

COVID-19 Crisis and EU: Liberal Values versus National Interest

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ABSTRACT *With the outbreak of the COVID-19 crisis, a great question arose about the possibility of applying liberal ideas in international politics and whether the national interest would prevail over liberal values in the international system. The EU is one of the most prominent of these case studies, as the countries of the EU suffered from weak collective efforts to combat the spread of COVID-19. This article aims to analyze whether the national interest will prevail over the liberal values of the European Union or not during the crises. This article argues that liberal values flourished tremendously in peace, but in times of crisis, liberal values are put to the test. Sometimes they can fail because national interest calculations are embedded deeply in nation-states. As long as liberal ideas converge with the national interest of nations, liberal institutions like the European Union can stand strong.*

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Introduction

Throughout history, humanity has sought to achieve security and, therefore, has established different security systems that led to the concept's expansion. However, such expansion makes it difficult to define the security concept clearly.¹ As such, the concept of security has been exploited to impose the domination of dictatorial regimes. It has restricted freedom of thought and violated human rights, and in the name of security, the regimes can impose their will over their citizens. This trend has eventually led intellectuals to adopt visions and theories to preserve human values, including liberal ideas in international relations.

Immanuel Kant was one of the first scholars to put in place the cornerstone of liberal theory on which the EU was created. Kant's liberal key assumptions include the rational qualities of individuals, faith in the feasibility of progress in social life, and the conviction that humans, despite their self-interest, can cooperate and construct a more peaceful and harmonious society. He also focused on democratic government, economic interdependence, international law, and international organizations as tools to overcome the security dilemma in the international system.²

These liberal ideas significantly impacted the collapse of dictatorships in Europe, especially in the post-World War II era, when democratic regimes began to spread and continent-wide wars disappeared. Accordingly, a

large class of politicians and scholars of international relations have argued that liberalism is the preferred option for avoiding war and achieving peace among people.

After the end of the Cold War, the international system was transformed from a multipolar system into a unipolar one led by the U.S. This new situation led to the creation of a new international political order based on liberal values. During this time, the theoretical frameworks developed by Francis Fukuyama in his book *The End of History and the Last Man* were one of important works that encouraged European leaders to adopt a democratic approach in Europe. The argument that the world has not witnessed a war between two democracies while witnessing the hundreds of wars that erupted between dictatorial regimes was one of the powerful arguments that adherents of this theory cited. Consequently, European states that suffered from conflicts did not want to engage in future conflicts again and found in the liberalism theory the basic foundation for the formation of lasting peace in the region.³

Europe has suffered many national and sectarian conflicts and was the greatest example among classical liberals to prove their theory. After World War II, with the collapse of dictatorships and the takeover of democratic leaders who sought to bring peace and prosperity to their countries, Europe's new leaders realized that true prosperity required greater market efficiencies than any European country alone. As a re-

sult, a complex network of mutual economic dependence has emerged, and this network underpins democracy, which also directly strengthens peace. As such, economic integration started with industries that were important to support wars, such as the coal and steel industries.⁴

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Liberal Ideas and EU: A Historical Overview

Austrian Count Richard von Coudenhove-Kalergi and French Prime Minister Aristide Briand were among the first politicians that called for the establishment of the United States of Europe. However, their efforts did not succeed due to the worsening economic crises and the rise of nationalism in Europe. After World War II, British Prime Minister Winston Churchill renewed these calls for European states to establish the United States of Europe.⁵ Churchill's efforts aimed to create a third global power alongside the Soviet Union and the U.S. and protect Europe from Soviet socialist expansion. However, these efforts failed again until 1951, when six European countries, namely France, West Germany, Italy, Belgium, Luxembourg, and the Netherlands, established the European Coal and Steel Community to prevent the German industry from becoming a war industry again.⁶

Six years later, the Treaty of Rome 1957 was signed between the countries to establish the European Economic Community and a common European market. This was consid-

ered the first step toward the founding of the European Union. This agreement was then amended by the Maastricht Treaty 1993, under which the European Union was established, and the euro was adopted as a common currency of the union. The treaty also aimed to develop common policies for internal, foreign, and defense affairs. In 2007, the Treaty of Lisbon was signed to make the union more democratic, address global problems such as climate change, and outline ways to withdraw from the EU.

The EU has aimed to ensure that the union has higher powers than the state, and the state is no longer the main actor. As such, the union collects taxes from all member states, imposes joint legislation, etc. Also, the union laws precede the laws of member states, whereby the European Court of Justice separates the potential conflicts between the member states, while the European Central Bank controls the fiscal and monetary policies.

