

Research Article

COVID-19 and its implications for the future global influence of the European Union

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Received: 24.11.2022; Accepted: 16.06.2023. DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.38154/cjas.58>

Abstract: On January 30, 2020, the severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS CoV 2) that causes coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) was identified by the World Health Organization (WHO) as constituting a Public Health Emergency of International Concern (PHEIC). With little information on how to diagnose, treat and safeguard people against the disease, countries around the world responded to the outbreak differently depending on the national context. As vaccines were rolled-out and economic measures were put in place, varied speculations started to emerge on the geopolitical implications of these measures for the European Union (EU). This paper examines some of the views from the growing body of literature on the future implications of COVID-19 on the EU's integration, and more specifically, on whether the EU is likely to emerge as the most influential powerhouse in the post-COVID-19 world. The paper argues that, based on the current conjecture, one cannot confirm the possibility of the envisioned future given the many hurdles that the EU must first deal with before being able to don such a crown.

Keywords: COVID-19, health crisis, global influence, European Union, integration, vaccine nationalism

COVID-19 ve Avrupa Birliği'nin gelecekteki küresel etkisi üzerine yansımaları

Öz: 30 Ocak 2020'de, Dünya Sağlık Örgütü (WHO), 2019 koronavirüs hastalığına (COVID-19) neden olan şiddetli akut solunum sendromu koronavirüs 2'nin (SARS CoV 2), Uluslararası Öne Sahip Halk Sağlığı Acil Durumu (PHEIC) oluşturduğunu deklare etmiştir. Hastalığa nasıl teşhis konulacağı, onun nasıl tedavi edileceği ve ondan nasıl korunulacağı konusunda çok az bilgiyle, dünyanın dört bir yanındaki ülkeler, ulusal kontekstlerine bağlı olarak, salgına farklı tepkiler vermiştir. Aşılar yaygınlaştıkça ve ekonomik önlemler devreye girdikçe, bu önlemlerin Avrupa Birliği (AB) üzerindeki jeopolitik etkileri hakkında çeşitli spekülasyonlar ortaya çıkmaya başlamıştır. Bu makale, COVID-19'un AB'nin entegrasyon süreci üzerindeki gelecekteki etkilerine ilişkin genişleyen literatürdeki bazı görüşleri değerlendirmekte ve daha spesifik olarak AB'nin COVID-19 sonrası dünyada en etkili güç merkezi olarak ortaya çıkıp çıkmayacağı konusunu incelemektedir. Makale, AB'nin böyle bir tacı takmadan önce, üstesinden gelmesi gereken birçok engel göz önüne alındığında, tasavvur edilen geleceğe ulaşmasının pek de mümkün olamayacağını savunmaktadır.

Anahtar kelimeler: COVID-19, sağlık krizi, küresel etki, Avrupa Birliği, entegrasyon, aşı milliyetçiliği

Introduction

The progress made since the development and rollout of COVID-19 vaccines in some countries has led scholars to start thinking about what the post-COVID-19 world will look like. While much of what is being discussed relates to the revamping of the global economy (IMF 2020), surprisingly, not much is being said on how to restore and sustain democracy after it has been adversely affected by COVID-19 (Afsahi et al. 2020; Young 2020), or countering what Svoboda (2019) refers to as the “executive takeover” in which “democratically elected incumbents seek to undermine the political opposition by implementing a series of discrete actions that gradually dismantle the democratic checks on the executive” (Rapeli and Saikkonen 2020, 28). Such moves have been seen in a number of European countries (especially Hungary and Poland) as one of the consequences of the emergency COVID-19 containment measures (Young 2020).

