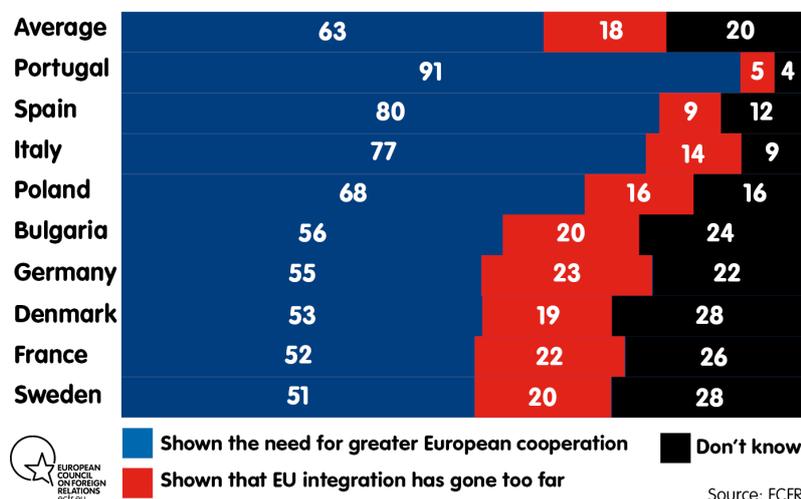
Leading the European Semester, Germany finds itself in a very delicate political momentum, with Covid19 second wave possibly behind the door, the Recovery plan dossier on the table but above all with almost at the end of Chancellor Merkel political guidance of the country since 2005, and with German Federal elections to take place in more than 1 year.

Spain, among the most hit countries both at the EU and global level, experienced a further domestic division and deeper political polarization. Prime Minister Sanchez found itself caught between a very vocal and pro-active role played in Europe and strong domestic criticism by far and center-right Spanish parties.

In august Italy will celebrate the first anniversary of Conte Bis government, the result of 2019 reshuffle which led the Democratic Party to replace the League in in ruling the country with the 5 Star Mouvement. The current two governmental allies share the same level of political diversity as the previous coalition did. An additional level of difficulty has been added by the way Covid19 affected the country and by the current domestic dynamics which makes it difficult to reach a clear Italian positioning on the Recovery EU plan.

The ways in which European politics will be reshaped by covid19 remain unpredictable and difficult to evaluate. There are still a lot of variables to be taken into consideration, included the role the EU wants to play in meeting its citizens demands and expectations. What is already clear is that, as analysed in a recent ECFR report by [Mark Leonard and Ivan Krastev](#), the crisis did not lead to any predominant surge, neither at the nationalist Euroscepticism level or pro-European federalism one. Although Europeans judged very severely and irrelevantly the EU performance during the crisis, at the same time they want more cooperation at the EU level to tackle economic recovery. With an average of 63%, Europeans feel the need of more European cooperation. If we take into consideration the most Covid19 hit countries, it is interesting to see how in Spain and Italy this rate reaches the 80% and 77% while in France only the 52%, confirming the peculiar attitude French citizens have towards Europe, as confirmed already in the past by the 2005 failed referendum on the EU constitution.

**How has the coronavirus changed your attitudes towards the EU? (%)**



There has been a lot of expectations around European 2019 elections and the way they would have reshaped European politics. The same expectations might arise once the covid19 will be over and national leaders and parties will have to test the results of their crisis management decisions and strategies. Much of these domestic developments will be influenced by how each member state will decide to align in Europe and which coalitions it will decide to build, with a special attention on the post-Chancellor Merkel Germany, the future German political leadership and the role it will decide to play in Europe.

