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Scholars' Policy Papers

Views of young professionals on current challenges

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The importance of Franco-German relations for the European Integration process: Lessons from NGEU negotiations (2020)

Savvas Papadopoulos

Do the Franco-German relations remain the driving force for the European Integration process? Which are the factors that contribute to a closer cooperation between the two states? Does the EU progress come to fruition only when the Franco-German engine is activated? The current policy paper tries to examine the significance of the Franco-German relations for the European integration process, and their refunction during the Next Generation EU and MFF 2021-2027 program negotiations aiming to understand how the recent past events shaped their current relations and the future of the Union. The policy paper will examine the factors that led to the successful negotiations of the NGEU, the best practices, the lessons learnt as well as the points of convergence and contention between the two countries.

Introduction

The Great Recession in 2008 and its ramifications in European economies led to a decade of crisis marking the rise of Euroscepticism, a direct challenge of the European project. However, the European integration process never paused and continued adopting a different approach. Member states were reluctant to transfer their sovereignty to supranational entities, but they continued to promote cooperation and empower intergovernmental institutions, as the European Council, pursuing further joint collaboration even in unmapped areas[1] .

Intergovernmental settings promote the bargaining process where the powers of each member state are vital for the successful outcome. The opposing national preferences lead to the formation of coalitions and the deployment of negotiation tactics and strategies. Bilateral meetings and agreements can take place in order to establish common ground among member states and maximize the bargaining power during the negotiation process. According to Bailer[2] (2004), member states with exogenous powers such as geography, population, and economic and military power are likely to succeed in EU negotiations. France and Germany are the largest, most populated and economically powerful states in the Union making their consent, vital for European policy-making. Their collaboration is a real evidence of the of intergovernmentalism's efficiency in the EU[3] .

France and Germany's relations are considered historically vital not only for the European process but the peace and prosperity of the European region. In his memoirs, the German Chancellor Konrad Adenauer, stated that France and Germany have shared a common purpose to "overcome a history of war," terminating years of cruelty and hatred. The European Union could be perceived as a project to establish peaceful relations between the two countries and peace

[1] Bickerton, C. J., Hodson, D., &Puetter, U. (2015). The New Intergovernmentalism. Oxford University Press.

[2] Bailer, S. (2004). Bargaining Success in the European Union. European Union Politics, 5(1), 99–123

[3] Darmé, C. (2020, May 25). When the Franco–German "Couple" Starts Making Sense Again. IAI IstitutoAffariInternazionali

in the whole European continent. Due to their "eternal" destiny of being interdependent, the only solution is cooperation and communication, whilst the alternative would be disputes and conflict[4] .

In the post-2008 financial crisis, Germany, due to its economic performance, acquired a leadership position becoming a -reluctant- "hegemon"[5] directing the EU. Germany as a supporter of the ordoliberal framework -Ordnungspolitik -[6] including fiscal restraints and economic targets instilled this model in the eurozone. France's weak position created imbalances between the relations of the two countries and provided the impression that the "engine" seemed malfunctioning or obsolete[7]. Mourlon-Druol (2017) adds that the Eurozone crisis surfaced the differences between the two states, and

collaboration on significant issues seemed hard to achieve.

 The events of the COVID-19 pandemic were a wake-up call of the Franco-German pair. The power of the two states ensures their leadership position[8] in the Union providing stability, cohesion and a clear direction; France and Germany achieved to cooperate ending in a common proposal and agenda regarding the Next Generation EU package, leading to the recovery of the European Economy and shaping the post-pandemic Union.

The Franco-German duet as an engine for the European integration process

After WWII, the Franco-German cooperation was launched with the Elysée Treaty(1963) in which a bilateral agreement marked the "special relationship" between them[9]. After the treaty, France and Germany have enhanced their relations to achieve better coordination at an EU level. The known Blaesheim process is a notable example based on the idea of informal communication and collaboration among the two countries. An efficient Franco-German cooperation presses the EU towards significant integration steps through resolving impasses and reaching European compromises[10].

Traditionally, due to the uniqueness of each state, France and Germany tend to prefer different policies and opposing views on policymaking. The different preferences lead member states in different coalitions, each acquiring a position of leadership in opposed camps. France tends to adopt positions closer to the Southern European states, while Germany prefers the positions of Frugals. Despite of their opposite preferences,

[4] Treacher, A. (2002). Franco-German Relations and European Integration: Peeling off the Labels. The British Journal of Politics and International Relations, 4(3), 510–518.

[5] Mourlon-Druol, E. (2017). Rethinking Franco-German relations: a historical perspective. Bruegel. 29.

