



‘Coronationalism’ vs a geopolitical Europe?

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Abstract

EU member states have been discussing how to deal with the socio-economic repercussions of the Covid-19 pandemic, collectively. While lively debates about internal solidarity continue, there is also the pressing issue of 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 demands that the Union and its member states step up their supportive role on the global scene. On the other, there are signs of ‘coronationalism,’ with some national political parties questioning the timing of EU external aid when member states themselves are struggling.

Based on expert contributions from a representative cross-section of 13 member states, this paper delves into the question of whether and how external solidarity features in political and public discourse in Covid-struck Europe. It finds that, for now, neither coronationalist nor geopolitical ambitions dominate the relatively little politicised debates about international cooperation and development aid.

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The Union's external solidarity conundrum

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 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 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.

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.

‘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 contribution looks at current discussions and debates – or the absence thereof – about international assistance or development aid in 13 member states. It draws on [country reports](#) written by experts from our EPIN network to see whether the geopolitical or coronationalist agenda is taking the upper hand in member states 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.

You can find the brief reports of each country [here](#).



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