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'Coronationalism' vs a geopolitical Europe? EU external solidarity at the time of Covid-19

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Abstract

EU member states have been discussing how to collectively deal with the socio-economic repercussions of the Covid-19 pandemic. As major debates continue to take place about internal solidarity, the question arises how the EU and its member states wish to support third countries, outside the EU, in tackling their health and economic emergencies. On the one hand, the EU wishes to become a geopolitical power, which requires that the Union and its member states step up their role and support on the global scene. On the other hand, there are signs of 'coronationalism' with some national political parties questioning EU external aid at a time when member states themselves are struggling. Based on expert contributions from a representative cross-section of thirteen member states, this report delves into the question of whether and how external solidarity has been part of the political or public debates in Covid-struck Europe. It finds that, for now, neither 'coronationalist' nor geopolitical ambitions dominate the relatively little politicized debates about international cooperation and development aid.



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‘Coronationalism’ vs a geopolitical Europe?

by Loes Debuysere

Since Commission President von der Leyen proposed her ‘Next Generation EU’ recovery plan at the end of May, the issue of internal solidarity has stirred some debate among member states. Southern countries heavily impacted by the pandemic are generally pitted against the so-called Frugal Four: Austria, Denmark, the Netherlands, and Sweden. While the former want to share the burden of economic recovery in the EU, the latter do not wish to become liable for common debt.

Internal solidarity is likely to remain high on the agenda, but the topic of *external* solidarity has figured less prominently in policy discussions in Brussels and member state capitals. External solidarity is understood here as the imperative to help third countries or third country citizens outside the EU through aid, soft loans or debt relief, for example.¹ Initially consumed by internal politics and attempts to achieve intra-Europe coordination, it was only from April onwards that the EU managed to turn its gaze outward. Since then, it has launched a number of initiatives and support packages (cf. Table 1) to tackle the health and socio-economic impact of the Covid-19 crisis in partner countries.

The Union’s external solidarity conundrum

The EU’s global response has so far consisted of a mix of redirecting existing aid, providing macro-financial assistance and organising a pledging event to support the production of Covid-19 vaccines. Little fresh money has been mobilised to fight the health and economic consequences globally. By redirecting existing funds under its ‘Team Europe’ response or through [financial engineering](#) in the new Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF), for example, the Union has been trying to play a global role at a time when most actions and funding are directed inwards.

Table 1: EU external solidarity initiatives since mid-March 2020

Team Europe	Most prominent has been the EU’s Team Europe package that was launched in early April to support partner countries worldwide in fighting the pandemic and its consequences. Rather than mobilising new money, the €15.6 billion package principally reallocates funds that were still left under, for example, the 2014-20 MFF.
Debt suspension, not cancellation (yet)	Forms of debt relief or suspension for African countries were not addressed in Team Europe, although the EU – like other G20 nations – agreed to suspend debt payments due from 77 of the world’s poorest countries in the second half of April. With French President Macron proposing some debt cancellation (rather than mere suspension) for Africa, European Council President Charles Michel announced in late April that he is in favour of opening this political discussion. The Council

¹ External solidarity is understood here in a broader sense than mere development aid. It also includes the provision of medical supplies, macro-financial assistance, soft loans, debt suspension/cancellation... That said, as the EU and its member states are the [world’s leading donor of ODA](#), development aid has traditionally been a core aspect of EU external solidarity.

	has recently expressed support for a coordinated international debt relief effort.
Macro-financial assistance (MFA)	The EU offered €3 billion of loans for macro-economic assistance to, for now, ten countries in the neighbourhood considered most at risk of a balance of payment crisis – Tunisia and Jordan in the southern neighbourhood; Ukraine, Georgia and Moldova in the eastern neighbourhood; and five Balkan states. The EU MFA should help them limit the economic fallout of the pandemic.
‘Coronavirus Global Response’	In response to a WHO call, the Commission hosted the Coronavirus Global Response in early May, an international pledging event to develop, produce and deploy Covid-19 vaccines and treatments to every single corner of the world. The EU eventually raised €7,4 billion, slightly lower than the anticipated €7.5 billion. Key pledges came from Norway, France, the Commission, Germany and the UK. Conspicuous by their absence were the US and Russia. After a week of persuasion, the Head of the Chinese Mission to the EU attended on behalf of China.
New MFF proposal and ‘Next Generation EU’	In late May, von der Leyen proposed the Next Generation Europe recovery instrument embedded in a revamped MFF. While funding for the new financial instrument that will deal with the Neighbourhood, Development and International Cooperation (the so-called NDICI) went up with 8% compared to the May 2018 Commission proposal, this is mainly due to financial wizardry in the form of guarantees and multiplier effects.