[6] Bulmer, S. (2014). Germany and the Eurozone Crisis: Between Hegemony and Domestic Politics. West European Politics, 37(6), 1244–1263.

[7] Mourlon-Druol, 2017

[8] Krotz, U., & Schramm, L. (2021a). An Old Couple in a New Setting: Franco-German Leadership in the Post-Brexit EU. Politics and Governance, 9(1), 48–58.

[9] Poptcheva, E.-M. (2015, October). The Franco-German relationship in the European Union: A short overview | Think Tank | European Parliament. EPRS | European

[10] Poptcheva, 2015

they maintain open communication channels and willing to cooperate in order to solve the gradual deadlocks in the European decision-making process.

The achievement of an agreement between France and Germany is explained by the idea of compromise by proxy[11] namely to bridge the differences and engage all actors with opposed views and preferences[12]. The coordination and agreements achieved by the two largest EU states is an example of how compromises are reached in the Union[13].

The case of NGEU negotiations in 2020

During 2020, the pandemic found the EU at ground zero. The COVID-19 outbreak paused the economic circulation, leading the Union's economy to the brink of a new financial crisis. All the countries were affected dramatically especially the southern with a high public debt needing an immediate response.

The open letter of Italy, signed by nine member states for issuing corona bonds for the Recovery of the Union, was the beginning of the most extended negotiation process in the history of the EU. At the beginning, Germany maintained its decade position that loans must be used for those member-states that need assistance in the frame of existing fiscal tools[14]. On the other hand, France was in favor of the corona bond proposal, which agreed with Macron's idea of "European autonomy and sovereignty".

Two highly opposed camps were formed; the southern states requesting the issuance of corona bonds and the northern ones, keeping an unyielding stance and promoting the usage of existing financial tools as loans linked with reforms and economic targets. A hard-distributive bargaining was taking place in the EU making clear that France and Germany had to take up the leadership initiative of the Union and pursue to achieve a compromise among them[15].

Measured statements took place and extensive negotiations began. The two sides used integrative tactics to understand and come closer to each other's position through mutual concessions. The Franco-German tandem led to a joint proposal which set the agenda for the negotiations on the NGEU Fund. The joint initiative, which both leaders announced, was followed by bilateral meetings with the rest member-states, specifically with those they represented[16]. The entire process was coordinated by the two states which adopted direct communication channels.

The Franco-German approach contained an initiative for 500billion Euros on grants allocated according to the level COVID-19 ramification regarding geographical criteria as the country's size, while they supported funds for the Green and Digital transformation of the EU. The main reason behind the refunction of the pair was the deadlock the EU was into, while a series of destabilizing events such as the Brexit and Donald Trump's administration demanded a strong EU, able to compete to the new multipolar reality with the US and China. Finally, the ramifications of the Covid-19 pandemic plunged the EU into a financial crisis also affecting the economy of France and Germany[17] [18].

During the negotiation process, the Franco-German tandem proceeded to limit the gap with

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[11] Koopmann, M. (2004)'A Driving Force Despite Everything: Franco-German Relations and the Enlarged European Union'. Notre Europe Studies & Research Paper No. 36.

[12] Darmé, 2020

[13] Krotz, U., & Schramm, L. (2021b). Embedded Bilateralism, Integration Theory, and European Crisis Politics: France, Germany, and the Birth of the EU Corona Recovery Fund*. JCMS: Journal of Common Market Studies.

[14] Krotz& Schramm, 2021

[15] Krotz& Schramm, 2021

[16] Darmé, 2020

[17] Erlanger, S. (2020b, July 16). Merkel and Macron Propose E.U. Coronavirus Aid Fund. The New York Times.

[18] de la Porte, C., & Jensen, M. D. (2021). The next generation EU: An analysis of the dimensions of conflict behind the deal. Social Policy & Administration, 55(2), 388–402.

the other member-state coalitions. Trade-offs and log-rolling have been used, whilst in case of actors, like Poland or Hungary, who threatened with veto, didn't affect France and Germany who were ready to proceed with the rest of the bloc. The final agreement was closer to the Franco-German tandem's position and objectives, proving once more that these two states are the driving force of the European integration process.

What will the future bring?

The events of the NGEU agreement shadow the post-Merkel Franco-German relations. In its manifesto, the new German government has argued to strengthen the EU and form it into a "Federal European State", Europäischern Bundesstaat. It is noteworthy that the first foreign trip of the new German Chancellor, Olaf Scholz, was in France, where he mentioned the necessity to make Europe more sovereign[19].