Of particular note in literature is the number of scholars speculating on the implications of the COVID-19 pandemic for the future international order resulting from geopolitical power shifts (Cont 2020; El-Assir, Suckling and Jackson 2020; Heisbourg 2020). Others have gone even further, predicting a new geopolitical position for the EU through its emergence from the pandemic as one of the most influential global powerhouses (Bergsen 2020; Roloff 2020). Although that appears promising, how evidently the EU used the COVID-19 pandemic to reorganize itself to assent to this prospected position lacks clarity (Alcaro and Tocci 2021; Dworkin 2021). In response to these growing assertions and aspirations, this paper argues that, given the response of the EU to the pandemic in its dispatch of vital goods around the globe in the fight against COVID-19, it may be a little premature to predict its emergence as the most influential global actor (Gaub and Boswinkel 2020; Higgott and Van Langenhove 2020). It would, therefore, seem more logical to focus on the need of the EU to carry out the necessary house-cleaning associated with the various actions taken in response to the pandemic and its subsequent efforts to rescue its economy and the livelihoods of its people. Compounding this issue, there is growing discontent among populists and nationalists who believe Brussels underperformed in its response to the pandemic, meaning the EU will also likely face challenging political questions regarding its legitimacy.

This article adopts a documentary review approach, referred to by Bowen (2009) and Frey (2018) as a “documentary analysis”, or by Kuckartz (2014) as a “textual analysis”. My own view of this approach concurs with that of Bowen (2009, 27), as “a systematic procedure for reviewing or evaluating documents – both printed and electronic (computer-based and Internet-transmitted) material”, considering it to be the most appropriate method for the examination of the various assertions voiced regarding the possible outcomes of the COVID-19 pandemic for the EU. The rest of the paper is organized as follows. The following section presents a review of literature discussing the likelihood of COVID-19 accelerating the political disintegration of Europe, followed by a section presenting a counter discussion of the possibility of the pandemic spurring the transformation of the EU into the most influential global actor. In the next section, which questions the arguments in favor of the EU emerging from the pandemic as the most influential global powerhouse, I articulate how the EU lost the global vaccine race, and how the behaviors of most of the political elites, especially those who resorted to authoritarianism under the façade of coronavirus containment, and the stain of EU’s vaccine nationalism, inhibited the swift sail of its most celebrated “normative power” norm. The concluding section offers some suggestions on possible paths for the EU in the future.

COVID-19 and Europe's future political disintegration

In Europe, the COVID-19 crisis spurred heated debate related not only to its effects on health and the economy, but also its implications on the future of European integration politics. The crisis even led to a re-examination of Jean Monnet's (1888-1979) famous dictum "Europe will be forged in crises". Thus, since the COVID-19 outbreak, it can be said that "there is a recurring refrain in EU history that crises are ubiquitous and good for European integration – that at pivotal moments, crises have been catalysts for major breakthroughs and for advancements of the integration process" (Dinan, Nugent and Paterson 2017, 9). More and more of Europe's policymakers are coming to view the COVID-19 crisis as a catalyst for the cementation of Europe's integration (Busse et al., 2020; Ladi and Tsarouhas 2020; Leigh 2020; Schmidt 2020, 1191), though not all agree, as others (Jones 2020; Salvati 2021) consider believe COVID-19 will stimulate the political disintegration of Europe. That said, how to gauge the view that the COVID-19 crisis will accelerate Europe's political disintegration remains challenging. Given the fact that COVID-19 hit Europe at a time when cohesion in the bloc was at its strongest in a decade (Busse et al. 2020), it can serve as a benchmark for gauging such predictions.

Previous studies put forward two major positions with regard to whether or not the COVID-19 crisis will accelerate Europe's political disintegration, framed by Leigh (2020) as the "relaunch" and "disintegration" hypotheses, or more simply, the "relaunch-narrative" and "disintegration-narrative". These two positions provide a framework for the organization of the arguments on whether or not the COVID-19 crisis will spur Europe's political disintegration. To begin with, those who embrace the disintegration narrative base their arguments on Europe's failure to respond effectively to the COVID-19 crisis, underlining the disarray among the European states in their responses to the pandemic and the pursuit of their own strategies with no consideration of any other European nation (Leigh 2020). According to the proponents of the disintegration hypothesis, this is evidence of how divided European nations deal with critical issues, where coordinated action would have been a more successful approach. Because of this, "there is greater uncertainty around the pandemic's effects on individuals' attitude towards European cohesion" (Busse et al. 2020, 25). As a result, analysts wonder how Europe can boast about being united when its actions show just how divided it is. The way they see it, the COVID-19 crisis will accelerate Europe's political disintegration having shaken three key areas that are core to Europe's integration, namely: "Schengen (border closures); the state aid rules, which are meant to ensure fair competition; and the Stability and

Growth Pact, being the core set of macroeconomic governing Eurozone members” (Leigh 2020).

