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The European Union's Response to Covıd-19 as an Existential Threat

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Abstract

The agenda and referent subjects and objects of security have widened as both the actors and the themes of national and international security have varied in the Post-Cold War Era. Recently, the epidemics have also been transformed into one of these vital referent objects of security. In fact, not only less-developed and developing countries but also developed countries including great and middle powers would become vulnerable to the pandemics such as in the case of COVID-19. Thus, the European Union (EU) Member States, first and foremost Italy, Spain and France have been profoundly affected by the outbreak of the COVID-19. In fact, the EU must face the implications of this pandemic in a time of existential threats including the Brexit, Euro crisis, rising populism and Euroscepticism. Within this context, this study initially aims to evaluate the vulnerability of the EU to COVID-19, then, the responses to and reflections of the pandemic in terms of the EU's security in a period when the EU's solidarity and unity have been already questioned. Eventually, this study discusses the potential impact of COVID-19 as another existential threat on the European integration process.

Keywords: European Union, COVID-19, security

JEL Codes: F50, I18, N34, N44

1. Introduction

In terms of security analysis, historically, national security has been the core focus. Furthermore, national security particularly emphasizes military power, which states must possess to confront threats against themselves. As Curta (2014) claims, international relations characterized security as a state-centric concept by defining it as state safety, defence, protection, and territorial integrity. Due to two

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world wars and the Cold War, during most of the twentieth century, security exclusively meant 'state security' and 'military security'.

In the post-Cold War era, the concept of national security, previously identified with military security, broadened both horizontally and vertically. On the one hand, while the referent objects of security have expanded, on the other hand, threats within the scope of security have also diversified. There has been a transformation from national security to human security, and new threats such as environmental problems, migration, health issues, and economic crises have emerged. Globalization and advancement in technologies caused the spread of infectious diseases rapidly and easily. Therefore, infectious diseases have been considered as existential threats to both states and individuals.

The EU, which is a supranational organization, has also expanded its understanding of security to include human security. In this context, diseases have been associated with human security. Thus, combating infectious diseases, which are considered as existential threats to the security of both the EU and its member states, has become one of the preconditions for ensuring security within the EU.

Recently, the infectious disease COVID-19, caused by the most recently discovered coronavirus, is now a pandemic affecting many states and individuals globally. This study initially aims to evaluate the vulnerability of the EU to COVID-19, then, the responses to and reflections of the pandemic in terms of the EU's security in a period when the EU's solidarity and unity have been already questioned.

In accordance with this purpose, the study firstly explains how the issue of security takes place in international relations. In this scope, the transformation of security issue from national security to individual security is discussed. Afterwards, the relationship between diseases and security and developments regarding these relations at global level is revealed. In the following section, the challenge posed by the COVID-19 crisis is discussed as another existential threat to the EU. Finally, the EU's response to the crisis and the implications for the EU's security are assessed.

2. From National Security to Human Security in International Relations

Security literature of 1945–1990 was dominated by a classical paradigm that defined security through the concept of national security and the axis of military power. In this framework, the focus of the classical security paradigm is the military opportunities, capabilities, capacities, and strategies that states must develop to combat threats to their survival. Designed with a realist security perspective and dominating the Cold War era, this threat-oriented classical security paradigm was built on 'insecurity' instead of 'being safe'. In other words,

it was built on the axis of insecurity rather than security (Sandıklı and Emeklier, 2012).

National security does not merely mean defending and protecting territories within the international system. Protecting and maximizing national interests is also viewed as a basic security requirement. However, as Koble (2012) noted at the beginning of the 2000s, security has become less of a military issue. According to Sandıklı and Emeklier (2012), military has gained importance in economic, commercial, financial, cultural, environmental, technological, and scientific matters as well as in strategic and geopolitical issues. In tandem with this, the scope of security studies has been diversified.

Although classical realists were the first to address the relationship between infectious diseases and security, the introduction of infectious diseases into the national and international security agenda occurred in the post-Cold War era with the introduction of critical theory. Critical thinkers argue that the understanding of classical security, which reduces the security of individuals to nation state security and transforms it into rhetoric featuring 'national security' and 'national interest' discourses, ignores other areas of state security. According to the critical approach, nation state structures must be mechanisms that, as a starting point, generate security for their citizens. The critical perspective that imposes an instrumental function on the state of security emphasizes that the main purpose of the state is to ensure the security of its citizens on an individual level (Sandıklı and Emeklier, 2012).

As Ovalı (2006) indicated, in the Post- Cold War era, the concept of security in international relations has entered a process in which both the threats and the referent objects of security are undergoing transformation. Until the end of the twentieth century, only the states and their military capacities have been considered as threats to the other states in the context of national security. However, Price-Smith (2009) proposed a "broadening" of the modern conceptualizations of national security to include non-anthropocentric threats such as migration, environmental destruction, and naturally existing epidemic disease. Also, McInnes and Rushton (2013) remarked that security is no longer regarded as a concept associated only with military threats, but all issues such as environment, food, energy, and migration are considered within the scope of 'security'. For Atu et al. (2018), global threats including *"climate change, environmental degradation, natural disasters, pandemic disease, and threats to biodiversity…. are existential threats to both nations and individuals."* This horizontal broadening which refers to incorporating non-military aspects of security into the security discourse began by the Copenhagen School. As Buzan et al. (1998) argued, this integration is realized *"because it is in this practice that the issue become[s] a security issue—not necessarily because a real existential threat exists but because the issue is presented as such a threat"* (Buzan et al., 1998 cited in Curta, 2014). At the same time, security was broadened vertically. This vertical broadening of security refers to the incorporation of other referent objects

different from the states, such as individuals, local or global communities (Curta, 2014).

Although securitization theory, classically conceptualized in the Copenhagen School, was not fully applicable for understanding security dynamics at the EU level (Bengtsson et al. 2019), the EU is regarded as a security identity that obtains the status of a referent object like its member states individually. With collective securitization, both the EU and its member states shares the field of security, and the EU can execute the functions of security governance (Sperling and Webber, 2019).