## SIX CASE STUDIES: HOW BULGARIA, FRANCE, GERMANY, ITALY, POLAND, SPAIN SEE EUROPE AFTER COVID19

### BULGARIA: The light at the end of the tunnel

*Tania Lessenska*

The covid-19 crisis seemingly spared Bulgaria all across the board. Since March, the country has seen around 200 death cases, less than most EU countries as well as less than in neighboring Serbia and North Macedonia. Unemployment in Bulgaria peaked from 6,7 % to 9% between March and May and is now steadily stabilizing. However, economic measures taken by the government, such as splitting of 40-60% salaries and social security costs in favor of employers and zero interest rate loans by commercial banks for freelancers, were deemed inaccessible by many. While things seem to be slowly getting back to normal, the government has agreed to chip in more at least for the tourism industry, bringing the deal for them to 80-20% and it is still hard to predict the economic downturn from the crisis. [The OECD](#) estimates that in case of a second wave of the virus, the economy could shrink up to 8% in 2020 which would mean a contraction comparable to that in the 1990s. The government needs to prepare for this, and it cannot do it alone. More than half of polled Bulgarians in a [recent ECFR study](#), seem to think so as well. The crisis has shown that there is a need for more cooperation at the EU level. Although the general perception is that the EU left more to be wanted when it comes to how it reacted to the crisis, Bulgarians ranked 4th in ECFR survey answering that they expect the most recovery support to come from the EU. The European Commission has announced its "[Next Generation EU](#)" recovery plan, where Bulgaria stands to be the second biggest net receiver among EU member states.

In addition to this, 36% of Bulgarians are either a little or much less supportive of higher government spending. That means that the Bulgarian leadership needs to plan heavily on how to best make use of the recovery funds to secure the trust of the population. Even more so with the looming parliamentary elections in 2021. The two biggest parties, GERB and BSP, are practically neck and neck with a small lead in favor of GERB according to recent polls. However, there is still enough time before the elections to allow for a decent preparation in terms of an economic response to the crisis. The positive news is that being a state where reforms are still needed there are a lot of opportunities for improvement, innovation and progress, like in the field of digitalization, energy and education. ECFR's research also shows that during the crisis, 43% of Bulgarians have become a little more or much more supportive of delivering on climate change commitments. Such strong support for environmental reforms might come as a surprise in a country where the weekly environment protests were vague at best. Still, in reality, Bulgaria has put forward some remarkable environmentally friendly start-up ideas in the last couple of years. The question that remains is whether the leadership will manage to properly channel the funds and stimulate the economy to both keep it from retracting too much and invest sustainably with a long-term vision. Proper distribution of these funds will also act as a test of the capabilities of the government to reform industries and keep the process transparent. An important step when considering that there have been several major corruption scandals involving EU funds in recent years as well as the failure to shake off the EU's corruption monitoring programme that has been active since it's accession to the EU. While Bulgaria will not stray away from EU values and commitment, the government must get its head in the game before it's too late to catch up. In

early 2020, the government missed an opportunity to apply for ERM II, and once the covid-19 crisis started, it became clear that its indicators will deteriorate. Luckily, Fabio Panetta from the [European Central Bank](#) predicts that Bulgaria could enter ERM II by the end of the year. However, the government cannot keep relying on luck; it must put forward actionable and sustainable ideas of developing the economy backed up by robust leadership and decisiveness.

## **FRANCE: The make-or-break moment**

*Mathilde Ciulla*

« Whatever it takes » has been Emmanuel Macron's motto since his election as French President in May 2017. Whatever it takes to save the European Union and its common values, whatever it takes to make it live up to its responsibilities, and more recently, whatever it takes to ensure that the EU and its member states survive the Covid-19 crisis still standing. European unity and cohesion have been at the centre of the French European policy. The Covid-19 crisis and its management have reinforced France's leaders' belief that Europe is stronger together, and the next months will be instrumental in that regard.

If the pandemic showed that the national level is still relevant when it comes to crisis management, the EU also proved that it was present and supportive, even when it goes beyond its competencies. The EU institutions as well as the member states have drawn lessons from the financial crisis of the past decade, and reacted quicker. Bilateral solidarity signals have also been strong, and visible from the public opinion's perspective. For once, in a country where European affairs are rarely discussed outside of the elites circles, European solidarity made it to the headlines of the main outlets: France will never forget about its neighbours – Germany, Luxemburg and Austria – taking in patients when its hospitals were not able to cope, but also sending masks and medical supply as Malta did, as shown by ECFR's Solidarity Tracker.