Another often-cited piece of evidence for the disintegration is the collapse of Europe’s common normative value of democracy. As posited by Goetz and Martinsen (2021, 1004), “COVID-19 has, thus, posed a fundamental challenge to European liberal democracy in two basic respects: it has called into question democratic principles; and it has called into question democratic performance, understood as the ability of liberal democracies to respond appropriately to the crisis.” Other manifestations of this during the peak of the COVID-19 crisis included the increase in executive take-overs, and the limited parliamentary oversight and undemocratic behaviors of some EU members, particularly Poland and Hungary (Krastev and Leonard 2021). These raised questions about the legitimacy of the EU, and highlighted just how divided the EU is when it comes to challenging issues. Of particular note was the mishandling of the procurement and distribution of COVID-19 vaccines, with individual countries being pushed to seek their own means of getting their people vaccinated, thus highlighting the lack of a common procedure and a unified approach to vaccination, and further strengthening the argument that the COVID-19 crisis will accelerate Europe’s political disintegration (Jones 2020; Salvati 2021).

Those advocating the relaunch narrative suggest that Europe will become even stronger as a result of the pandemic, believing the COVID-19 crisis has accelerated the political integration of Europe. They follow Jean Monnet’s dictum that “Europe will be forged in crises”, and while acknowledging the weakness demonstrated by the bloc in handling the COVID-19 crisis, they underline a number of issues that stand as proof that Europe’s political integration has increased as a result of the COVID-19 crisis (Celi, Guarascio and Simonazzi 2020; Overbeke and Stadig 2020). To begin with, they argue that COVID-19 further solidified the integration of European countries by raising the status of health issues as a concern of the EU, with the proposed establishment (under the health union agenda of the EU Commission) of the European Health Emergency Response Authority (EHERA), responsible for coordinating the EU’s response to health issues (EUC 2020; Schmidt 2020) – an unprecedented move in the history of the EU and its predecessor. Second, the launch of the EU Recovery Fund, known also as the “Next Generation EU” (Becker and Gehring 2022; Ladi and Tsarouhas 2020; Fabbrini 2023; Tesche 2022), which has brought EU countries closer together to address the common economic challenges associated with the pandemic. The common approval of the fund stands as evidence of the willingness of the EU members to forego their individual interests for the greater benefit of the EU. The position taken by Germany, for example, was particularly

remarkable and unexpected (Celi, Guarascio and Simonazzi 2020). This, together with the EU's proposed "Support to mitigate Unemployment Risks in an Emergency (SURE)" seem to have debunked the claim that the European nations would drift apart in their efforts to deal with the pandemic (Becker and Gehring 2022; Fabbrini 2023; Leigh 2020; Tesche 2022). Third, the COVID-19 crisis has compelled France and Germany to work together more closely, thus reviving the long-neglected Franco-German cooperation that was considered the "locomotive" of European integration (Becker 2022; Ferrara and Kriesi 2022, 1368; Ladi and Tsarouhas 2020, 1047-1049; Leigh 2020), breathing new life into the EU and reenergizing the integration trajectory.

More importantly, the COVID-19 crisis served to silence many of the Eurosceptic populists. Going against expectations, the COVID-19 crisis did not further the anti-EU agenda as a result of the mitigation measures, such as travel bans and lockdowns seriously weakened migration rates one of the agendas that have always served as a stepping-stone for anti-EU campaigns. According to Busse et al. (2020, 18), "despite the crisis, attitudes towards the EU seem to have improved in 2020 ... [And if one is to go by the] ECFR April 2020 poll ... 63 per cent of respondents agreed that there was a need for more cooperation at an EU level" in the majority of the EU member states, supporting the relaunch narrative.