In 1983, Richard Ullman had indicated the need for a redefinition of national threats and argued that *"defining national security in purely military terms conveys a profoundly false image of reality [and] causes states to concentrate on military threats and to ignore other and more harmful dangers"*. Further, Ullman defined a threat to national security as *"an action or sequence of events that (1) threatens drastically and over a relatively brief period to degrade the quality of life for the inhabitants of a state, or (2) threatens significantly to narrow the range of policy choices available to the government of a state or to private, nongovernmental entities (persons, groups, corporations) within the state"* (Ullman, 1983 cited in Curta, 2014, in Price-Smith, 2009, and in Enemark, 2009). Thus, the security of the state has been redefined to cover the security of the citizens.

As Ispas, Cirdei, and Negoescu (2011) noted, "European Security Strategy: A Secure Europe in A Better World" document adopted by the European Council in 2003 was the first document in the EU to agree on a joint threat assessment and define a strategic plan for the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) of the EU. In this document, "terrorism, the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, regional conflicts, state failure, and organized crime" were identified as the threats Europe faces. Also, it was explained that new diseases can spread fast and become global threats (European Council, 2003). However, in terms of response, the European Security Strategy favoured recourse to military capabilities to prepare the way for more security in the world. After the European Security Strategy document, the EU has contributed to a more secure world in which globalisation has made threats more complex and interconnected and has worked on building human security (Ispas et al., 2011). Thus, security understanding within the EU has broadened to include human security and the EU has become a referent object securitizing the world.

3.   Disease and Security Relations in the Framework of Human Security

As Patrick (2011) expressed, the plague that struck Athens in Ancient times, The Black Death (bubonic plague) in Europe in the fourteenth century, and the Spanish influenza of 1918 were among infectious diseases posing an

existential threat to many states in history. As a result of globalization and technological advancement, diseases move across the borders rapidly and easily, they are more infectious and cause many deaths. In other words, the speed and scale diseases spread have expanded because of increasing trade and travel from one country to another by easy means of transportation in a globalized world. Some of the cases illustrating potential threat of infectious diseases are outbreaks of Ebola, SARS, West Nile Virus, Pandemic Influenza and HIV/AIDS (Atu et al., 2018).

In 1994, the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) described human security as: *"safety from such chronic threats as hunger, disease, and repression"* and +as *"protection from sudden and harmful disruptions in the patterns of daily life – whether in homes, in jobs or communities"* (UNDP, 1994). Thus, the concept of human security has turned the referent object of security into people's security rather than national security. Even so, as Ovalı (2006) stated, human security is a call to shape security policy according to both governments and human needs.

According to UNDP 1994 Report, human security is recognized in seven kinds of threats to human security: *"economic security, food security, health security, environmental security, personal security, community security and political security"* (Ilie, 2011). UNDP 1994 Report was accepted as the first in which a global level international organization endorsed human security as a national security approach (Rugolo, 2014). In this way, as Enemark (2009) stressed, health security has been included in the concept of human security.

Buzan and his co-authors contributed to the conceptualizations of security. According to Barry Buzan, Ole Wæver, and Jaap de Wilde, all advocators of the Copenhagen School, national security comprehends a variety of activities including military, economic, political, societal, and environmental dimensions. The interactions of these dimensions make their conception holistic (Price-Smith, 2009). According to their theory named as securitization theory, "threats and vulnerabilities" should be evaluated as existential threats to a referent object by a securing actor (Enemark, 2017). Buzan et al. argued that if definite social conditions are achieved, "any problem or issue can be perceived as a threat to national security" (Buzan et al., 1998 cited in Watterson and Kamradt-Scott, 2016). In this context, epidemic diseases are accepted as one of the threats identified within the securitization theory (Minculete and Răpan, 2012). In other words, an issue of epidemic disease is one of the risks or threats securitized into an existential threat to national security.

Health has been a part of national security agendas after the end of the Cold War with the idea of interdependence between the preservation of public health and maintaining peace and security. One of the health issues, epidemic diseases may become a threat to national security through direct and/or indirect impacts on the concrete interests and the means of the state because of their historical link with power and order. Furthermore, diseases have the potential to cause the death of many people, economic loses, disorder within the state, and

weaken the state power relative to its rivals. In other words, the infectious disease may be a direct and/or an indirect threat to a state's unity, prosperity, and power (Price-Smith, 2009).

As Curta (2016) expressed, "non-traditional" security threats such as epidemic diseases were considered, and more emphasis was given to the concept of "human security" due to a decrease in armed conflicts between the states. According to Rugolo (2014), human security scholars do not dismiss the importance of a state's ability to defend itself. Rather, they tend to argue that without human security, there can be little traditional state security and vice versa. While the traditional definitions of security focus on a state's external threats, human security scholars accept that as external threats diminish, security analyses should change their emphasis to individuals. Security agenda should include other threats such as hunger, disease, violent crime, pollution, and natural disasters that kill more people than war, genocide, and terrorism combined (Rugolo, 2014).

Considering the links between disease and security, the widely discussed topic has been the inclusion of HIV/AIDS into an issue of international peace and security (Wenham, 2016). Particularly, the impact of HIV/AIDS on society has widely discoursed with regarding national and international security.

According to Atu et al. (2018) and McInnes, & Rushton (2010), the United States (US) Vice President, Al Gore's announcement of AIDS a threat to human security in United Nation Security Council (UNSC) meeting in January 2000, is considered as a start for securitization process of disease. In his speech, he proposed that infectious diseases like AIDS posed an existential threat to national and international security (Jimba, 2012 cited in Atu et al., 2018). Furthermore, Gore addressed as follows:

"For the nations of sub-Saharan Africa, AIDS is not just a humanitarian crisis. It is a security crisis – because it threatens not just individual citizens, but the very institutions that define and defend the character of a society. This disease weakens workforces and saps economic strength. AIDS strikes at teachers and denies education to their students. It strikes at the military and subverts the forces of order and peacekeeping. AIDS is one of the most devastating threats ever to confront the World community. The United Nations (UN) was created to stop wars. Now we must wage and win a great and peaceful war of our time – the war against AIDS" (Price-Smith, 2002; Curta, 2014; Rychnovská, 2015).