Now that the hardest of the sanitary crisis has passed, the EU needs to look forward into the next phase, and be a positive force of construction. Expectations from national leaders, as well as from citizens, are high when it comes to economic recovery, and building on the many instances of solidarity, the EU needs to build a sense of community between all – rebuilding trust and showing decisiveness not to go back to “business as usual”. The German Presidency of the European Council starting on the 1<sup>st</sup> of July will be the first step towards it: now is the good moment, in French leaders' opinion, to boost the EU capacity to project itself, and to develop a long-term strategy. The agenda all depends on the rapidity with which the Recovery fund proposed by the European Commission following the Franco-German proposal in May 2020 is adopted. Other issues also are on France's leaders mind: the implementation of the Green Deal, the relationship with China and the Leipzig summit, and the reinforcement of its mediation role towards a resumption of the dialogue between Serbia and Kosovo. And with its EUCO Presidency coming in the first semester of 2022, France hopes that Germany will be able to launch the Conference on the Future of Europe in the fall, which has been in the pipe for almost a year now. It fits into Macron's agenda of bringing the EU closer to the French population, but also of giving new energy to the Franco-German engine that has been underperforming for the best part of its mandate.

The EU narrative, in the coming months, will need to find a good balance between more integration and listening to its citizens' concerns about economic recovery, unemployment or debt. The situation cannot go back to the way it was before the crisis when the EU inspired mainly distrust within the

French population, and if it does not seem to have reinforced it in the majority of the Member States, the pandemic won't have cancelled the growing Euroscepticism that we have been witnessing in the past few years. On the other hand, the EU, if it wants to reduce its dependence vis-à-vis the rest of the world – on medical supplies as shown by the pandemic, but also on strategic sectors such as defence, energy and cybersecurity –, it will need to continue the discussions Macron launched on European sovereignty. And if the crisis has made it even more relevant for sectors such as health and drew some of the more reluctant Member States closer to Macron's obsession, it seems to be an opportunity to be translated in these strategic sectors.

Macron has stressed it all along the crisis: the EU is at a make-or-break moment, and the next few months will be paramount for the way it wants to define itself – be it towards its citizens or towards the rest of the world.

### **GERMANY: Cohesion, solidarity, and strategic sovereignty**

*Rafael Loss*

With the coronavirus crisis, it feels like time is simultaneously speeding up and slowing down. So much is happening in politics – national debates on crisis management, complaints about the irrelevance of European institutions, China's exploitation of the pandemic for political gain – that the developments of just one day could keep newspaper columnists busy for weeks. The lockdowns and restrictions, though, have decelerated most other aspects of everyday life. Often, the highlight of my workday is moving from the kitchen table to the couch.

This covid-19-induced temporal illusion obscures the fact that Europe's response to the current crisis has come at remarkable speed. In less than four months from the emergence of the first covid-19 cases in Italy, France and Germany proposed a whopping €500 billion recovery fund, including an unprecedented one-off mechanism for taking on joint debt.

Germany's presidency of the Council of the European Union starting on 1 July could prove to be an inflection point for the European project. The stage is set for its revival: the new European Commission has shown ambition and, albeit belatedly, compassion amid its early failures in the coronavirus crisis; German Chancellor Angel Merkel, unburdened by her personal electoral fortunes, can focus on her European legacy with surprisingly little resistance from inside her own party to the Franco-German proposal; and French President Emmanuel Macron can re-establish France as an equal partner to Germany and thereby create political space for important domestic reforms. Moreover, with France set to assume the Council presidency in early 2022, the Franco-German engine might be able to sustain momentum for Europe's post-covid-19 recovery and transformation. On 18 June, Merkel outlined the priorities of the German presidency: climate change mitigation, digitalisation, and a greater global role for Europe. Preparations for the substantive discussions on these topics commenced long before Europe's exposure to the novel coronavirus, but like the Commission's European Green Deal and digital transition proposals, they provide a framework along which to build coalitions of member states, citizens, and other stakeholders for reform in the pandemic.

Such ambitious plans will require considerable effort to be implemented. While exogenous shocks like the coronavirus crisis can suddenly make possible what was previously impossible, some resistance must be expected. The "Frugal Four" have long rejected debt mutualisation. The Green Deal has angered powerful lobbyists from automotive groups to farmers' associations. And the

governments of Poland and Hungary object to “overblown concerns” about democracy and the rule of law in Europe. How China will feature in EU policymaking in the coming years is anyone’s guess – not least because of German reticence on the issue.