COVID-19 and the resulting global position of the EU

Crises, and their implications on the socio-political and economic well-being of societies, have long attracted the attention of scholars and social analysts (Walby 2022), as "throughout history major crises have provided turning points in social and political organization, altering economic fundamentals, reshuffling alliances, shifting narratives and reconfiguring public authorities" (Cotula 2021, 105235-1). Political economists, for instance, have raised the question of "whether these economic crises are always followed by political crises" (Solimano 2005, 4) claiming that in the past years, "there has been much debate about the place of crises, and crisis narratives, in restructuring public policies" (Cotula 2021, 105235-1). There are also important questions and reflections to be raised with regard to the implications of COVID-19, as though it began as a health crisis, it soon transformed into an economic and political crisis in many regards. Similarly, examining the implications of COVID-19 on European societies is equally important, since COVID-19 proved to be challenging beyond expectations not only for the poorer and developing nations, but also the rich and advanced nations. Even in the more advanced integrated regions, such as Europe and its Schengen zone, the case was the same (Christensen and Lægveid 2020; Overbeke and Stadig 2020).

The pandemic revealed the limits of the EU's capacity to respond and manage crises of this nature. While the best approach would have been to work together and come up with the most appropriate means of curbing a challenge of such magnitude, most of the approaches taken were nation-specific and were largely confined to within national borders. The consequences of such an approach would likely be varied, and would raise the need for diverse exit strategies (Overbeke and Stadig 2020). The pandemic led to the link between the scientific communities and practitioners being questioned, and all were compelled to come up with a way of working together. The pandemic further revealed the limits of governmental reliance on experts, as well as the implications of a political desire to influence their findings (Cole, Dutheil and Baker, 2021). Similarly, it proved that, although institutional arrangements and rule-based decision-making are of greater importance, still, in times of emergencies like the COVID-19 crisis, a complex institutional infrastructure that abides by rules and procedures may have some limitations, as was evidenced by the way the EU dealt with the pandemic.

The EU's weaknesses were largely internal and structural, and emanated from what Christensen and Læg Reid (2020) and Lodge and Wegrich (2014) refer to as a "lack-of governance capacity" or "limited governance capacity", which hindered the efforts to manage the crisis effectively. It was only when it diverted from its strict adherence to the rules and principles, such as the financial regulations, that it was able to deliver in terms of funding to back up the worst-hit economic sectors. According to Bergsen (2020, 134), the EU was able to alleviate the severity of the economic impact of COVID-19 "during the first half of 2020 [when] the brakes on fiscal policy were released to deal with the crisis, and this included Germany letting go of its balanced-budget target". This was a significant turnaround that would previously have been hard to imagine given the way Germany historically approached issues of fiscal policy within the EU. It has been argued, however, that this was possible because "the impact of COVID-19 was not a result of bad governance, hence it had big difference with the Euro crisis" (Roloff 2020, 32), implying that the COVID-19 pandemic was a novel crisis that called for new solutions.

Despite all the challenges, there are still speculations among scholars that the EU is in a position to emerge from the pandemic as the most influential global power. For example, a European Parliament report entitled "The geopolitical implications of the COVID-19 pandemic" refers to the COVID-19 pandemic as a game changer, and similarly, Bergsen (2020, 131) predicts that the COVID-19 crisis can serve as "a turning point" for Europe. These predictions seem to suggest that the COVID-19 pandemic is likely to trigger change, although there

is a lack of consensus on how such a change will be realized. For instance, El-Assir, Suckling and Jackson (2020) put forward two possible scenarios for the future of the EU in the post-COVID-19 world, one predicting a rebalancing of the global order, and the other describing a fragmented global order. With regard to the former, they predict cohesion within the EU, but with continued policy challenges, while under the fragmented global order scenario in the latter, they predict the division of the EU into smaller blocs and countries. They base their scenarios on a historical study of crises in the 21st century, beginning with the 2001 terrorist attacks on the United States, which had significant impacts on global security, the 2003 SARS pandemic that resulted in the rapid industrialization of several Asian Tigers, and the 2008 Eurozone financial crisis, which led to the emergence of populists and anti-EU movements.