In fact, it looks like the EU is facing competing outward and inward-looking aspirations. On the one hand, the EU has vowed that it wants to become a global actor in today’s multipolar world. Indeed, von der Leyen’s “[geopolitical commission](#)” and HR/VP Josep Borrell’s hope for the EU to become a “[top-tier geostrategic actor](#)” have put this ambition on the agenda. While it remains unclear how the EU wishes to define [its geopolitical policy](#), the Covid-19 crisis has shown that forms of external solidarity – for example China’s mask diplomacy – can improve geopolitical credentials. On the other hand, some member states have become more politically and economically inward-looking in recent years under pressure of populist forces. And right-wing populist parties have [supported cuts to external assistance](#) over the past decade, arguing that those funds should be used to help citizens at home. This underlying trend could now turn into broader [coronationalism](#) as European countries face their largest recessions since World War II.

To stake stock of this conundrum in the Covid-19 era, this paper looks at current discussions and debates – or the absence thereof – about international assistance or development aid in 13 member states to see whether the geopolitical or coronationalist agenda is taking the upper hand when it comes to external solidarity. While not all member states are covered, the sample strikes a balance between North (Estonia, Sweden), South (Cyprus, Greece, Italy, Spain), East (Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Germany, Poland, Romania) and West (Belgium, Germany, France). It also balances out debtor versus creditor states, net contributors versus net receivers of the EU budget and populist versus political mainstream-led countries. The goal is to better understand which types of external support are being discussed in the member states, who takes part in these discussions and which third countries are targeted. This analysis helps us to reflect on the future of EU development aid and international partnerships.

Debating external solidarity in the member states

Our qualitative analysis of 13 member states finds that discussions about external solidarity play second fiddle to discussions about intra-European solidarity. **In most member states, external solidarity has so far stirred little to no public debate or political discussion.** Indeed, in contrast to the often-heated discussions about internal solidarity, international cooperation and development aid have remained little politicised. Even before the pandemic, development cooperation did not feature much in the public debate, either because most countries reached a broad political consensus about this policy or because some member states (Bulgaria, Estonia, for example) simply lack a substantial track record in development cooperation. The Covid-19 crisis seems to continue this trend, with most attention being directed towards the health and economic crisis within member states.

That said, **in some countries states right-wing nationalist political parties have publicly opposed external support.** This has been the case for the Flemish nationalist parties in Belgium, the AfD in Germany, populist-nationalist forces in Czechia, Lega in Italy and VOX in Spain. These parties have dismissed the EU’s geopolitical ambitions as inappropriate at a time when European citizens are suffering. This is in line with a [2019 Eurobarometer study](#) finding that EU citizens to the right of the political spectrum were less convinced about the effectiveness of providing financial assistance to developing countries as a means of bolstering EU influence in the world. Should these nationalist parties thrive during the upcoming economic recession caused by Covid-19, we can expect more politicised discussions about international cooperation and development aid in the future.

Leaving aside these coronationalist voices, however, **international cooperation and development aid have generally continued as usual, yet in a more Covid-19 tailored manner.** Many member states have made contributions to the UN, WHO or other international organisations to support the development of a vaccine. They have also provided bilateral support, often in the form of medical equipment, to their traditional development partners – Eastern Partnership and the [Western Balkans](#) for most East European member states; Africa for Belgium, France and Germany; Latin America and the southern neighbourhood for Spain; south-east Mediterranean for Cyprus and Greece. In some countries there has also been support for debt relief for some of the poorest countries. One notable exception here has been Greece, which quietly suspended most of its foreign aid.

Generally, **many of the larger member states have embraced external solidarity and refrained from pitting this practice against internal solidarity.** In France, no ‘France first’ slogans were heard, even when President Macron proposed an ambitious global agenda that includes [massive debt cancellation](#) for some African countries. German political parties generally agree that, now that Germany has managed its own safety, it should play a key role on the global scene. In Spain, despite being hit hard by the crisis, the government asked for EU external solidarity, while requesting internal solidarity at the same time. Romania continues to present itself as a team player and reliable partner, both inside and outside the EU. In an attempt not to appear too controversial, the Polish government has also supported and encouraged external solidarity, particularly for the

East. An important caveat, however, is that Poland used this momentum to undermine [Polish NGOs](#) by closing down important development programmes.

By contrast, in countries such as relatively Covid-free Czechia or Covid-struck Italy, politicians across the ideological spectrum understand that a plea for external solidarity would only alienate voters; they therefore shy away from a public discussion. **Smaller member states have generally been more cautious about external support.** In fact, in the Czech Republic, the government dismisses all forms of internal and external solidarity. Cyprus and Greece tend to be more inward-looking as they struggle with both Turkey’s interference and the aftermath of the financial crisis. Estonia and Bulgaria, both with a limited track record in development cooperation, are not particularly enthusiastic about the matter. An interesting exception is the Swedish government which, while being on the frontlines in questioning internal solidarity, has never questioned external solidarity.

Neither full-blown coronationalism nor a geopolitical Europe

Overall, the Covid-19 pandemic has not sparked a new wave of coronationalism in European member states regarding external solidarity, but rather enforced [a trend that was already there](#). Far right, populist and/or nationalist forces continue to be more sceptical about external solidarity, with some raising the issue publicly these days. However, despite the occasionally vocal opposition, development aid and international cooperation have continued as usual in the Covid-19 era, with larger member states particularly inclined to embrace external solidarity.