Gore focused on three points in his speech (Prins, 2004):

"1. The heart of the security agenda is protecting lives,
2. When a single disease threatens everything from economic strength to peacekeeping, we face a security threat of the greatest magnitude, and
3. It is a security crisis because it threatens not just individual citizens, but the very institutions that define and defend the character of a society".

Nowadays, these three points that Gore dealt with have been also exactly valid for COVID-19, a pandemic affecting many countries globally.

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As Rushton (2010) noticed, Resolution 1308 of 17 July 2000, adopted by the UNSC, is regarded as the turning point in the securitization process. For the first time, with UNSC Resolution 1308, a health issue was officially acknowledged as an international security concern. The resolution not only articulated specific concerns about the potential negative impacts of HIV/ AIDS on UN peacekeeping operations, but it also emphasized that if uncontrolled, this disease has the potential to pose a risk to economic and political stability and national security (Enemark, 2009).

Whether turning point was UNSC meeting in January 2000 or date of Resolution 1308, AIDS and security relations were taken seriously and reformulated by securitizing actors when AIDS considered as a threat to states' economic, social and political security rather than human security (Rychnovská, 2015). Once the securitization process has begun, it compelled states to make this disease a political priority (Elbe, 2005).

Thus, Resolution 1308 of the UNSC restated the essence of the third point that Al Gore emphasized in the special meeting of UNSC about HIV/AIDS. HIV/AIDS has been a security crisis, as it threatens institutions defining and defending the character of society as well as individual citizens (Prins, 2004).

In 2007, "A Safer Future: Global Public Health Security in the 21st Century World Health Report" issued by the World Health Organisation (WHO) described influenza as "the most feared security threat". However, today, COVID-19, another pandemic disease replaces influenza. As Enemark (2009) predicted, the next pandemic, COVID-19 has caused more people to become ill and die, over a greater area in a short time.

The UNSC needed to meet again in 2014, as public health was threatened globally again due to the expansion of the Ebola outbreak. The UNSC issued "Resolution 2177 of 18 September 2014 on Peace and Security in Africa", expressing outstanding points to the outbreak of the Ebola virus in, and its effects on, African states as well as other states in the world. Resolution 2177 particularly indicates *"...Determining that the unprecedented extent of the Ebola outbreak in Africa constitutes a threat to international peace and security..."* (UNSC, 2014).

Although any resolution on COVID-19 has not been adopted by the UN yet, there is an official initiative made by the Permanent Representative of Germany to the UN. Letter dated 22 June 2020 addressed to the Secretary-General is about plans to hold a high-level open debate on the theme Pandemics and security. By this letter, Heusgen reiterated that *"global health risks, such as pandemics and epidemics, can become a threat to international peace and security"*. Furthermore, the letter remarked that the COVID-19 pandemic has become a global public health threat and has challenged global cooperation (UNSC, 2020). Thus, since the 2014 Ebola outbreak, infectious disease and security nexus have been brought up again at the global level.

The latest global development concerning security and disease relation is the UN's Response to the COVID-19. As the COVID-19 pandemic is regarded as

not only a health crisis but also an economic, a humanitarian, a security, and a human rights crisis, COVID-19 has caused vulnerabilities and disparities within and among nations. Coming out of this crisis will require a holistic approach including all societies, and all governments act together and driven by kindness and solidarity. For saving lives, protecting societies, and recovering better, the UN Comprehensive Response to COVID-19 has been launched by the UN Secretary-General. The Response sets out following objectives: *"to deliver a global response that leaves noone behind, to reduce our vulnerability to future pandemics, to build resilience to future shocks – above all climate change, and to overcome the severe and systemic inequalities exposed by the pandemic"* (United Nations, 2020). The UN underscored a need for national, regional, and international collaboration for the control of COVID-19. In this context, actions of the EU as a regional organization have become crucial.

At the EU level, security and disease relation was firstly mentioned by the European Security Strategy document. With this text, in much of the developing world, the impacts of destructive forces of poverty, malnutrition, and disease on the security of states and civil societies were recognized (Ispas et al., 2011). Thus, *"securitisation at the EU level has occurred against a changing global context, and new priorities both nationally and globally"* (Jacobson, 2012 cited in Bengtsson and Rhinard, 2019). Infectious diseases are among new priorities and existential threats that the EU has begun to consider within human security.

With the help of many legislative developments nested in the European Commission and the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control (ECDC) since 2013, a specific health security regime has advanced at the EU level. This health security regime has represented a form of collective securitization with capacities for surveillance, risk assessment, and coordination. Therefore, collective securitisation can be accepted as *"a practice-based dynamic through which events are framed and responded to by a multitude of actors"* (Bengtsson and Rhinard, 2019). In sum, a transformation of the EU cooperation on infectious diseases into a health security regime is evaluated in the collective securitization framework with the participation of both member states and the EU institutions. Hence, following part of this study stresses the coordination and execution of the EU's response to COVID-19 which is an existential threat to the EU.

4.   Facing the Challenge of COVID-19 in the EU

The process of European integration has been triggered with the Schuman Declaration which was inspired by a French bureaucrat Jean Monnet and delivered by the then French Foreign Minister Robert Schuman on the 9th of May 1950 following the two disastrous World Wars. The process has been aimed at ensuring peace and welfare in Europe since then. The establishment of the European Coal and Steel Community by the Paris Treaty in 1951 was followed by the founding of European Economic Community and European Atomic Energy Community by the Rome Treaties in 1957. Since the official establishment of the

EU in 1993 with the Maastricht Treaty, the Union has continued to evolve towards an "ever closer Union" beyond an economic integration. In fact, the steps taken in the course of integration have generated a hybrid institutional set-up involving both supranational and intergovernmental elements. Due to its hybrid and complex institutional and legal structure, the Union has been often defined as a 'sui generis' political entity (Phelan, 2012). The Lisbon Treaty (2009), which is the latest agreement signed between the EU member states to give its current shape to the Union, has also reproduced this hybrid structure.