Nevertheless, an agenda that frames European purpose and power after covid-19 in terms of “cohesion and solidarity,” as Merkel did in her address to the Bundestag on 18 June, and that complements this internal dimension of European integration with an emphasis on “strategic sovereignty” in Europe’s dealings with the world, has a good chance of explaining to Germans and other Europeans alike why a return to the status quo ante covid-19 would not be possible or, in fact, desirable. That, instead, a more solidary and sovereign Europe is in their interest. This is no easy task; made only more difficult by physical distancing and the temporal illusion. But if Europeans squander this opportunity, they will meet the next pandemic – and any other future shock – as ill-prepared as they were for the novel coronavirus.

### **ITALY: Constructive solidarity, shared responsibility**

*Teresa Coratella*

The way the pandemic will be dealt by the EU will profoundly affect Italy’s economic, social and political spheres. However, the other way around should also be the case: the way Italy decides on how to contribute to the EU recovery plan will also impact the future of the European project and the role Italy will play after the EU pandemic.

The exceptional situation Covid19 posed to Europe is an extraordinary and unique opportunity for all member states, Italy included. The health emergency phase is behind our back, with Italy as a protagonist of a unique EU solidarity scheme which allowed the country to overcome the emergency. Looking at the future, and learning on past mistakes, the Italian government should put all its efforts to be part of the governance of the Next Generation Eu, not only a beneficiary.

As for domestic dynamics, today the EMS seems the most visible obstacle for the governmental allies, namely the 5 Star Movement and the Democratic Party, to reach a common position on the EU recovery plan. The first one, more reluctant on the use of the financial instrument by recalling a possible Greek scenario, with the second more open, however with the conditionality of a tailored and country-based evaluation of national condition and needs.

Italy has been at the centre, although under different perspectives, of the last three major crisis that hit Europe in the last 12 years: the financial-economic which with Italy as the 3rd-largest EU economy and the 8<sup>th</sup> by GDP in the world; then the migration crisis, which disrupted Italian politics and lead to the dramatic rise of populist and Eurosceptic parties after years of pro-European ruling governments; and now Covid19, with Italians affected in their very personal lives, with health replacing economy and migration as a major concern.

A post Covid19 Europe seen through Italian lens should be probably able to balance between solidarity among member states and solidity of its 27 economies; to promote its strategic economic interests, production chains and national champions when talking to China and, at the same time, capable of a constructive dialogue with the US, a partner which today is very different from what we used to know; to interact with major powers on all those key regional priorities and major crisis in the Eu closest neighbourhood by advancing its own interests, principles and values; to put forward concrete Brexit negotiations; to be driven by an invaluable Franco-German driven force and by a strong German Presidency able to include balanced compromises and views coming from 27 capitals;

to overcome the North-South-East-West divide, with each member states sharing responsibility and benefitting of the European project.

All these expectations, however, require a commitment towards a constructive approach to guide Europe out of the tunnel of this unprecedented crisis, a commitment which should be at the top of the agenda of Italy as well as of all other member states. The way Covid19 affected Italy as first and most hit country in Europe will always be a key component of the European common identity and memory. However, it is now time for the Italian government to take courageous decisions though shared responsibility; to change the game of narratives that Italy constructed about China and Russia being first aid suppliers during the health emergency; to advance concrete ideas and contributions.

Europe should remain the key pillar around which Italy might want to advance its own priorities and interests as well as to advance constructive plans and resolutions. As of today, this is not the case of Washington, whose approach vis-à-vis Europe and shared strategic interests is quite far from what we used to know. However, there are already some signs of going back to usual politics. As shown by [ECFR latest polls and reports](#), if, during the coronavirus crisis only 5% of Italians saw the US and the EU, with 4%, as most useful allies, after China 25% and WHO 9%, today numbers show different preferences and perceptions: to recover from the pandemic, 22% per cent of Italians expect to receive EU support.

During one of the hardest times for Italian history, Italians seemed dazzled by Beijing and Moscow temptation lights. However, they now want to be driven by the EU political guiding light.