Bergsen's predictions for the future of the EU in the post-COVID-19 era are influenced by "Modern Monetary Theory (MMT)" – a school of economic thought that posits that inflation is the only real constraint on government spending, and, thus, that in the current low-inflation environment there is space to significantly increase such spending (Bergsen 2020, 134). This, and the fact that the EU eased its fiscal policy by allocating stimulus capital to affected sectors, signifies that the changes in the relationship between the state and economy predict a changed future in terms of the politico-economy of the EU. As he puts it, "The COVID-19 crisis and its economic implications have the potential to lead to a shift in the political economy or the macroeconomic regime in Europe following over a decade of crises ... [thus] it is possible that the current crisis will provide the trigger, but significant political obstacles remain, not least the lack of political representation of many of these ideas in Europe" (Bergsen 2020, 136). He provides no concrete evidence to support this prediction beyond the change in fiscal policy, raising the million-dollar questions, "To what extent are fiscal policies able to bring about a U-turn in European politics, given the fact that the approach has placed debts on all EU members? Is this what will make them stronger? With debts to commercial banks, how will the EU be able to emerge as the most influential global powerhouse? This brings us to the next scholar who predicted a powerful EU in the post-COVID-19 world.

Roloff (2020) takes this debate a step further, arguing that the EU can "seize the opportunity and gain more influence on the global level if it uses its strength as a manager of interdependencies by rulemaking and rule shaping as well as exercising its influence as a central node in transnational networks" (Roloff 2020, 26). He thus seems to visualize the COVID-19 pandemic as an opportunity for Europe/EU to capitalize on its historically accumulated and rich experience and exert its influence in global politics, noting the lack of global leadership in the

response to COVID-19. Of particular note, he points to the rapid response of the EU especially to the easing of fiscal regulations, and the provision of fiscal stimulus to the sectors affected by COVID-19 and those who lost their jobs as a result. He then proposes three crucial areas in which the EU can be empowered in its post-COVID-19 exit strategies, namely: defending democracy in the EU and beyond, closer cooperation in addressing climate change and progressing the move towards lower emissions, and further progress on EU defense integration (Roloff 2020, 34).

It is hard to see, however, how such action could support the EU's emergence as the most influential global power, given the ease with which democracy was given a back seat in favor of containment measures to curb the pandemic in some EU members. Furthermore, there is clear evidence that efforts of the EU to bring a state of normality back to its economy are contributing to climate change after the months of economic lockdowns and travel bans led to an improvement in air quality around the world (Zinke 2020). Finally, defending integration is not that easy given the different opinions of how the EU performed in its response to the pandemic (Celi, Guarascio and Simonazzi 2020; Wolff and Ladi 2020). As such, even his conclusion that the "EU has shown its capability to react adequately to the existing crisis posed by COVID-19" (Roloff 2020, 35) is debatable, as no EU member state responded to COVID-19 based solely on the EU guidelines. Those that outpaced the degree of response in the shortest time, such as Norway (Christensen and Lægreid, 2021), or those that performed well in terms of the vaccine rollout, such as the United Kingdom, managed to do because they were not under the leadership of EU.

Missed opportunities in the EU's post-COVID-19 prospects

Since the World Health Organization (WHO) declared COVID-19 a global public health emergency of international concern (PHEIC) on January 31, 2020, the EU and its members were often listed by the leading global media among the regions worst hit by the pandemic. According to WHO data listed on the Statista webpage on March 1, 2021, by February 28, 2021, the European region had become the second worst-hit region after the Americas, with a total of 38,674,452 and 861,803 confirmed cases and deaths, respectively (Statista 2021). The vaccine rollout in a large number of European nations, and in the EU zone in particular, was reported to be lagging behind that of many other developed nations (Abboud 2021; Breen and Schiffing 2021), and a large number of its inhabitants were very skeptical of the vaccines (Gomez 2021; Lazarus et al. 2021; Schwarzsinger et al. 2021). All the above make it somewhat difficult to predict the emergence of the EU as the most influential global powerhouse in the post-

COVID-19 world, and I go on to question this speculation based on three factors: the fading image of the EU in the global supply of personal protective equipment (PPE), the absence of the EU in the global vaccine development efforts and the stains of vaccine nationalism in the bloc; and the authoritarian approaches of some of the EU members.