Hence, the EU performs legislative, executive, and judicial functions highlighting its supranational aspects. Nevertheless, the power of the EU to act is not evenly distributed among policy areas. The Union can only act in those areas where it is authorised by the member states through the EU treaties. The division of the power between the member states and the EU becomes clearer with the categorisation of competences in the Lisbon Treaty. Three main types of competences are classified as exclusive competences, shared competences and supporting competences. Exclusive competences involve the areas where the EU alone can legislate and adopt binding acts such as customs union, competition rules for the internal market, monetary policy for the Eurozone countries, common commercial policy, and conservation of marine biological resources under the common fisheries policy. Shared competences occur in the fields where both the EU and the member states are authorised to adopt binding acts. These areas include internal market, social policy for the dimensions identified in the Treaty, economic, social, and territorial cohesion, agriculture and fisheries, environment, consumer protection, trans-European networks, energy, area of freedom, security and justice and common safety concerns in public health matters. As for the fields of supporting competences, the role of the EU is limited to supporting, coordinating, or complementing the action of member states, as it does not have any legislative powers. This type of competences applies in areas including industry, culture, tourism, education, youth, sport, administrative cooperation, civil protection as well as protection and improvement of human health (EUR-Lex, 2016).

This complex division of authority between the EU and member states complicates the EU's role in times of crises at least in the initial phases. Nevertheless, crises are nothing new in the history of European integration. Jean Monnet (1976), one of the founding fathers of European integration, had predicted as early as in the 1970s that "Europe will be forged in crises and will be the sum of the solutions adopted for these crises". In fact, crises have been driving force for the European integration process which has followed a dynamic trajectory with ups and downs (Eylemer, 2015) and provided the basis for formulating strategies to deepen integration in Europe (Trondal, 2020). However, the challenges faced by the EU in the last decades have caused a questioning of the solidarity and legitimacy within the EU as well as of the future of European integration.

The EU have had to face not only the disastrous impact of the financial crisis which began in 2008 and turned into a Euro crisis but also other crises such as the refugee crisis which escalated in 2015 and the complicated process launched by Britain in 2017 to leave the Union leading to the Brexit in 2020. Furthermore, the rise of populism and extremist politics in Europe has caused a legitimacy crisis challenging the EU polity (Trondal, 2020). Those crises were also exacerbated by other external challenges in the close neighbourhood and the far abroad including the annexation of Crimea by Russia, the Ukrainian crisis, and the implications of trade wars between the US and China to name the few.

Since 2020 which marks the 70th anniversary of the Schuman Declaration, the EU has also faced the COVID-19 crisis as one of the epicentres of the catastrophic global pandemic. The EU's ability to respond seemed restricted at the onset of the crisis due to the weak competences of the EU in terms of health policies including infectious disease management and pharmaceutical procurement. As health policies mainly fall under the national competence area of the member states, the EU's role is limited to supporting and coordinating the national policies (Brooks and Geyer, 2020). Furthermore, as stated by the European Central Bank President Christine Lagarde, the pandemic has caused "the largest shock to the European economy since the Second World War" (Lagarde, 2020).

The preliminary measures of the EU included the creation of a temporary "Pandemic Purchase Programme" involving government and private debt, "Pandemic Crisis Support" to provide cheap loans for the health costs of the Euro area countries under the European Stability Mechanism, a temporary recovery fund (SURE) to mitigate unemployment risks, funding for small and medium enterprises and temporary stretching of state aid rules. The EU leaders ultimately decided to integrate the EU strategy for the economic recovery into the Union's next Multiannual Financial Framework (2021-2027). Following the tough negotiations between the member states upon the European Commission's proposals, a compromise could be reached on a long-term budget of € 1.074 billion coupled with a temporary recovery instrument named 'Next Generation EU' worth € 750 billion of grants and loans combined. The implementation part of the recovery instrument has been also a vital step in breaking the taboo over joint borrowing and achieving the Eurobond aspirations in the EU. The Commission will finance the recovery by borrowing on the capital markets and the borrowing will be repaid by the EU's own resources system (Ladi and Tsarouhas, 2020).

Thus, the long-standing disagreement in the EU since the Euro crisis on the financing method of financial measures to support the worst-affected states could be overcome. While the southern member states such as Italy, Spain and France have advocated a common European response by issuing Eurobonds, the northern member states including Denmark, the Netherlands, Austria, and Finland were initially against such an instrument which would cause common debt (Johnson, 2020). Overall, this package which is described as the largest stimulus package ever financed under the EU budget aims to build 'a greener, more digital

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and more resilient' post-COVID-19 Europe more adjustable to the existing and imminent challenges (European Commission, 2021). Still, the severity and the multifaceted nature of the crisis requires an ambitious EU reaction. Testing its resilience to hard-hitting shocks, the pandemic constitutes an existential threat to the EU so far as it is argued that this crisis will either result in disintegration or be a catalyst for the construction of a stronger Europe (Bergmann et al., 2020).

The EU Global Strategy adopted on 29 June 2016 as an overall response to the transformations in the EU's internal and external security environment presents the principles and strategic priorities concerning the EU's foreign and security policy. Being the second security strategy paper officially announced in the EU history following the European Security Strategy in 2003, the Global Strategy (2016) starts with a rather negative assessment regarding the security environment of the Union stating:

> *"We live in times of existential crisis, within and beyond the European Union. Our Union is under threat. Our European project, which has brought unprecedented peace, prosperity and democracy, is being questioned".*

In this fragile security environment, the Strategy emphasizes the necessity for a stronger Europe in a "more connected, contested and complex world" (Global Strategy, 2016). The concept of resilience comes to the forefront in this sense. The key requirements for a resilient EU are the capability to cope with risks and challenges as well as the ability to contribute to stability in the neighbouring states and regions (Bendiek, 2017). In this regard, the Strategy defines resilience as "the ability of states and societies to reform, thus withstanding and recovering from internal and external crises" (Global Strategy, 2016).