COVID-19 Challenge

The COVID-19 crisis was not the first crisis that threatened the continua-

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tion of the EU and will not be the last. Despite the great success of the EU so far, as claimed by liberals, it has faced several serious crises that almost led to its failures, such as the refugee crisis, the financial problems of Greece and Italy, the rise of far-right political movements in Europe, and the withdrawal of the UK.

However, the circumstances and repercussions of the COVID-19 crisis had the most significant impact, making it the most prominent and influential crisis in the history of the union. This crisis prompted some European leaders to declare the union's tacit failure, such as Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić when he said: "The European solidarity does not exist. That was a fairy tale on paper."⁷ He also kissed the Chinese flag as an expression of gratitude after the immediate Chinese approval of his request for assistance.

One of the serious effects of the crisis, which has demonstrated the fragility of European solidarity, is the occurrence of incidents that may affect the union's future. For example, the seizure by the Czech authorities of protective medical masks and other medical supplies sent from China to

Italian hospitals to help them deal with the coronavirus, as well as the raising of the Chinese flag by some Italian citizens in place of the European Union flag in recognition of China's support for Italy in the face of the coronavirus outbreak.⁸

During these events, an important question arises as to the extent to which the national interest of the European Union states collides with the liberal ideas and values on which the union is founded. This question can be answered by investigating the success or failure of the EU's objectives and values during the COVID-19 pandemic. Such an investigation could demonstrate the reliability of the claims that the liberal system is stable and show the credibility of the EU's objectives if it clashes with the national interest of member states.

The European Union considers the promotion of peace, its values, and the well-being of its citizens as its first goal, which also includes preserving solidarity in the face of dangers that may threaten the states of the union. However, COVID-19 has tested the commitment to achieve this goal. Germany, for instance, at the beginning of the crisis, prevented the export of any medical equipment outside its borders, including to members of the bloc. Furthermore, the union's response to the crisis in Italy was too slow, which led to deep resentment in the most affected countries.

French President Emmanuel Macron, therefore, warned of the collapse of the European Union as a po-

litical project if the EU did not take serious steps to support the economies of the stricken countries. As such, these incidents have made it difficult to achieve the union's goal of promoting peace, its values, and the well-being of its citizens. The failure to achieve these goals when a great need arises raises questions about the future of the EU if new crises occur. For example, will national interests take precedence as they did during the COVID-19 crisis, or will liberal values and goals take center stage?

One of the important goals that the EU seeks to achieve is to provide freedom, security, and justice without internal borders. However, this goal failed during the COVID-19 crisis, as European countries were quick to close their domestic borders based on individual decisions without any coordination with the union's institutions.

Germany, for example, issued a travel warning regarding Belgium, while France did not take the same action. As for Hungary, it imposed a complete ban on flights, except for those coming from Poland, the Czech Republic, and Slovakia, while Spain declared a health alert in Madrid. Eventually, the EU tried to accommodate the problem and find solutions within its framework. In this regard, EU foreign ministers adopted common and unified criteria for coordinating travel restrictions. The regions in the union were classified by three colors, green, orange, and red, with the addition of a fourth color, gray, for areas with insufficient informa-

tion. Despite this delayed attempt at a unified response, a constant question arises concerning the readiness of member states to implement unified objectives in the event of pandemics and crises. Therefore, the same question arises as to whether the national interest has again triumphed.

The European Union also aims to achieve sustainable development based on balanced economic growth and price stability, a highly competitive market economy with full employment and social progress, and environmental protection. Sustainable development can also be achieved by combatting several social issues, including poverty, social exclusion, and discrimination, by supporting the member states' efforts to address the problems. It also aims to reinforce the inclusiveness and cohesion of European society and allow all citizens to enjoy equal access to opportunities and resources.

However, the EU also appears to have failed to achieve these goals, as calls for assistance for the collapsed economies of Italy, France, and Spain have deepened the crisis between the northern members, including Germany and the Netherlands, and the southern European states, which include Italy, France, and Spain. This crisis stems from the belief of the union's northern states that the whole burden falls on them as the two economically powerful states of the union. The union's southern states believe that they are the most affected by the crisis and that the union's northern states must help



European Council President Charles Michel leads EU Leaders' Summit held via a video conference in Brussels, Belgium, on March 25, 2021. OLIVER MATTHYS / Pool / AA

them to achieve balance in Europe. COVID-19 thus illustrates the extent to which the national interest of EU states triumphs over the liberal goals and values on which the union was established and poses multiple questions about the union's future.