As is reflected in the EU’s Team Europe initiative or the new MFF proposal, this continued support does not necessarily mean there is a new or ambitious push for a geopolitical Europe through external solidarity. Little fresh money has been allocated to beef up Europe’s external Covid-19 response. It is also not unlikely that when the economic recession fully pans out over the coming months and years, cuts will be made to some member states’ overseas development aid (ODA) commitments, even in those countries that support Europe’s role of greater solidarity in the world. In short, low-key discussions about international cooperation and development aid continue for now, with neither the coronationalist nor the geopolitical argument winning the day.

Belgium: “Per corona infection, Morocco gets 1000 times more EU support than Flanders”

by Loes Debuysere

In Belgium, there has been relatively little debate about external solidarity with third countries, compared to vivid discussions about internal solidarity within Belgium and with other EU member states. That said, some discussion about external solidarity took place and have principally revolved around EU initiatives (Team Europe, Next Generation EU, the possibility of debt cancellation).

Belgium has so far spent 27 million euro on its humanitarian response to the Covid-19 crisis and on the development of a vaccine that will be available for all countries. This budget was later embedded in the Team Europe response. During the Foreign Affairs Council in early April, Belgian Minister for Development Cooperation, Alexander de Croo, urged EU foreign ministers to focus their global Covid-19 efforts on Africa. He has also shown willingness to discuss debt cancellation and additional support for the local private sector in Africa. This focus on Africa, and Congo more particularly, is in line with Belgian foreign policy interests.

Belgium’s global response, firmly rooted in the EU response, has triggered some public debate, principally by Flemish nationalist parties. One key incident happened when members of Flanders’ leading political parties – the far right Vlaams Belang and the Flemish nationalist NVA – denounced 450 million euro of ‘EU corona support’ for Morocco (cf. figure 1 and 2). Socialist MEP Kathleen Van Brempt in return accused the politicians of xenophobia and argued that the money in question was only a reallocation of existing funds under the EU Neighbourhood Policy. The polemic’s focus on aid to Morocco comes as no surprise in a country where Moroccans constitute the largest group of migrants.

Figure 1. ‘Per corona infection, Morocco gets 1000 times as much European aid!’
Tweet by federal parliamentarian Tomas Roggeman (NVA).



Figure 2. ‘EU support against Covid-19: Tunisia (250 million), Morocco (450 million), Flanders (6 million). Priorities?’ Tweet by MEP Tom Vandendriessche (Vlaams Belang).



Belgian support for Africa under the ‘Team Europe’-package has also been contested by Vlaams Belang, as a Flemish MP from that party argued that Minister of Development Cooperation De Croo had wrong priorities and should focus on Belgians. Similarly, a MEP from Vlaams Belang also argued that ‘rather than focusing on intra-European solidarity, the Von der Leyen commission wishes to use this crisis to realise its ambitious global role. But this is not the time for megalomaniac dreams.’

With Vlaams Belang gaining popularity in a recent poll in Flanders (up to 27,3%, almost 10% more than their result during the May 2019 federal elections), it is not unlikely that the debate on external solidarity will come to the fore more prominently in the future, despite the fact that most mainstream parties are committed to international cooperation. In this regard, a predominantly right-wing Flanders may also clash with a more left-wing oriented Wallonia. For example, while there has not been a mediatized debate on this matter, a number of left-wing parties, especially in Wallonia (PTB/PVDA, Ecolo, PS), have proposed debt cancellation for the poorest countries. It is unlikely that Flemish nationalist parties would easily agree on this.

Bulgaria: As poorest EU member, Bulgarians generally receive international support

by Antoinette Primatarova

External solidarity or, even less so, international partnerships in the (post-)Covid-19 world have not been a major point of discussion in Bulgaria. Still, the government demonstrated external solidarity, mainly by providing a new Bulgarian product - full protection gear sets for medical staff - to third countries. In early April, Prime Minister Borissov announced the donation of 100 such sets to Northern Macedonia. Further provision of protection gear followed in May to eleven other countries in the Western Balkans and Black Sea region, which is in line with Bulgaria's priorities for development policy and humanitarian aid. In addition to this assistance (amounting to ca. 325 600 EUR), Bulgaria contributed ca. 440 500 EUR to international organizations active in the fight against Covid-19.

Awareness of the need for universally available and affordable vaccines against Covid-19 is high. Media have eagerly reported about ongoing Bulgarian research projects that might contribute to European and international efforts in this respect and about the role of Bulgarian Commissioner for Research and Innovation Mariya Gabriel in the coordinated EU response. The participation in the Coronavirus Global Response Pledging Conference happened without any political debate about the appropriate level of the contribution (100 000 Euro).