Indeed, the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic and its implications for Europe has been a severe test case for the resilience of the EU as another existential threat in various areas including security, economic policies, public health, social protection, and governance. Josep Borrell (2020), the High Representative of the EU for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy (HRFASP), remarked the severity of the challenge of this multifaceted crisis to the Union's security by stating that "*The COVID-19 crisis is not a war, but it is 'war-like' in that it requires the mobilisation and direction of resources at unprecedented levels.*" This remark referred to the COVID-19 as a threat to the EU's security.

The challenge has been aggravated by the fact that the main response measures including the ones with regard to the health systems, repatriation of citizens or restrictions to public life are within the national competence of the member states (European Council, 2020). The EU can only intervene to support, coordinate, and complement the action of EU member states in these policy areas. The COVID-19 crisis thus clearly revealed the difficulty of European cooperation in such policy areas as the EU member states initially headed towards inward-looking crisis management policies such as the unilateral closing down of the borders and the limitations of exports of medical equipment putting the European solidarity into question. The significance of the four freedoms of the internal

market (free movement of goods, labour, services, and capital) has become much more evident due to the initial uncoordinated closures of borders. In the meanwhile, the crisis has begun to threaten the essentials of the European economy as it spread throughout the EU member states (Russack and Blockmans, 2020).

While the first cases were reported in France, Germany, and Finland respectively in the EU in January 2020, all of the EU member states had to face the pandemic in a period of six weeks. Thus, the Union was declared as the new epicentre of the pandemic on March 13, 2020, by the WHO. Apart from the lockdown or closure measures taken in some member states including Italy, Spain, Germany and France, the Union's external borders were entirely closed on March 17, 2020, for the first time in its history (Linka et al., 2020). This was indeed the EU's first main coordinated response to the COVID-19 crisis.

The pandemic has exposed not only the fragility of global governance and solidarity in the international system but also the fragility of solidarity within the EU as a supranational governance model. On the other hand, the pandemic and its global consequences have clearly demonstrated that global and regional cooperation is critically required to manage the COVID-19 crisis as it seems impossible to deal with it entirely in the local or national level. Concerning the fact that the global governance is at a critical juncture, it is argued that the management of this crisis has the potential of driving the states either to implement more inward-oriented policies raising nationally protective tendencies or to tend towards a system which is more prone to international cooperation and solidarity (Müftüler-Baç, 2020). The High Representative Borrell (2020), underlined this fact with the following words:

"COVID-19 will reshape our world. We don't yet know when the crisis will end. But we can be sure that by the time it does, our world will look very different. How different will depend on the choices we make today".

Although all the EU member states were affected by the pandemic, some of them including Italy and Spain were hit more severely than others finding themselves in a disaster situation particularly in the beginning of the crisis. By 24 June 2020, the reported cases in the EU/European Economic Area (EU-27 + Norway, Iceland, and Liechtenstein) and the United Kingdom (UK) amounted to 1 524 111 wherein the five countries reporting the highest number of cases included the UK (306 210), Spain (246 752), Germany (191 449) and France (161 267). Of the 175 456 deaths reported in the same group of European countries, the highest number of deaths occurred in the UK (42 927), Italy (34 675), France (29 720), Spain (28 325) and Belgium (9 713) (ECDC, 2020). Since 31 December 2019 and as of the last week of November 2021, the cases in Europe reached to 84 385 671, among which the highest reported cases amounted to 10 146 915 in the UK, 7 589 961 in France, and 5 799 244 in Germany. Of the 1 519 845 deaths reported in Europe in the same period, the deaths amounted to 144 775 in the UK, 122 917 in France, and 100 832 in Germany (ECDC, 2021).

Yet, despite the expectations of assistance and support from their European partners, the most affected countries could not initially get what they expected apart from insufficient offers of financial aid. Hence, Spain officially requested international assistance for medical equipment supplies from the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) in March 2020 (France 24, 2020). Besides the imposition of export bans on essential medical equipment by some member states including France and Germany, the calls of Italy for the activation of the EU Mechanism of Civil Protection for the supply of medical equipment did not get any response from the EU member states. Instead, China and Russia sent medical equipment and doctors to the country. This situation led to a deep distrust in European solidarity, while it strengthened the positive attitudes towards China and Russia in Italy. According to a poll in March-April 2020, China and Russia were viewed as the friendliest foreign countries by the Italian respondents respectively. On the other hand, Germany and Russia were listed as the least friendly countries in the same poll. It is also outstanding that 42 percent of the respondents expressed views in another poll in favour of leaving the EU compared to the 26 percent supporting to leave the Union two years ago (Münchau, 2020). In fact, these polls as well as the reactions to the EU in the social media as reflected in the Facebook accounts such as "Italexit", "Czexit", "Spexit Bye Bye Europe" illustrate that many European citizens felt abandoned by the Union (Ischinger and Ruge, 2020).

The president of the European Commission Ursula Von der Leyen made a *"heartfelt apology"* to Italy on behalf of Europe for the insufficient support to the country in the beginning of the crisis in a speech in the European Parliament. Nevertheless, referring to the eventual moves of the EU and its member states to provide medical support and to agree on financial recovery, she argued that Europe has become *"the world's beating heart of solidarity"* following the initial lack of response due to its unpreparedness to the crisis. She also called for a *"Marshall Plan for Europe's Recovery"* and underlined the necessity to overcome *"the old divisions, disputes and recriminations in order to make Europe's economies, societies and way of life more sustainable and resilient"* (European Commission, 2020a).