One of the important objectives of the EU is to enhance the economic, social, and territorial cohesion and solidarity among the bloc's countries. The union succeeded in achieving this during the crisis, but this success was not easily earned. After more than four days of 'difficult talks' that nearly broke the EU's longest-ever record, the European Union presented, on July 21, 2020, a 750 billion euro recovery plan to overcome the re-

percussions of the COVID-19 crisis on the economy. According to this recovery plan for Europe, the countries most affected by the crisis, such as Italy and Spain, would be given the largest share.

One of the most important values on which the European Union was founded and failed to maintain during the COVID-19 pandemic is the preservation of human dignity and human rights. The Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) warned in May 2020 that COVID-19 had caused an increase in human trafficking crimes and poor conditions for refugees in refugee camps in Europe. This deterioration was due to the lack of safe liv-

ing conditions for these refugees and the pressures of the economic crisis on a large segment of the world's population.

Nationalism or European Identity?

After a century of turmoil and chaos that culminated in a bloody 30-year war on the European continent motivated by sectarian differences within Christianity following the reformation calls adopted by Martin Luther in 1517, the European powers signed the Treaty of Westphalia 1648, which ended these conflicts and guaranteed the states their sovereignty.

The conflicts led to material and moral losses of the German states as the battlefields of these wars, as well as a demographic change and the spread of diseases and deadly epidemics such as the plague. These became some of the major reasons that inspired negotiations between the European powers to find solutions to the war. In addition, the substantial outbreak of famine in German cities and villages, the death of Emperor Ferdinand II in 1637, and the coming to power of Emperor Ferdinand III, who found the Holy Roman Empire treasury bankrupt, also formed additional motives for the policymakers in all involved parties to find a compromise that would guarantee peace. In addition, the exposure of the "Richelieu" regime in France from 1624-1642 led to internal crises due to the prolonged war. At the same time, many rebellions had emerged in

An overview of the crises that have plagued the EU demonstrates that the national interest of the individual states of the union often triumphed when it clashed with the values and goals of the bloc

Spain due to the great losses during the wars. These events prompted European leaders to negotiate and find definitive solutions to these futile wars under the slogan "Peace for the Christian World." Accordingly, the European leaders concluded the Peace of Westphalia, which consisted of two peace treaties. The first treaty was signed on May 15, 1648, in Osnabrück, and the second one was signed up on October 24, 1648, in Münster. Both cities belong to the German province of Westphalia, and both treaties were written in French. These two treaties ended the grinding wars on the European continent and established the principles of international order and law.⁹

The Westphalia Treaty greatly impacted the shaping of the contemporary world order. The treaty produced a new European political system based on sovereignty and allowed rulers to decide on religious worship and freedom. It also prohibited the sovereign interference of other states over the domestic affairs of one state

If the EU collapses one day, it would not reflect a failure of liberal values. It would be more dependent on the realization of fundamental aspects of human nature for survival, which is inseeded in the behavior of nations

and created respect for the territorial integrity of states. After this treaty, the modern diplomatic relationship was formed, and the loyalty of Europeans was to the national state rather than to the Catholic Church.

With the end of World War II and the spread of democracy and secular regimes that marginalized the role of the Church in the affairs of government and the establishment of the European Union, liberalist scholars and followers believed that they had achieved a great step in imposing a state of peace and in dissolving religious and cultural differences in the European continent. However, realistic principles often impose themselves strongly in the crises that have occurred in Europe. For example, once the UK felt that its role in the world had been marginalized and that the British Crown had been subjugated to the European Council after being a great power, in addition to the need to establish a balanced power in the world, the UK hastened to withdraw from the EU and