### **POLAND: Between Archimedes and status quo** *Andrzej Mendel-Nykorowycz*

The European Recovery Fund proposal has been well-received in Poland, which is slated to become one of its greatest beneficiaries. Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki called the coronavirus crisis a “major turning point in the history of the Union” and lauded the fund as an Archimedean turning point for economic recovery. He also voiced support for an increase in the EU’s own resource via digital, financial transactions and carbon taxes, as well as by clamping down corporate tax evasion. This enthusiasm, however, does not extend to a deeper institutional transformation of the EU or pursuit strategic sovereignty. Instead, the government’s European policy is to maintain status quo where possible and stick to transactional politics.

Poland positions itself in the middle of current talks about the fund, arguing that it can, in Morawiecki’s words “integrate different points of views”. It has previously aligned itself with Southern countries, hoping to increase the size of the budget in order to consequently increase net benefits. The Franco-German proposal is largely in line with Poland’s preferences, even as disagreements with France over the inclusion of the fund in the budgetary framework and conditionality Poland is also closely linked to CEE countries, particularly other V4 members, which have expressed concerns about the structure of the fund. Morawiecki’s argument for the fund as “a one-time instrument”, motivated by the willingness to preserve existing agricultural and cohesion policies, is also a gesture towards the Frugal Four and its fellow travellers.

In other areas, there is little appetite for deeper changes. Placed on the EU’s and NATO’s Eastern flank and dependent on US military guarantees and contributing to European defence initiatives such as PESCO, Poland is anxious to avoid any steps towards European strategic sovereignty that might be perceived negatively in Washington. These considerations dictate preference for American arms suppliers, including a recent decision to buy 32 F-35 fighter planes. On a more positive note, despite

some initial enthusiasm, both the government and the general public looks impervious to China's charms.

The Polish government, conscious of the Polish reliance on coal and unwillingness to pay the political cost of cutting that dependence, will extract every concession it can, particularly in the construction of the Just Transition Fund, in exchange for accepting more ambitious climate goal – although it will agree on them in the end. It is also taking an even less conciliatory stance on asylum policy and is likely to use its veto on the issue to score political points at home.

The state of the rule of law in Poland, consistently undermined by the governing Law and Justice party, will remain a major point of contention. The Commission's rule-of-law conditionality proposals for EU funds, supported by several EU capitals and Members of the European Parliament, are likely to emerge as a stumbling block in. The government is likely to fight tooth-and-nail to block the inclusion of such provisions in both the recovery fund rules and the MFF, however the EU should weigh carefully if it is willing to overlook democratic backsliding in favour of smoother negotiations.

It should be noted that, according to ECFR's latest Unlock polling recently published, there is significant support among Polish citizens for greater EU role both at home and abroad. Poles look up to the EU to provide support in post-corona recovery. Majorities support more coordination at the EU level, a more common response to global threats and challenges by the EU and greater financial burden sharing in the coronavirus. Climate change remains high on the agenda. Supporters of closed borders and protectionist policies are a distinct minority. In a nutshell, when it comes to the future of the EU, Poles are bolder than their own government.

### **SPAIN: It's Europe's time to act**

*Carla Hobbs*

Spain is among the EU countries hardest hit by the coronavirus pandemic, both in human terms, with the third highest death toll after Italy and France, and economic terms, with the country now facing the most severe financial crisis since the civil war.

While the onset of the pandemic has served to deepen political divisions and polarisation at the national level, Spaniards remain united in their support for the European project. According to a recent ECFR poll, 80% of Spaniards believe that the coronavirus crisis has shown that there is a need for more cooperation at the EU level. This is quite an astounding figure given that the same poll revealed that 52% think the EU failed to live up to its responsibilities in managing the crisis and just 8% saw the EU as the country's most important ally during the pandemic.

Clearly, the EU's perceived mishandling of the crisis has done little to erode the unwavering pro-Europeanism of Spanish society. This staunchly pro-EU sentiment- partly linked to the historic benefits Spain accrued from EU membership including support for its democratic transition- has immunised Spain to the Eurosceptic political winds that buffeted other EU member states. Even far-right Vox eschews the anti-EU agenda of its continental counterparts, knowing it will garner few votes.