The lack of a track record in development policy is the reason why there is no public debate on external solidarity. Bulgaria's involvement with the 'third world' during the Cold War was linked to the ideological aspiration to convert 'fraternal' parties and countries to communism. The ideologically motivated support for loss-making projects during this period was one of the reasons for the high indebtedness of the country in the late eighties. Bulgaria itself had to rely upon development and humanitarian aid between 1990 and EU accession in 2007.

2011 was a turning point with the introduction of a development policy (Decree Nr. 234 of the Council of Ministers). However, because of the international financial and economic crises, Bulgaria's EU commitment to achieve the level of 0,33 % of GDP for development policy by 2015 has been postponed to 2030 and the aspired interim level of 0,17 % for 2010 has not been achieved yet. Only a small part of the development budget is spent on bilateral projects.

Living with the image of the poorest EU member, most Bulgarians take for granted EU's internal solidarity and lack awareness for the importance of EU's humanitarian aid and development policy. According to the [latest Special Eurobarometer](#) on development cooperation (October 2019), Bulgarians "are amongst the least positive" about it. This reluctance might be related to lack of knowledge. Bulgaria demonstrates the highest number of respondents (up to 26 %) from EU28 that opt for "Don't know" as an answer to all questions regarding development cooperation.

Bulgaria cannot be expected to become an active player in the shaping of EU's development policy but there is some hope to raise public awareness for its importance through more and better targeted information.

Cyprus: Internal solidarity is a necessary condition for external solidarity *by Andreas Theophanus*

Health conditions and economic circumstances in most third countries have been worse than those of EU countries even before the pandemic. One of the questions that arises is whether the EU could play a role in addressing these challenges. Some would argue that the EU should try to play a leading role in international affairs offering external solidarity. Others, however, would point out that before investing in external solidarity, the EU should show internal solidarity first. Cypriot public opinion principally aligns with the second point of view. Furthermore, there is a broad consensus that internal solidarity is a necessary condition for external solidarity. Most Cypriots also think that before the EU assumes a major global role much has to be done to recover its credibility, internally and internationally.

Unavoidably, the record of each country and its own circumstances affect the discussion that takes place. Even before the Covid-19 crisis there was a debate in Cyprus about the potential role of the EU as an international actor. But this debate, including the domain of constructive engagement in third countries, has not been a priority; not because there is lack of concern for developmental aid to third countries but instead due to the perception that the Union cannot act as a major international actor in its current form.

During the accession negotiations polls indicated that Cyprus had the strongest pro-EU sentiments. This was also associated with high expectations that, in the end, did not materialize. Since 1974, Turkey occupies 37% of the territory of the Republic of Cyprus and pursues an ambitious policy of colonization. In recent years Turkey has been facilitating the flow of refugees and economic immigrants into the government controlled areas of Cyprus. The socio-economic cost for Cyprus is very high. Yet, internal EU solidarity on this issue has been lukewarm. Furthermore, in 2013, when Cyprus faced a huge economic crisis, the treatment of the Troika was harsh.

Cypriots learned the hard way that there is a huge solidarity deficit in the EU. They would like to see a stronger Union playing a constructive role at all levels, including engagement in the broader Middle East. Cypriots are convinced that such a course of action will have a stabilizing effect in the broader area and that also major European objectives and principles would be served. But they believe that in order to achieve these goals the EU must first deepen integration and also address effectively the internal structural problems and imbalances. This is a noble objective, but there is a long way to go.

Czechia: This Covid-19 environment is not conducive to external solidarity *by Christian Kvorning Lassen and Jan Kovář*

While global powers increasingly use humanitarian aid as an instrument of soft power during the COVID-19 pandemic, the question of external solidarity and support for third countries is mostly absent from the political and public discourse in Czechia.

In those cases where external solidarity is publicly debated, it is predominantly invoked by political actors that surf on populist, nationalist and insular waves, and predominantly

as a one-way street favouring the Czech Republic. As the focus during the pandemics is primarily inward-looking, these political actors are not only in favour of autarkic solutions and against intra-EU forms of solidarity, but also refuse forms of external solidarity and support for third countries, in particular the non-repayable ones. For example, these parties rejected support to China at the beginning of the pandemic and are generally opposed to any form of debt relief, non-repayable aid or even low-interest loans. Through the prism of zero-sum profit-maximization of EU funds – i.e. the idea that if other countries receive substantial funds, it means that there are less funds available for the Czech Republic – permeating the country's political and public discourse, the environment is not conducive to solidarity.

As enterprises and people in Czechia are themselves struggling to deal with various impacts of the pandemic, the current situation increases the credibility and legitimacy of inward-looking, 'coronationalist' solutions in the eyes of many. Thus, the incumbent populist government has maintained high levels of support among the Czechs. It is yet to be seen what will be the long-term effect of this on their popular support, but it meshes with the existing political agenda of siphoning off as many EU funds as possible while contributing as little as possible, making the Czech Republic recalcitrant towards solidarity even with fellow Member States.

In any case, the voices of those advocating in favour of external solidarity are so far mostly unheard in the mainstream debate. Most political parties avoid the topic of solidarity or charity, as they know this would mean political suicide. The only exceptions are various humanitarian NGOs whose voices are, however, limited to a small, like-minded bubble.