The pandemic is predicted to cause a deeper economic recession compared to the 2008 financial crisis in the world (IMF, 2020). Besides, it hit the European economy when it was already vulnerable to shocks following the Euro crisis. In the face of the COVID-19 crisis, it is acknowledged by the EU itself that the Union has been now struggling with the deepest economic recession and output contraction in its history following the World War II (European Commission, 2020b). According to the European Commission's economic forecasts in July 2020, the EU economy was projected to contract by about 8.3% and the Eurozone economy by about 8.7% in 2020. These forecasts were even more pessimistic than the spring forecasts whereby an economic contraction of 7.4% and 7.7% was forecast for the EU and Eurozone respectively. Furthermore, it is projected that there will be significant divergences among the member states. Whereas the

estimated contractions for France, Italy and Spain are over 10%, Germany is forecast to contract 6.3% in 2020 (European Commission, 2020c).

The potential impact of the pandemic on the EU international trade is also estimated to be severe as the World Trade Organization projects a decline in the EU exports between 12% and 33% and decline in EU imports between 10% and 25% in 2020 according to different Gross Domestic Product forecasts (European Commission, 2020c). These economic implications will undoubtedly influence the defence economy in the EU as the military expenditures are expected to fall further considering that some EU member states already cut their military expenditures up to 30% following the 2008 global financial crisis. Under the most pessimistic scenarios, the full recovery is forecast in the third quarter of 2023 (Kasapoğlu, 2020). Hence, it is very likely that the impact of the COVID-19 crisis on the sphere of defence will be destructive in Europe concerning budgetary, industrial, and politico-strategic aspects. Considering the endurance of the pandemic as well as its overall economic effects, its damage on the European defence may vary from a more limited extent to an extent causing a broader European security crisis (Marrone, 2020).

The socio-economic effects of the pandemic will also possibly cause a decline in the operational readiness of the EU to participate in the crisis management activities and civilian and military missions in different conflict zones in the world. Such a decline and inward-oriented policies will not only deteriorate the Union's position as a security actor but also add up to the risks of further escalation of tensions and instabilities in the crisis prone regions. Under these conditions, it is also highly probable that the EU will have to face the spill-over of the negative externalities of the rising security problems and instabilities particularly in its close neighbourhood. Such spill-over could also exacerbate the populist and Eurosceptic trends in the Union (Sinha, 2020).

On the other hand, the pandemic has corresponded to a period when the global leadership of the US started to be questioned and thus the international security environment has been evolving into a rather multilateral framework replacing the previous unilateral post-Cold War system led by the US. Whereas the liberal rules-based international system has been recently encountering external and internal challenges, the US global leadership is also ever more contested by the rising powers - indeed particularly by China. The COVID-19 crisis has been added as a new area of conflict between the US and China besides the existing issues such as trade wars and the digital contest between the two countries. Despite the accusations against China that it did not promptly exchange information on the new coronavirus which clearly carried the risk of turning into a severe pandemic from the outset, China tried to create the global perception of a responsible international actor providing medical equipment and assistance to the other countries under the "mask diplomacy". Nevertheless, as France also joined the US charges against China regarding the late circulation of information on the virus, it is argued that the struggle between the West and China is likely to continue in the post-pandemic era. Some scholars even claim that the new Cold War will take place between China and the West (Economic Development

Foundation, 2020). Correspondingly, Walt argues that the shift of power and influence from the West to the East will be further stimulated by the COVID-19 crisis due to the slow and disorganised response of the EU and the US to the pandemic. He also highlights that the conflictual nature of international politics will persist while the strengthening nationalist tendencies will conceivably weaken hyper globalization (Allen et al., 2020).

Although the exact implications of the COVID-19 on global geopolitical balances are not clear at this stage, as argued by some analysts, the emerging trends indicate the formation of a multipolar global system whereby China is viewed as the key strategic competitor by the US. The EU can take its place in this multipolar system only if it can develop its diplomatic and military power to accompany its economic power. Thus, just an economic recovery will not be enough for the post-pandemic EU. On the other hand, the risk of deepening political, economic, and strategic divisions within the Union due to the pandemic could make the EU exposed to the pressures from the other global actors. Thus, the EU must make its choice through its acts and policies either to participate as a global actor or to be alienated in the emerging system (Cont, 2020).

Despite its unprepared response in the beginning of the crisis, the EU's acts and measures will be critical for the future of the Union in the course of time. The EU does not only need to tackle its internal problems but also an international environment which is under the risk of collapsing multilateralism due to the escalating confrontations as well as the rising insecurity in its fragile surrounding. Therefore, as underlined by Bunde et al. (2020), because of the COVID-19 crisis both the internal hold and the global role of the EU are at stake and the Union has to deal with this severe existential threat in the emerging international system which will be shaped by global competition.

5. The EU's Response to the COVID-19: Is It Enough to Save the Union?

The massive EU system whereby the public health falls within the competence area of the member states had been caught unprepared to the pandemic owing to the inadequate authority and expertise in this area. Hence, it was not an easy task for the Union to develop a coherent response to the COVID-19 crisis (Trondal, 2020). The initial responses of the individual member states in panic such as imposing their own border checks and restraining exports of medical equipment further deteriorated the sense of solidarity within the Union. The EU institutions were involved in the coordination of policy measures at the Union level by the mid-March 2020. The European Commission and the European Council took the main role enabling the permanent contact and coordination between the relevant national authorities. Apart from the video conferences held by the President of the Council with the EU leaders (Charles Michel), an EU integrated political crisis response mechanism bringing together the EU institutions, agencies, experts, and the representatives of the affected

member states has been initiated by the Council. Besides, the regular risk assessments are conducted by the European Centre for Disease Control. In this regard, the EU announced that its response would primarily focus on the main aims of restraining the spread of the virus, ensuring the provision of medical equipment, supporting research for treatments and vaccines (18 research projects and 140 teams across Europe under the Horizon 2020 programme) as well as jobs, businesses, and the economy (European Council, 2020a).