Now, with the OECD forecasting Spain's GDP to contract by 14% in 2020 and unemployment to hit more than 25% in 2020, Spain will be looking to the EU for a comprehensive response to the crisis which avoids reopening the north-south wounds of the 2008 financial crisis. For Prime Minister Sánchez- who described the crisis as "the most difficult moment for the EU since its foundation" - it is a matter of existential importance; "It's Europe's time to act. Europe is at risk."

This comes at a moment of renewed Spanish ambition on the European stage. Recognizing that Spain had long been punching below its weight in Brussels, the current government has been working to raise Spain's European profile, aided by the country's strong representation in the core European Parliament groups following last year's elections. As Spanish Foreign Minister Arancha González said upon taking office "Spain is back, Spain is here to stay."

What kind of Europe will a more active Spain push for? The government will likely continue to advocate for 'ever closer union' on a number of fronts, such as immigration and asylum policy, decarbonisation, eurozone reform, and social rights, in line with Macron's "Europe that protects". With regards to foreign policy, Spain will continue to advocate for a stronger European foreign and security policy, facilitated by the appointment of Josep Borrell as the EU's High Representative for Foreign Affairs.

Yet whether Spain will find a receptive audience and allies for its agenda remains to be seen. The Europe that Spain "returns" to is wholly different to the Europe of the 1990s when Spain enjoyed higher levels of EU influence, and even the Europe of five years ago- with Italy in a weakened position, the UK gone, Poland absent, and Germany hitherto a lukewarm player. Indeed, Spain may find that while it now has a place at the EU table, the menu is not that appetising.

Yet change may be afoot. While the Franco-German proposal for a €500 billion post-pandemic recovery fund may not be the leap towards the fiscal union that Spain champions, it certainly indicates a change of course for Germany. All hinges now on the recovery fund negotiations but Chancellor Merkel's defection from the frugal northern camp and shift towards solidarity and greater union in response to crisis is an encouraging signal for Spain. Provided its European ambitions are not again hamstrung by domestic issues such as the looming financial crisis, it is a timely moment for Spain to position itself as an important partner in shaping Europe's future.

## CONCLUSIONS

The last 3 months were initially perceived as an Ice Age for Europe, frozen in an unprecedented sanitary and economic crisis. However, after an initial EU quite guarded strategy, we have hopefully entered in a new momentum which represents a unique opportunity to move forward toward further integration. After the Dutch and French negative referenda, a difficult Lisbon Treaty adoption, the financial and the migration crises, we are now in a new milestone phase for Europe integration policy and process.

The way and effectiveness of EU management will much influence its external projection as a global power vis-à-vis a world which, despite Covid19, continued to running around both in Europe's closest neighbourhood, like in the case of the Libya crisis development, as well as far away like for Hong Kong.

Sovereignty and autonomy should be the two key pillars around which Europe could build its global strategy in order to adapt effectively to the ongoing worldwide changes. Specifically, Europe should find a new way to position itself in the middle of US-China rivalry by preserving its strategic actor role and defend its own interests; to deal with Iran in the light of very difficult Teheran-Washington relations; to assess the current relations with Russia and how to move forward in its Russian strategy; to strengthen multilateralism which underwent a major stress test during Covid19 pandemic.

Europe should also not forget those closer crises and dossiers which do already have a political, security and economic impact like the Libya and Syria crises. As well as those domestic dossiers which has been temporarily been frozen because of Covid19 crisis management. Among them, the Western Balkans accession process; the migration dossier and Dublin reform; health sovereignty; 5G and the consequences on cybersecurity; European security and defence vis-à-vis an ongoing US disengagement; the Hungarian and Polish democratic dossier; the challenge of digitalization; post-Brexit negotiations with the United Kingdom; a Green future for Europe.

In doing so, Europe should not forget those unique opportunities which are at the back of our doors like strategy-led cooperation with Africa; the reinforcement of already existing relations with North African partners; building strong and strategic ties with major Asian actors and powers.

The German Presidency has a great responsibility in these exceptional times. The responsibility to guide Europe out of the current tunnel as well as to lay those solid foundations of action on which the Portuguese and Slovenian Presidencies will continue to build on towards more integration and solidity.