Estonia: Development and humanitarian aid remain off the public radar *by Piret Kuusik*

In the light of COVID-19 pandemic, relations and support for third countries have played no role in the public debate, in spite of Estonia's efforts to support its development policy partners during the crisis. Over the past months, Estonia has provided humanitarian aid to [its traditional development partners](#) – Ukraine, Georgia, Afghanistan, Belarus, Kenya, Ghana as well as Montenegro and North Macedonia. Additionally, at the [April's EU Foreign Ministers' meeting](#), Estonia advocated to support reforms in Ukraine and to keep paying attention to the Eastern Partnership countries. Thus, Estonia has been active in pursuing its development and humanitarian causes also during the pandemic.

However, this has not received much attention in the media nor has it played a substantive role in the public debate. This is illustrative of a general tendency whereby development and humanitarian causes do not receive much attention in Estonia's public debate and media coverage. Estonia's development policy is driven by three sentiments: top-down commitments through the country's membership in international organisations, Estonia's geopolitical interests east of the EU and altruism towards countries in the EU neighbourhood.

Following these principles, Estonia executes its development policy in a modest and targeted way (Estonia spends 0,17% of its GNI to development), which can be

celebrated as an achievement. However, solidarity with, and concern about, humanitarian and development causes in third countries is [generally low](#) among Estonians. Consequently, the development field is driven by enthusiasts, specialists and officials and not guided by public sentiment. Hence, development policy is a cause of the few and not a significant part of Estonia’s foreign policy debates and public discussion.

Currently, an extra layer of humanitarian activity takes place as Estonia has become a non-permanent member of the UN Security Council from January 2020 until the end of 2021. For example, Estonia’s President took part in a meeting on [the protection of civilians in armed conflict](#), which in normal circumstances would not be a topic that underpins Estonia’s foreign policy. The president argued in favour of maintaining access to humanitarian aid despite restrictions brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic and using new technologies to improve access to aid. As usual, this did not gain any media or public coverage.

France: Surprisingly, no “France First” slogans to be seen

by Pierre Vimont

So far, France did not witness major controversies on the issue of external support to third countries. The traditional nationalistic arguments against international solidarity are nowhere to be seen. No “France first” slogan in parliamentary debates, no political leader standing at the helm of a massive social protest against French assistance to Africa for instance.

This relative indifference from the French population comes as something of a surprise. In a nation where the far-right nativist movements are today faring rather successfully in opinion polls and in electoral competitions (in the first round of local elections in March, the *Rassemblement National* achieved some of its best scores in recent years), one would expect the issue of external support could to stir public controversy. Such political mobilization would have been all the more natural as the French government has been highly visible in its solidarity toward the outside world. With the EU Commission’s President and with the German Chancellor, President Macron is at the forefront of European efforts to ramp up international solidarity. In EU Council meetings, French representatives have right from the start been encouraging EU institutions to come up with a financial plan (“Team Europe”) in support of Africa. Individually France has been advocating the most radical option of debt cancellation for the poorest countries in Africa in G20 meetings.

How to explain this perception of a somewhat subdued nation in front of this usually confrontational issue? It has probably to do with the clear perception that we are all in this crisis together and that the spread of the pandemic outside of France could not just be pushed aside as irrelevant to our own difficulties. Another explanation could be the historically close relationship between France and the African continent which stills reverberates in French politics as a special case for public care. And finally, perhaps, there may be an undercurrent feeling of collective disarray which has disrupted traditional political ideologies and forced citizens and political leaders alike to think

differently when confronting this unknown virus.

To conclude, a sober note of caution may nevertheless be necessary. As the economic and social fallouts of the virus crisis loom dangerously on the European political horizon, difficult financial and budgetary choices will have to be made. In the midst of this hardship, external assistance may well become the first victim of the harsh decisions to be taken. And this downgrading of external solidarity could happen almost surreptitiously without any real public debate.

Germany: "Before you assist others, always put your own oxygen mask on first"

by Jonas Richter

To defend themselves against accusations of egoistically pursuing their nations' self-interest when unilaterally closing borders and imposing a temporary export ban on medical equipment in the beginning of March, German government officials like to quote the classic inflight passenger announcement: "Before you assist others, always put your own oxygen mask on first." From a German perspective, this applies to internal as well as external EU solidarity at the time of Covid-19.

When, in February, the virus still seemed far away, the foreign ministry [announced](#) to "stand alongside the Chinese population in solidarity", sending some medical equipment and offering to dispatch a number of virologists. Three weeks later, the aforementioned export ban entered into force.