Fading image of the EU in the global supply of PPE

The COVID-19 outbreak spurred a massive spike in global demand for PPE, especially for the most vulnerable groups, such as the medical workers on the frontline of the fight against the pandemic. Most of the EU countries were taken by surprise, being unprepared to meet even their own domestic supply, let alone contribute to the global chain supply. Worse still, even the most basic medicines used in the treatment of COVID-19 were obtainable within the region. France was the only country with factories capable of manufacturing facemasks, although its production capacity could not match with the demand, with a capacity of 170 million facemasks a year compared to the 200 million a day achieved by China. The EU was thus unable to contribute to meeting the global demand (ADB 2020). As noted in one study, "The Belgian federal government has traditionally held stocks of personal protective equipment (PPE) ... when COVID-19 hit Belgium, this meant health services quickly ran low on stocks of PPE, leaving the government scrambling to find suppliers on the international markets" (Overbeke and Stadig (2020, 311). The dependence on the international market was evidence of just how unprepared European industry and its factories were. It was China whose factories were able to step up to meet the global demand for PPE, representing a missed opportunity for Europe with an estimated value of US\$2.5 billion in 2018 (ADB 2020) and diminishing the EU's chance of becoming a leading supplier of PPE.

EU's absence from the global vaccine supply race

The COVID-19 pandemic took its toll not only on the global economy and supply chains, but also diplomacy. There is a likelihood that most diplomatically influential countries and regions will lose, while those that one may not first think of may gain. The way vaccines were developed and procured may also have contributed to the loss of global status for the EU, and the situation is reminiscent of Fazal's (2020, E78) observation that the "recent history of twenty-first century infectious disease outbreaks suggests a possible move away from health diplomacy with global participation. COVID-19 provides numerous examples, from widespread criticism of the World Health Organization to

increased bilateral health aid and the creation of a regional vaccine initiative.” This observation makes a lot of sense, given what unfolded in Europe, and particularly among the EU members. First, I have observed that, unlike what many people expected, the existing laboratories within the EU member states failed to take a leading role in vaccine development, despite being equipped with modern technologies, and those that attempted to do so, made little ground (Scally and O’Leary 2021). Second, there was a shortage of supply among the European population, causing various initiatives taken to procure vaccines to be blamed for not being effective. One of the actors in this blame game was the EU, whose proposed common vaccine procurement arrangements proved to be challenging (Deutsch and Wheaton 2021; Elliott 2021). As a result, Europe, and the EU members in particular, lagged behind in the global race to secure a COVID-19 vaccine supply.

Moreover, in terms of the population vaccination rate, Europe and the EU far lagged behind a number of non-European countries (such as Israel), where almost all of the populations were vaccinated. This has led some analysts to question the anticipated emergence of the EU as a global powerhouse in the post-COVID-19 world (Roloff 2020), particularly given the poor performance of the EU and Europe in its coronavirus containment strategies and vaccine administration programs (Goenka 2021; Hall et al. 2020), which was somewhat unusual, given the usual vigor with which the EU responds to crises. One doesn’t have to look far back in history to find examples of Europe and the EU taking a leading role in response to calamities and crises that called for humanitarian assistance, and so it was odd to see Europe being largely at the mercy of other regions in terms of PPE and vaccine supply. The absence of Europe and the EU in the vaccine race has significant implications for its anticipated global power, as there is no way it can now strategize its position, having already proven itself incapable of satisfying the global requirements for the fight against COVID-19.

EU and the stains of vaccine nationalism

Despite being acknowledged by “international institutions like WHO and the UN that a global crisis like the COVID-19 outbreak needs a globally coordinated response and COVID-19 vaccines should be treated as global public goods”, the fight against COVID-19 has not been conducted with such an approach. A massive shortfall in the response to COVID-19 was witnessed, reflecting a “lack of global coordination and cooperation which had acerbating negative consequences on how the global pandemic is managed and contained” (Hafner et al. 2020, 2). The anticipated return to a state of normality following the progressive success in the development of COVID-19 vaccines unfolded into

what was referred to as “vaccine nationalism” (Deutsch and Wheaton 2021; Eaton 2021; Ghebreyesus 2021; Kretchmer 2021; Hafner et al. 2020) that “occurs when governments or [regional organizations] sign agreements with pharmaceutical manufacturers to supply their own populations with vaccines ahead of them becoming available for other countries” (Khan 2021). In the fight against COVID-19, vaccine nationalism was particularly prevalent in some of the wealthiest nations, such as the United Kingdom, the United States, Japan and the European bloc, which secured and procured several million doses of the most promising vaccines before they were even approved (Khan, 2021). In this race for COVID-19 vaccines, the countries most likely to be left short were the developing nations in the global south. Despite all the possible consequences, on January 29, 2021, the EU put in place the so-called “Transparency and Authorisation Mechanism for Exports of COVID-19 Vaccines”, as the EU strategy related to COVID-19 vaccine exports (European Commission (EC) 2021). Under this controversial system announced by the EU Commission, all EU-based vaccine manufacturers were to seek authorization from national governments for the export of vaccines outside the EU (Fleming, Brunsden and Johnson, 2021). This vaccine nationalism drew criticism from countries and world leaders both in the global north and the global South, who cited the need for equitable access to vaccines if the world was to be kept safe from the pandemic (Hafner et al. 2020).

