

The Covid-19 crisis: Ten takeaways for the EU



What does the Covid-19 outbreak mean for the future of the European Union? [Paul Schmidt](#) presents ten takeaways for EU leaders, arguing that while the initial reaction has focused on closing borders and the role of nation states, there is a clear need for stronger European cooperation.

“When the end of the world comes, I go to Vienna. Everything happens there ten years later”, Austrian author Karl Kraus supposedly said. These times are finally over. Our world is in a state of emergency and we are right in the middle of it.

The coronavirus keeps us breathless causing feelings of helplessness and fear. In the absence of vaccines or medicine, countries around the world are increasingly locked down, closing their borders and reducing basic rights such as the freedom of assembly and movement in order to curb the contagion rate of the virus and protect their national health systems.

Not long ago, EU-countries were infighting over the second decimal in the next multiannual EU financial framework. Now, economic assistance packages worth hundreds of billions of euros are being set up in the various capitals to mitigate the consequences of the standstill, at least for the first few weeks. Is the nation state currently the actor of last resort? Has the EU failed? Not at all. In fact, the EU is only as strong as its members want it to be. Difficult times can teach us many lessons and some of them may already be on the horizon. The following list offers ten takeaways for the EU from the crisis so far.

1. The EU and its members will need to renew their crisis contingency planning

We need to do better when it comes to quickly and effectively coordinating individual national measures when a crisis hits. Negative secondary effects, such as national export bans of medical equipment, restrictions on entry for health and nursing staff or an interruption of cross-border trade in goods, must be avoided, while cross-border medical cooperation needs to be improved.

2. The EU's crisis instruments must be further expanded

In the aftermath of the last financial crisis, the EU improved its responsiveness in economic and financial matters. The Eurosystem ensures the supply of liquidity. EU members adopt stimulus packages, while the European Commission mobilises EU structural funds, suspends fiscal rules and state aid proceedings, helps with new credit lines and takes care of the functioning of the internal market.

However, further steps to expand this set of crisis instruments are necessary. The next EU budget will need to be retargeted, the European Stability Mechanism reworked, and reformed unemployment schemes will need to be rolled out to help with the recovery. All countries in a state of crisis will need guaranteed access to the capital market.

3. A common European health area should be established

The EU's determination to provide flexible economic and financial aid shall serve as an inspiration to create a common European health area. Today, health issues are primarily in national hands. Medical care, the organisation of public health or quarantine measures are provided on site. So far, the EU has been dependent on the good will of its member states to give support and coordinate the different measures taken. However, the current crisis makes clear that cross-border health matters – such as communicable diseases, the exchange of patients or joint procurement of medical devices – call for new European responsibilities and action.

4. Health funding must be increased

A robust, public health system is one of the most important socio-political pillars of the European welfare state. While in recent years national health systems have faced severe cuts, it is now time to boost financing and step up capacities. The same applies to effective crisis protection for employers and employees, which up to now has worked particularly well in countries with effective social partnership structures and traditionally established rules of social cohesion.

5. Nationalism is not a solution

Even if national borders have been raised reflexively and states are now ruled by emergency decrees, a new rise of coronavirus-inspired nationalism will not solve the problems at hand. National, regional and European crisis measures must complement each other in order to be fully effective and achieve the desired economies of scale.



Eurogroup President Mario Centeno during a video meeting on 7 April 2020, Credit: [European Union](#)

6. Strong national identities are compatible with European solidarity

In the current crisis, the importance of nation-states and nationalities has gained new prominence in the eyes of the public. Each country has tried to bring its own citizens home, albeit with the support of the European Commission. Nevertheless, this is no contradiction to the promotion of European awareness and European solidarity, as these elements are indispensable prerequisites for deeper cooperation in the future.

7. Globalisation may need to be reassessed

The Covid-19 outbreak has been a setback for globalisation. Securing the supply of necessary goods and strengthening local European production lines are now key challenges – in particular in the context of the EU's climate strategy. Fundamental dependencies due to global supply chains could be put on hold, with new European structures established. This should be viewed as an opportunity for the EU, and especially for cross-border regional cooperation.

8. Digital connectivity is indispensable, but it cannot replace direct human contact

There is no way around digitalisation. Home office, video conferencing, digital learning, social-digital contacts. Digital connectivity has proven itself to be an indispensable and critical communication infrastructure. Yet, we will have to learn to stand on our own feet. While it is essential for the EU to secure and guarantee digital infrastructure in the event of a crisis, digital communication will never replace direct human contact.

9. Research and development is a key priority

The current crisis must in addition lead to massive investment in research and development in the EU. The Union will have to find new ways to promote scientific excellence, keep it on the continent, make better use of it and limit existing global dependencies.

10. The crisis could yet boost confidence in European cooperation

If the EU – in association with its member states – succeeds in helping businesses via a large-scale programme for reconstruction, in maintaining employment and in cushioning the social impact of the crisis, approval for the European project could rise again and confidence in European cooperation might ultimately be strengthened.

Times of hardship are a test. They separate or bring people together. They raise awareness of what needs to be preserved and what must be changed. After the Covid-19 crisis, many things may be different. The European Union though has the social strength, the scientific know-how and the economic potential to master this polycrisis.

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Note: This article gives the views of the author, not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy or the London School of Economics.

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