However, once the most pressing crisis response measures had been settled at the European level, the government re-focused its outlook. It [welcomed](#) the G20's debt moratorium to help the 77 poorest countries cope with the Corona crisis as "international solidarity of a historical dimension" and promised to work for its complete realisation. Already by the end of March, German Development Minister Gerd Müller had called for debt cancellation, and in April his ministry presented an [Emergency COVID-19 Support Programme](#) for hard-hit developing and emerging countries, comprising around one billion euros from redirected funds of the ministry's budget. Müller also [suggested](#) that the European Investment Bank should provide 50 billion euros in stabilization loans and emergency aid for Africa and the Middle East. In early June, he [renewed](#) this claim, expressing to feel "ashamed" that not a single euro of additional funds had arrived there yet.

These actions have met with a broad level of consensus across almost all political parties. Opposition parties such as the Greens and DIE LINKE have both called for "global solidarity", while the FDP's only concern was a missing monitoring mechanism to ensure that funds released through the debt relief are effectively used to fight Corona. The exception is the far-right AfD party who, facing a remarkable popularity drop since the beginning of the crisis (from 14% in March to 9% in May 2020), has [called for](#) an immediate freeze of development funds, in order to reallocate this budget to combatting Covid-19 and its consequences at the national level.

According to a recent [poll](#) on German worldviews in times of Covid-19, 73 percent of its

population agree that “Germany should contribute more towards solving global problems than less wealthy countries, given that it is a relatively wealthy country”. Germany, having weathered the crisis relatively unscathed so far, is by and large a strong advocate of EU external solidarity.

Greece: No public debate, but foreign aid suspended for the time being

by Dimitris Katsikas

The post-2008 Greek financial crisis has heavily impacted the country’s efforts, [since the late 90s](#), to develop a comprehensive Official Development Assistance (ODA) policy. Fiscal consolidation led to a reduction of ODA’s budget from \$550 million in 2008 (0.21% of GNI) to \$200 million (0.10% of GNI) in 2013. While Greece has continued to meet its multilateral commitments, particularly to the EU, bilateral ODA has been substantially reduced, and following the refugee crisis, it has been [devoted mostly to in-donor refugee expenses](#). According to the latest figures [provided by the OECD](#), Greece’s ODA in 2019 amounted to \$308 million (0.14% of GNI). While this continues to be low compared to pre-crisis levels, it represents an increase of 11% over 2018, one of the largest among OECD countries. Most bilateral aid goes to the Balkans and the South-Eastern Mediterranean.

The Covid-19 crisis poses a new challenge for Greece’s ODA policy. While Greece has supported the OECD and EU statements about continued aid to countries in need during this period, it seems that the reality on the ground tells a different story. Given Greece’s limited fiscal space and serious weaknesses in its health and social policy capacity, as a result of the previous crisis, the Greek government seems to have adopted a ‘pragmatic approach’. It, for example, prevents supplies – particularly those related to health material - from leaving the country. According to an informal communication with an official, Greece has since the beginning of the pandemic suspended most foreign aid actions, with the exception of some very limited help that was offered following requests by diplomatic missions in countries with Greek communities.

The issue has not attracted any public attention. There has literally been no coverage in the media, which have focused on the lockdown and economic support measures. This is not surprising, given the little attention traditionally paid to such issues in Greece and the fact that a weak Greek civil society has only limited and ad hoc involvement in ODA negotiations. In any case, given the suffering during the previous decade and society’s focus on averting a new economic crisis, it is highly unlikely that Greece’s ODA commitments will become a major topic of public debate in the foreseeable future. All in all, for Greece, the pandemic will most likely further delay efforts to develop a substantial and effective ODA policy.

Italy: Yes to more international cooperation, but not external solidarity *per se*

by Eleonora Poli

With more than 50% of Italians having been hit economically by the crisis, and almost 75% having suffered psychological effects of social isolation, the issue of external solidarity or support is not part of the public debate in Italy. Yet, it should be, as it is politically relevant. According to a May 2020 survey on Italian foreign policy at the time of Covid-19, 68% of the Italian citizens are asking for more cooperation to fight global threats. This, however, might not mean direct support for external solidarity. It is rather a call for help.

The outbreak of the coronavirus has further weakened the image of the European Union. Not only are 71% of Italians deeply critical of the European Union because they believe that too little was done by Brussels to support the country during the emergency, but 73% of citizens are convinced that the Covid-19 emergency has demonstrated the complete failure of the European Union itself. In this respect, while the recent Commission’s Next Generation Europe Recovery Plan might change this perspective, there is still little trust in EU actions and there is little debate about what the EU can do externally.

In a general attempt to effectively respond to the unprecedented crisis and the gravity of the economic and social consequences, the Italian government and parliament have for long been trapped in internal dynamics. Recently, the Italian parliament has for instance discussed and supported the Proposal for a Decision of the European Parliament and of the Council on providing Macro-Financial Assistance to enlargement and neighbourhood partners in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic crisis. The majority of parliamentarians were in favour of this proposal, yet the far right Lega openly called for the EU to help national member states first.