These concerns were strongly voiced both in the G7 and G20. During a G7 meeting, French President Emmanuel Macron urged Europe and the United States to allocate, as a matter of urgency, up to 5 per cent of their current supplies to developing countries where the COVID-19 campaigns had scarcely begun, and where China and Russia were offering to fill the gap (Khalaf, Hall and Mallet 2021, 1). This was a direct critique of the earlier position of the EU Commission in its January 29, 2021 press release related to the export of COVID-19 vaccines (EC, 2021; Stearns, Nardelli and Chrysoloras 2021). Macron’s position aligned with the views expressed by John W.H. Denton, the Secretary General of the International Chamber of Commerce (ICC) in his letter to European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen voicing the deep concerns of the ICC regarding the European Union’s plan to impose restrictions on vaccine exports (ICC 2021). This was a clear indication of just how stranded the EU had become in COVID-19 politics (Dionne and Turkmen 2020), and showed how the “increased pace of pandemics in the twenty-first century has placed states’ choices in executing health diplomacy into sharp relief where the primary goal is not acting together [but] the protection of the physical and economic health of their own citizens” (Fazal 2020, E78). Such an approach could be considered unhealthy and, as trends have shown, vaccine nationalism is most likely to cost the countries in the long

term, as there are no good ratios between vaccine uptake and stockpiling, as Abboud et al. (2021, 1) professed in an editorial piece in the Financial Times on March 1, 2021.

Another world leader who was particularly vocal about the uneven distribution of vaccines and the wave of vaccine nationalism was President Paul Kagame of Rwanda. In a piece published in the Guardian, Kagame stated: “Delaying access to vaccines for citizens of developing countries is ultimately many times more costly. The pandemic will range on, crippling the global economy”, warning of the dangers associated with vaccine nationalism and the lack of global cooperation in the fight against COVID-19. Even “the Covax facility led by the World Health Organization failed to deliver on its expectations of making sure that at least 20 per cent of doses were available for African – right from the start and at the same time as for richer countries. As a result, nearly two months after the first vaccines have been administered in the rich countries, it was still not clear when African nations would be able to start inoculating people, though the first doses ...[began] reaching the continent later [in January, 2021]” (Kagame, 2021). Kagame called for global cooperation in the fight against the pandemic by making sure that necessary resources to address the problem would be accessible to all (Pilling 2020).

COVID-19 and democracy backsliding trends among EU members

Whether democracy had a future or would be able to survive in the post-COVID-19 world has emerged as a concern among theorists, political parties, civil societies and the public (Afsahi et al. 2020; Goetz and Martinsen 2021; Rapel and Saikkonen 2020). This concern emanates from worries that people have over whether the emergency measures taken to curb the spread of COVID-19, such as executive takeovers put into force through emergency decrees, will ever be reverted, in that “rule by decree has curtailed citizens’ fundamental democratic rights to assemble and protest” (Afsahi et al. 2020, v). There are also concerns that “emergency measures enacted under the COVID-19 pandemic will be used inappropriately to further dismantle checks on the executive” (Rapel and Saikkonen 2020, 28) as was the case of Israel where, “When the relevant parliamentary subcommittee refused to authorise the measures, Netanyahu rammed it through with an ‘emergency decree’” (Harari 2020). There are other concerns over the future of democracy in the post-COVID-19 world that the pandemic is placing additional pressure on the already alarming degree of deterioration witnessed in democracy. Both the necessities instigated by COVID-19 and “the longevity of the declining trend in democracy is a cause of the concern in the face of the global pandemic” (Afsahi et al. 2020, v), and many

governments face an increasing dilemma as people struggle to strike balance between democracy promotion and emergency control – being a context that provides no choice at all, but possibly a mere trade-off. Nevertheless, in many instances, the deployment of emergency measures to curb the pandemic is often preferred to enhancing both democracy and safety co-existence, and is frequently described as a noble decision.