The EU leaders confirmed the proposal of the Union to temporarily restrict non-essential travel to the EU by closing of the EU's external and Schengen borders exempting the medical professionals and scientists on 17 March 2020. They also agreed to establish priority lanes at the national borders to ensure the movement of medicines, goods and the people that need to cross the borders and to coordinate the repatriation of the EU citizens outside the Union. The decision of travel restrictions which was enforced until 30 June 2020 stood as the first coordinated response of the Union to the pandemic (Brzozowski and Foote, 2020). As of 1 July, the member states gradually started to remove the travel restrictions to the non-member countries through the lists which are reviewed every two weeks. They also started the progressive removal of internal border controls by 15 June as an important step to restore the free movement of persons within the EU which is a crucial aspect of the EU internal market (European Council, 2020b).

Therefore, following the early wave of the pandemic when the individual member states acted rather individually against the solidarity principle, the EU stepped in to coordinate the joint actions but still within the limitations of its competences and to the extent it is empowered by the member states. Approximately 600000 EU citizens were repatriated via joint flights co-financed from the EU budget. The EU also played role in facilitating the repatriation of more than 85000 citizens stuck in third countries under its civil protection mechanism. Additionally, several measures were taken with regard to public health to ensure the provision of medical supplies, equipment and support to the EU member states such as the joint public procurements as well as the deployment of the medical teams to most affected areas under the civil protection mechanism. The EU tried to overcome the early lack of solidarity by coordinating the sharing of medical supplies and the transfer of medical staff among the member states. The European Commission also proposed a new health programme for the 2021-2027 period named as EU4Health. This programme aims to contribute to the recovery in the post-pandemic era by strengthening the resilience of the health systems in Europe and promoting innovation in the health sector. Hence, it seeks to increase the EU's preparedness and capability of effectively responding to the possible cross-border health threats in the future.

Another aspect of the EU's response to the pandemic was to counter disinformation in the COVID-19 crisis. The Union aims to tackle the deliberate dissemination of fake news, incorrect and misleading information which threaten the public health and security as well as the attempts of the foreign actors intended for affecting the EU citizens and debates (European Council, 2020c). The

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European External Action Service's (EEAS) Special Report Update (23 April-18 May) on COVID-19 disinformation referred to the continuing involvement of the external actors, particularly pro-Kremlin sources in the spread of disinformation by circulating conspiracy theories and driving anti-vaccination sentiment. The report also underlined the role of China in disinformation in a way reflecting the uneasiness of the EU with regard to the China's position since the beginning of the pandemic. It is stated that "the efforts of the state actors like China to deflect blame, to use pandemic to promote their own governmental system and enhance their image abroad continue" (EEAS, 2020).

The European Commission and the High Representative Borrell published a Joint Communication in June 2020 on tackling COVID-19 disinformation. The Communication starts with the evaluation that the pandemic goes together with an extraordinary "infodemic" (The European Commission and HRFASP, 2020). Infodemic is a term originally used by the WHO to describe "excessive amount of information about a problem which makes it difficult to identify a solution" and which "can spread misinformation, disinformation and rumours during a health emergency". This kind of infodemic risks powerful public health response and causes misperceptions and doubts among the people (WHO, 2020). It is outstanding that the EU Communication explicitly refers to Russia and China among the foreign actors "engaged in targeted influence operations and disinformation campaigns around COVID-19 in the EU, its neighbourhood and globally, seeking to undermine democratic debate and exacerbate social polarisation, and improve their own image in the COVID-19 context" (The European Commission and HRFASP, 2020). The High Representative Borrell (2020) described this situation as "a global battle of narratives" which comprises attempts to discredit the EU and added: "…we must be aware there is a geo-political component including a struggle for influence through spinning and the 'politics of generosity'. Armed with facts, we need to defend Europe against its detractors".

On the other hand, Russian and Chinese authorities officially reject the link of the disinformation to their governments and claim that the disinformation originates from private bodies. Despite the allegations of disinformation, the EU High Representative also declared that the EU would not launch a "Cold War" with China (Deutche Welle, 2020). This declaration reveals in a way that the Union prefers to preserve its pragmatism regarding its relationship with China and not to engage in an overt confrontation with this rising power unlike the US.

On the other hand, the EU must face the security challenges and vulnerabilities which are likely to exacerbate as well as the geopolitical competition in its neighbourhood. The COVID-19 is evaluated as a "threat multiplier" in the EU's close neighbourhood and beyond (Bunde et al., 2020). Therefore, although internal solidarity has been on the forefront during the pandemic, the Union also recognizes that it needs to tackle the issue of external solidarity as an international actor with geopolitical and security aspirations. The efforts of China to develop its geopolitical credentials amid the COVID-19

outbreak in both the EU and the EU's surrounding through its mask diplomacy and other policy steps has increased the vitality of this issue on the EU's agenda. The external solidarity requires to support the third countries or their citizens in their struggle with the pandemic through aid and other forms of assistance. In fact, this is an imperative for the EU not only to cope with the spill over effects of the security challenges in its surrounding but also to become a global actor in the multipolar world. The inward-oriented policies neglecting the external solidarity may endanger the EU's geopolitical and security aspirations (Debuysere, 2020).

In this regard, the EU has launched the "Team Europe" in April 2020 as part of its global response to the COVID-19 to provide targeted support to its partners combining resources from the EU, the member states and financial institutions including European Investment Bank and the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development. The financial support of more than €20 billion from the EU's existing external action resources with a focus on the immediate eastern and southern neighbourhood countries, Africa and the Western Balkan countries is aimed at addressing the short-term needs and the longer-term structural effects of the pandemic on the societies and economy. Thus, it covers the direct health crisis and humanitarian needs as well as the efforts of developing health, water, sanitation systems and research and preparedness capacities in the partner countries. The focus is on the most vulnerable people such as the migrants, refugees, internally displaced persons. The EU also seeks to contribute to the coordination of a multilateral response in collaboration with the UN, G7, G20 and international financial institutions (European Commission, 2020d). Indeed, it is quite critical for the EU to contribute to the resilience of its most-affected partners worldwide both for the sake of its own security and to reveal that it is a reliable and responsible global partner in a fragile international environment more than ever because of the unprecedented COVID-19 crisis.