Lega’s position reflects its own voters. Indeed, according to the LAPS Survey, 87% of Democratic Party voters, 67% of the Five Star Movement voters and 69% of Forza Italia voters are in favour of more international cooperation. However, only 59% and 53% of the Lega and Fratelli d’Italia electorates respectively support the idea. The lack of national debates on the meaning of international cooperation and the need for external solidarity is certainly embedded in political reasons. The urge to overcome the economic, social and sanitarian consequences of the COVID-19 crisis and to avoid sovereignist parties’ anti-EU propaganda have resulted in national institutions debating solidarity internally. Indeed, while the need for international cooperation is strongly felt by citizens, a call for external solidarity would probably fuel any sort of sovereignist discourse whereby the EU is allegedly helping other countries before Italy. This would unnecessarily raise anti-European sentiments, which are already high.

Poland: External solidarity is important, but the devil is in the detail

by Kinga Brudzińska

There are two main issues that have been dominating the political debate in Poland during the pandemic and external solidarity is not one of them. The first topic is related to tackling the consequences of the COVID19 pandemic at home. The second is connected to holding the presidential election in the upcoming few weeks. Nevertheless, external solidarity has entered the public debate in Poland in the early stages of the lockdown. This is probably because Poland wants to avoid a situation in which, as was the case in the aftermath by the migration crisis in 2015, it is accused of a lack of solidarity in facing joint challenges. Hence, today Poland seeks to project a positive image on the European stage in extending a helping hand to those in need. As a result, being the country in which the Solidarity Movement in the 80s was born, Warsaw claims to have a [duty to extend its solidarity](#) to neighbouring countries and to support their endeavours to tackle the consequences of the pandemic.

So far Poland has disbursed its external support through multilateral channels, in particular via contributions to international organizations (€ [600 000 in total](#), including for example 250 000 EUR to the UN Central Emergency Response Fund and € [90 000](#) to UNICEF). What is more, the country has provided bilateral humanitarian and development aid (around €[12 million](#)) to [50 countries](#), with special attention for the Eastern Partnership (foremost to Belarus, Ukraine and Georgia) and Western Balkans countries. The support varies depending on the needs of the third country. For example, in Ukraine or Belarus the aid goes to strengthening healthcare system, the social protection system and emergency services. In Moldova, it aims at supporting local entrepreneurs in transforming their activities, thus saving jobs. Planned activities include also purchasing protective personal (i.e. masks, suits, detergents) and medical equipment (i.e. respirators, medical containers, contactless thermometers, and antibacterial lamps).

Moreover, Poland has joined its fellow Visegrad Four countries (V4) at the beginning of April in launching an extraordinary [V4EastSolidarity Programme](#), which provides financial contributions (EUR 250 000) to the Eastern Partnership (EaP) countries. This aid looks to address the most urgent medical, technical, economic and social needs in these countries.

There is a general understanding among policy makers and civil society representatives that Covid-19 outbreak can result in a serious humanitarian crisis in developing and neighbouring countries. Therefore, showing solidarity and providing a helping hand is more important now than ever before. However, the devil is in the detail. While the government is promoting solidarity with third countries in dealing with the pandemic, it has cancelled in May 2020 the grant competitions in the following programs “Polish Development Assistance 2020,” “Polish Humanitarian Assistance 2020” or “Global Education 2020”. These programs would have enabled the Polish non-governmental sector to keep supporting third countries through their channels. Almost 60 NGOs signed a [letter of complaint](#) about this to the Minister of Foreign Affairs.

Romania: Avoiding the temptation of ‘coronationalism’

by Bogdan Mureşan

Unsurprisingly, the novel coronavirus crisis has led most member states to redirect their political focus and available resources towards managing the public health emergency at home, while devising effective ways to mitigate its political and socioeconomic impact. In spite of seeming a little hesitant at first, the European Union (EU) quickly came to grasp that effectively tackling the pandemic required not only European solidarity, but a real, not just nominal, positive synergy between national and supranational interests, translating into a coordinated and concerted crisis response. Romania, through its official rhetoric and concrete actions, was a firm supporter of this principle, avoiding the temptation of ‘coronationalism’ or unjustified economic protectionism.

The main public message, endorsed by mainstream media and consistent with the ‘pre-coronavirus’ governing programme, was that Romania is a team player and a reliable partner, both inside the European Union and for countries in its strategic neighbourhood. So far, the Romanian state has offered concrete aid to partners in the region, like the Republic of Moldova and Ukraine, and to Italy, one of the member states hardest hit by the outbreak, mainly by sending medical teams to these states.

The delivery of substantial quantities of medical equipment, medication and medical devices to the Republic of Moldova was described as a tangible expression of Romania’s preoccupation with the citizens of this neighbouring country. Also, as part of the commitments made at European level, the Romanian Agency for International Development Cooperation has provided financial support to an oncology centre in Ukraine to procure the protective equipment needed in preventing the spread of the virus.

Romania’s active role in expressing European solidarity with the Union’s partners was visible through the *rescEU* mechanism. Romania is the first member state to host this hub from which the Republic of North Macedonia and Montenegro, among others, have benefited so far, through the EU Civil Protection Mechanism. This was consonant with the official support for the ample financial aid mobilized by the EU for the Western Balkans and the Eastern Partnership countries in combating COVID-19 and for their post-pandemic recovery.