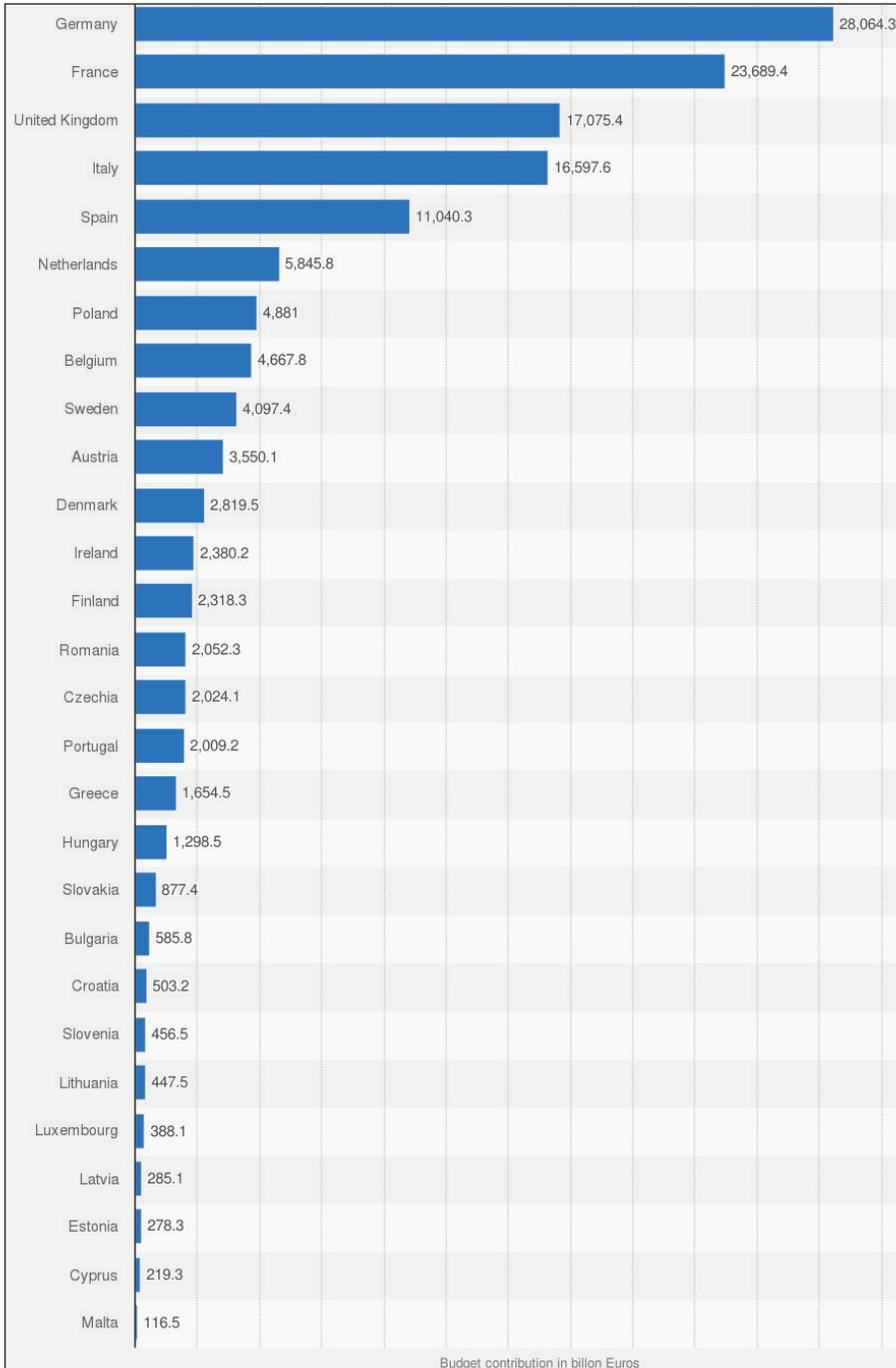
restored its sovereignty over the UK territories.

These crises that engulfed the EU and the exploitation of advocates of demagoguery led to the emergence of nationalist and populist movements, which allowed the far-right movements to take over the authority in some European countries. These events consequently led to a weakening of the voice that called for European unity and the rise in the demands for the return of the Westphalian system between the countries of the European Union. This feeling was strongly reinforced after Britain's exit from the union and the COVID-19 crisis, strengthening the hypothesis of a strong return of the Westphalian regime to the European continent.

The UK may be the first country to withdraw from the EU, but it definitely will not be the last. Many other countries, such as France, Italy, and Greece, may follow after having suffered from the COVID-19 crisis and successive financial crises.