Though the deployment of emergency measures seems appropriate and temporal, history teaches us a different lesson. In many cases, “temporal measures have a nasty habit of outlasting emergencies, especially as there is always a new emergency lurking on horizon” (Harari 2020). Thus, when choosing emergency measures, it is imperative to consider also exit strategies to prevent the possible institutionalization of emergency measures. This needs to be addressed to identify what must be done to enhance democracy under the façade looming horizon imminence of emergency measures as part of the new normal. So this raises the question of what form should democracy take in the post-COVID-19 world. Turner’s “The World after COVID-19: A Christian Contribution” suggests the possible entry, and puts forward a suggestion of what is needed in the post-COVID-19 world: “In the ‘post-COVID world’ we shall need the experience that we are more, politically speaking, than voters and taxpayers; more, economically speaking, than producers and consumers; and to know that as members of civil society (citizens or not) we are neither ‘individuals’ nor sectoral ideologues but persons in community” (Turner 2020, 1). Choosing from this menu, especially on enhancing ‘persons in community’, democracy is indispensable, though the question ‘why’ immediately comes to mind. Looking at the way some countries within the EU responded to the pandemic leads one to question the validity of the EU as a defender of democracy and human rights. The actions of politicians in countries such as Hungary and Poland, and the leniency of the EU in dealing with them, showed the unwillingness of the EU to police adherence to the principles of democracy even within its own region.

Conclusion

Based on the arguments advanced above, it is evident that COVID-19 will leave an important mark on the social and economic life of the EU and its citizens. With regard to the future of the EU, it is apparent that governments and citizens in Europe still find the role of the EU to be indispensable (Leigh 2020), as evidenced by the progress made by EU nations when working together (Overbeke and Stadig 2020; Wolff and Ladi 2020). Since Europe’s political disintegration or integration is not a matter of “either yes or no, forward or backward progress or regress, [as the views expressed here point to the fact that] integration and

disintegration may occur simultaneously, it is hard to predict which will predominate in the medium-term” (Leigh 2020). However, based on the measures taken, such as the debt for the EU recovery fund, and the lessons learned from the challenges associated with integration benefits constraints such as the freedom of movement, it can be argued that, the COVID-19 crisis has accelerated Europe’s political integration rather than disintegration. Similarly, as argued in the fourth part of this paper, it is too early to predict with precision what the post-COVID-19 world will take, as even the anticipated eradication of the virus by the end of 2022 cannot be met, despite the various vaccines developed. COVID-19 mutations continue to present a challenge to scientists and hinder their initiatives to come up with solutions to the problems caused by coronavirus. Many of these measures are still in their preliminary stages, although there are signs of positive developments. What is needed is for the global community to work together to find long-lasting solutions to the pandemic. Like most pandemics, the future implications of COVID-19 are hard to envisage, but more lessons are being learned.

As for the EU, there is a lot to be done. Since the measures taken in response to the pandemic were not uniformly applied, the recovery of the member states from the COVID-19 pandemic is likely to vary. COVID-19 has revealed the limits of regional organizations in their efforts to deal with pandemics, and has shown how individual countries can easily retreat to claims of sovereignty and protectionism as a means of resolving the challenges emanating from pandemics. There is still more to be done in Europe and among the EU members before any safe predictions of a better future can be made. Putting in place frameworks to address the economic consequences of the pandemic, as well as restoring the trust of the people in democracy and their confidence in their governments should be a first step. Above all, as suggested by Christensen and Lægreid (2020), the deficit in the ability of the Europe and EU to manage crises needs to be dealt with. The culture of working together, though halted, still makes more sense, since overcoming the consequences of the pandemic will take longer if all parties are working in isolation. It is apparent that those who predict that the EU will be the most influential powerhouse in the future seem to be building their arguments on limited evidence. While the chances are still there, to overcome the hurdles, the EU must address all the remaining challenges to health, the economy, and the political and psychosocial social spheres left in the wake of COVID-19.

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