At the same time, Romanian diplomacy stressed the importance of maintaining the Enlargement Policy at the heart the EU’s relationship with the region, beyond incremental support initiatives for socioeconomic recovery. For Romania, this should include the adoption at a European level, in the upcoming period, of the documents representing the negotiating frameworks with Albania and the Republic of North Macedonia, following the decision to open accession negotiations with the two countries, in the midst of the pandemic.

In May 2020, the Romanian President announced his intention to send two medical aid missions to the Republic of Moldova and the United States of America (USA) and his request was approved by parliament. The transatlantic relationship and the strategic partnership with the USA represent a quintessential pillar of the Romanian foreign policy and this aspect has not changed during the pandemic.

Spain: The false dilemma of internal and external solidarity

by Eduard Soler i Lecha

It is much easier to build false dilemmas than to dismantle them. This is what happens when we are asked to choose between freedom and security or between economy and health as if there were no mechanisms to make it compatible. When dealing with the effects of COVID-19, EU leaders and societies may be invited to choose between internal and external solidarity. But this is a false dilemma. First of all, because internal solidarity increases the chances of a quicker and more robust economic recovery at the EU level, which will have a positive spill-over effect for neighbouring regions and international partners. Secondly, because reconstructing Europe will be much harder if, at the same time, the rest of the world does not recover, and if Europe’s neighbourhood faces social and political unrest.

Spain is one of those countries that has requested European solidarity and at the same time is asking for the EU to extend its solidarity to third countries. Spain is particularly concerned about the social, economic and (geo)political consequences of the pandemic in its Southern neighbours. Many countries in the Southern Mediterranean are vulnerable because of their dependence on tourism, oil exports, remittances and maritime traffic. The interest for the Southern neighbourhood extends to the whole African continent. There, Spain priorities converge with those of the most influential member states. An example of this is the fact that the Spanish premier, Pedro Sánchez, was one of the signatories of the letter advocating for a debt moratorium and to boost Africa’s emergency health response capacity.

The only voices that have been heard against this call for solidarity are those of VOX, the radical right-wing populist party, that already in March opposed any additional EU aid to African countries until the situation in Spain would be fully controlled. The same party, which advocates for a more restrictive migration policy, has also seized the opportunity to remind that, when facing the pandemic, Morocco proved to be able to seal its border. Apart from VOX, none of the other opposition parties have raised any concerns about the convenience of a reinforced EU solidarity – both internally and externally. This is in line with the large consensus on EU policies that have characterised Spanish political debates since its accession in 1986 and with the Europeanist feelings of the vast majority of the Spanish society.

Finally, one of the peculiarities of Spain’s priorities is the call for the EU to extend its financial and technical support to Latin America. This is coherent with Madrid’s foreign policy priorities, the social and economic links with those countries and its traditional role as one of the advocates of an alliance between the EU and Latin America at the global level in what has been often called a “community of values”. Latin America is now one of the epicentres of the pandemics and this may help Spain to pass on the message that the EU’s global response to the COVID19 should not ignore this part of the world.

Sweden:

Cracking down on development cooperation won't buy you votes

by Jakob Lewander

The framing of the Swedish government's international Covid-19 response follows a long tradition of Swedish foreign policy. Based on policies of free trade and international development and cooperation, Sweden's involvement with the world targets poor developing countries through the prism of the UN. On the EU level however, the ongoing debate about the EU Commission's recovery plan, which entails deepened financial integration and a potential raise of the Swedish budget contribution, has sparked resistance from the Swedish government as well as the opposition. While external solidarity through free trade and cooperation with the developing world continues as usual and remains a well-anchored policy, there is much more scepticism about intra-EU financial integration. Political parties won't win votes by cracking down on development money, yet they could win some by advocating frugality in the EU.

In Sweden, the political discussion about how the pandemic has to be managed has not been tackled from an international angle. Neither has the issue of EU external support been on the public agenda, which is normal as EU affairs are not widely discussed in Sweden, neither in the media or in parliament. Since the outbreak of the COVID 19 pandemic, the Swedish political debate has instead revolved around the nation-state. The process and articulation of the government's response to the sanitary crisis management was in line with the Swedish way of governance, building on strong independent expert authorities. Therefore, technocracy and civil servants rather than ministers and lawmakers have been at the forefront of Sweden's crisis management, presenting mortality data and statistics.

That said, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs has presented a global initiative called Trade for Health, which aims at securing supplies of health material by eliminating trade barriers. The idea is to take the initiative to the WTO as an EU proposal. This proposal is well in line with Sweden's strong emphasis on open markets and free trade through multilateral institutions and its use of the EU as a platform to promote those objectives. Also, as a humanitarian response, the ministers of international cooperation and climate have launched an economic support package to tackle deteriorating health and hunger. It consists of 36 million EUR that will be administered through the UN and WHO.

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