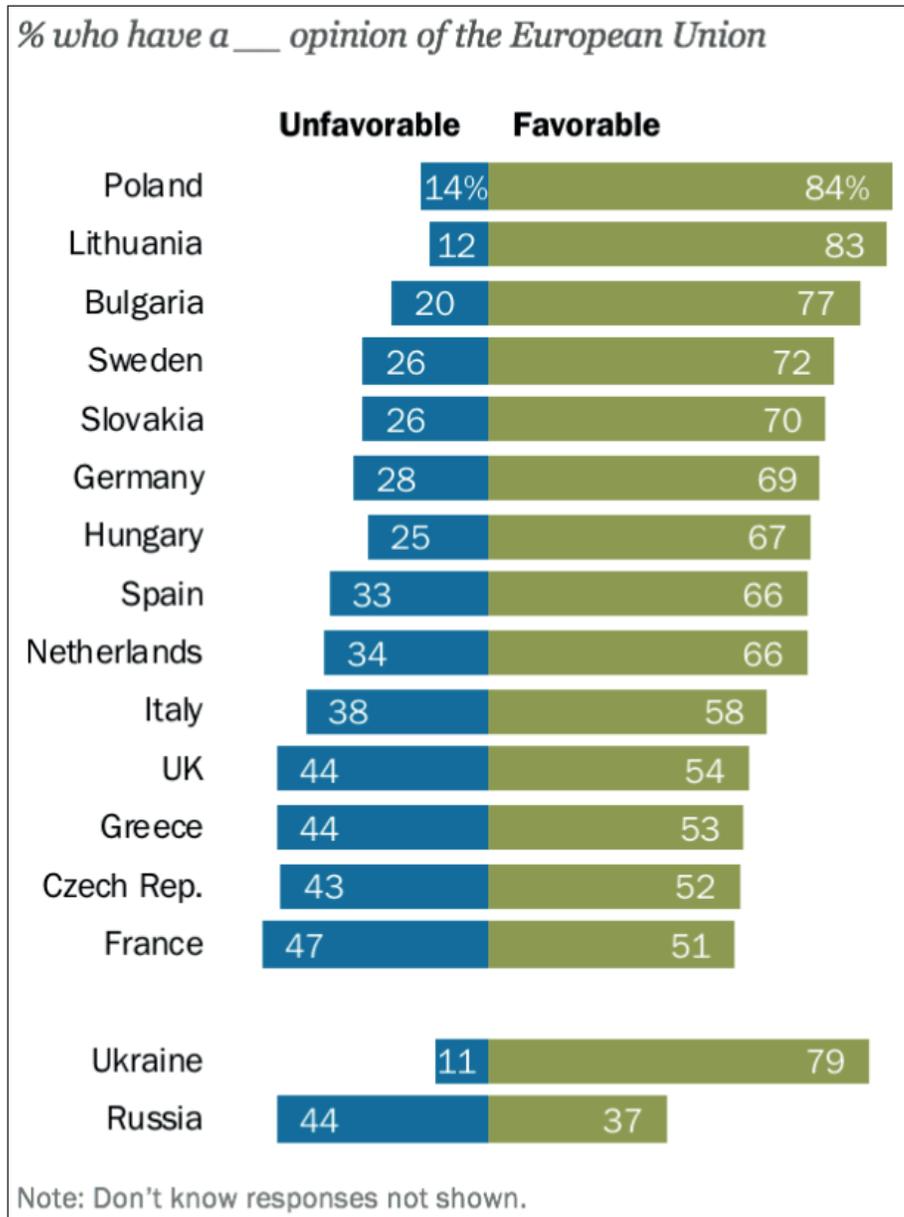
Interestingly, economically strong countries such as Germany are leading the way in EU membership. At the same time, the membership is significantly weakened by countries with weak expenditures, such as Greece, as described in the figure below. This can be explained by the fact that the stronger economies seek to keep the EU as an open market. Vulnerable states see themselves as the least economic beneficiaries. Therefore, the same previous question is repeated: Does the national interest

Figure 1. Amount Contributed to the Budget of the European Union in 2019 by Member States



Source: Statista¹⁰

Figure 2. Most Member Nations Hold Favorable Views of the European Union



Source: Pew Research¹¹

still overwhelm the values and goals of the European Union?

Conclusion

An overview of the crises that have plagued the EU demonstrates that the national interest of the individual states of the union often triumphed when it clashed with the values and goals of the bloc. However, this problem has often been addressed by EU countries, despite the slowness and sometimes even failure to resolve it. This slowdown always leads us to the question of whether there is a bigger crisis than all previous crises: Will the national interest once again triumph over liberal values and goals, or will liberal values and goals be the voice of reason after the first shock of a crisis? Although senior scholars such as Mearsheimer believe that the liberal system is bound to fail,¹² the EU's handling of the crises has made it clear that the liberal system often finds a way to solve its problems.

It can be said that the fact that European countries seek to remain in the EU is not only driven by the goals and values of the union but also closely linked to the national interest of all member states. When the EU states' national interest clashes with the union's values and goals, states often prioritize their national interests and accelerate their withdrawal from the union, as the UK did.

In peace, liberal values flourished tremendously, but in times of crisis, liberal values are put to the test. Some-

times they can fail because national interest calculations are embedded deeply in nation-states. As long as liberal ideas converge with the national interest of nations, liberal institutions like the European Union can stand strong.

Thus, if the EU collapses one day, it would not reflect a failure of liberal values. It would be more dependent on the realization of fundamental aspects of human nature for survival, which is inseminated in the behavior of nations. ■

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