As the pandemic undermines the Union's security environment, the EU needs more and more to strengthen the preparedness and resilience of itself and its neighbourhood to crises ensuring security and stability both within and beyond its borders. Besides the measures taken in the fields of public health, economy and research, the EU security and defence policy should be also strengthened. As Borrell (2020b) highlighted following a videoconference held by the EU Defence Ministers, the COVID-19 crisis is a "redefining moment" in terms of its repercussions on the Union's social, economic and security and defence policies since health has clearly become a security issue. Hence, the swiftness and flexibility in responses and an improved coordination of diverse actors are crucial aspects of crisis management.

Considering the existing strengths and vulnerabilities, the EU identified the foremost lessons for European security and defence along five pillars with the goal of encountering the likely security consequences of the COVID-19. Those pillars are solidarity, responsiveness, preparedness and resilience, capabilities, and partnerships. It is underlined that solidarity should be the guiding principle as the armed forces of the member states should help each other and national military assistance to the civilian authorities should be supported by the relevant EU

institutions. Concerning the responsiveness, the EU aims to monitor the possible implications of the pandemic on security and stability outside the Union's borders for instance with regard to terrorism. The EU needs to develop the adaptability of its missions and operations to the transforming circumstances and utilize the EEAS Early Warning System for conflict prevention in an effective way. Furthermore, the EU must consider seriously the risks of deterioration of prevailing conflicts and crises (EEAS, 2020).

The EU should also develop its preparedness by tackling different challenges regarding cybersecurity, hybrid threats, disinformation campaigns which are evaluated as real threats to the European security in view of the significance of coordinating military and civil response and the preservation of the Union's communication networks during crises. The EU should also concentrate on improving its capabilities and search how the EU civilian missions contribute to the Union's response to the COVID-19 without neglecting the need for developing an innovative and strong European defence industry. Last but not the least, partnerships should be a vital pillar of the EU's security and defence. Facing the challenge of the already crumbling multilateralism and increasing global competition as well as confrontations, the EU aims to hold multilateralism as the cornerstone of its foreign and security policy. Besides keeping the UN system at the core of the rule-based multilateral order, the EU seeks closer cooperation, dialogue and coordination with other international organizations including NATO and international partners (EEAS, 2020). Hence, differently from the stand of the US, the EU prefers to avoid deep and devastating international confrontations which can risk the European security. So, it seeks to contribute to the development of the post-pandemic international system on cooperative and rule-based tenets rather than on a fuzzy conflictual basis.

6. Conclusion

In a narrow sense, national security has meant protection of the state from physical threats. Now, as diseases can spread easily and rapidly in the globalization era, diseases and their pandemic potential represent further security threats for the states. Evans (2010) demonstrated this fact by these words: *"Thirty or forty percent of all deaths worldwide are now attributable to infectious disease, while war only accounts for 0.64 percent of those deaths".*

Diseases can threaten national and international security in a variety of ways. Firstly, diseases particularly those that have pandemic potential increase morbidity and mortality. Globally, as of 3 December 2021, there have been 263.563.622 confirmed cases of COVID-19, including 5.232.562 deaths (WHO 2021). Moreover, diseases damage health systems, reduce the workforce of the nation, and cause political and economic instability (Curta 2014). Furthermore, there are indirect threats disease poses to national security including *"the health of the armed forces and, most significantly, to the social, economic, and political stability of certain key regions"* (Peterson 2002 cited in Curta 2014). In this

context, COVID-19 pandemic disease has posed security threats to states as well as the EU in several ways, primarily through its impact on society, economic capacity, and internal or foreign politics.

Although the European integration history has been shaped by crises and responses to those crises, the challenges faced by the EU in the last decades have caused a questioning of solidarity and legitimacy within the EU. In 2020 which marks the 70th anniversary of the Schuman Declaration -the first crucial stage triggering the European integration- the EU faces the COVID-19 crisis as one of the epicentres of the catastrophic global pandemic. The ongoing crisis has been a severe test case for the resilience of the EU and constitutes another existential threat to its global role and security. Therefore, the crucial economic, social, and political implications of the pandemic are evaluated as a vital risk for the future of the Union.

It has been understood once again that the EU's capability and capacity to respond quickly to the crises are still restrained particularly in the policy areas whereby the EU competence is limited, and the member states stand substantially as the ultimate authority. The EU can only intervene to support, coordinate, and complement the action of the EU member states in those areas such as public health. This is principally due to the hybrid and sui generis nature of the Union as an international integration model combining supranational and intergovernmental features.

The initial responses of the individual member states in panic such as imposing their own border checks and restraining exports of medical equipment further deteriorated the sense of solidarity within the Union. The EU institutions became involved in the coordination of policy measures at the Union level by the mid-March 2020. The policy measures taken following the initial unpreparedness and lack of joint response have mainly aimed to address the core existential threats caused by the pandemic as well as to rebuild the suffering public image of the Union. These measures include a wide range of actions such as the repatriation of EU citizens, joint public procurements for the provision of medical supplies, the use of the civil protection mechanism to support the most-affected areas, an economic recovery plan, and the "Team Europe" approach as a global response to support the partners.

Overall, the EU's efforts to ensure its own survival and security appear to be quite far-reaching proving that the Union has progressively adapted to the crisis circumstances. On the other hand, the politicization of the EU's policies and measures and the rise of already existing populist trends and Euroscepticism vis-à-vis the pandemic may still be problematic for the future of European integration. As the pandemic undermines the Union's security environment, the EU needs to strengthen the preparedness and resilience of itself and its neighbourhood to crises ensuring security and stability both within and beyond its borders. The crumbling multilateralism and increasing global rivalry constitute a further risk for the EU's security. Nevertheless, despite the uncertainties about the longer-impact of the pandemic and the Union's response, it should be considered that the EU is

historically an experienced entity to the crises and often resort to pragmatic problem-solving strategies legitimizing and securing its existence.

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