All these statements align with Macron's ambitions, signaling the continuation of the close cooperation of the Franco-German tandem and the effects on the European Integration process. Although the German Chancellor's "European

sovereignty" is not identified with Macron's "European Autonomy"[20], Germany prefers the Euro-Atlanticist approach to a European autonomy[21]. An additional area of conflict would be the future of the fiscal rules in EU. France and Italy have already signed a treaty that could be perceived similar as the birth treaty of the Franco-German Tandem in Elysee. France and Italy press for a reform of the Eurozone[22] against the fiscal restriction policies supported by the German Finance Minister. Finally, a significant cause of disagreement is formed around nuclear energy, where France and Germany openly disagree. France promotes the acceptance of nuclear energy as sustainable and eco-friendly, while the new German government has stated their public disagreement regarding the use of nuclear energy[23].

How could the recent past shape the future?

The NGEU negotiations are a notable example of Franco-German joint leadership and its efficiency in forming agreements within the frame of opposed preferences. Inclusive tactics are vital to reach the Other. France and Germany, two member states from opposing camps, achieved to come closer and understand each other's viewpoints and preferences. The outcome of this process is a gradual mutual concession of both sides, by eliminating the positions that are -to the detriment of the other. In the case of NGEU negotiations, France stopped the request of corona bonds due to Germany's disagreement and Germany started examining the idea of grants.

Another vital lesson is the necessity for inclusion of the rest member states during the formation

[19] Cohen, R., & Bennhold, K. (2021, December 11). Macron and Scholz Meet and Call for More 'European Sovereignty.' The New York Times.

[20] Cohen & Bennhold, 2021

[21] Streeck, W. (2022, February 1). New German coalition'scompetingvisions. Le MondeDiplomatique.

[22] Leali, G. (2021, December 23). Macron and Draghi jointly call for softer fiscal rules. POLITICO.

[23] Wehrmann, B. (2021, December 6)New German govt faces tough challenge in French nuclear power push for the EU – media. Clean Energy Wire.

of the agreement. Even though the Franco-German initiatives are the "fuel" for the European integration process, the engagement of the rest member states is necessary. In the case of 2020 NGEU negotiations, some may criticize the Franco-German approach as leaving small space for any agenda setting. However, thanks to the outreach of Emmanuel Macron and Angela Merkel to the other member-states, they achieved through bilateral meetings to shape an inclusive compromise, where all declared their satisfaction in their domestic arenas.

Conclusions

The events of the 2020 NGEU negotiations confirmed the power of the Franco-German tandem. However, the critics of the Franco-German bilateral agreements argue that those agreements pre-form the European decision-making process, leaving no space for other actors to get involved and influence the process. At the same time, supranational institutions could rarely become direct "actors". As Mourlon-Druol (2017) states, it is clear that any significant European policy or reform requires the consent and cooperation of the "duet", but it is also essential to establish an environment of co-decision with the rest member states, either through further bilateral meetings or through the framework of the European Council. The case of NGEU (2020) is an example on how the Franco-German tandem can form an inclusive environment for member states' interests, fulfilling the European Integration promise.

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Crisis Management and Risk Communication:

The Covid-19 vaccination policies implemented by Greece and Germany during the first three months of 2021

Ioanna Georgia Eskiadi

The current policy paper aims to analyze and explore the Covid-19 vaccination policies implemented by the Greek and German governments in the first three months of 2021 in the prism of crisis management and risk communication. The period refers to the beginning of the vaccination process in both countries. Covid-19 was an unknown risk with high scientific uncertainty about its impact and how it was spread due to its novelty leading to mixed messages. Crisis management and risk communication have emerged during the Covid-19 pandemic as two necessary and important concepts that each state should take into account in order to create its strategy. The two governments need to be better prepared in future crisis and develop an effective communication policy to reach the audience and protect public health. This could happen by promoting health literacy and education among the citizens.

Introduction

Covid-19 pandemic has affected gravely the humanity the last two years. Governments in order to act, respond and manage a crisis need to be prepared, to have a well-structured crisis management plan, effective risk communication to address their messages and convince the audience about the severity of the virus. In this paper, we present the vaccination policies implemented by the Greek and the German governments during the first three months of 2021. Especially, we emphasize on how the two governments organized the vaccination rollout and how the vaccination process was communicated. In the beginning, we analyze shortly the two definitions, then we present the two vaccination policies; we compare them and finally we recommend some practical next steps for future crisis. Vaccine hesitancy is present and high in both countries and one of the main reasons is the lack of trust to the public institutions, of coordination and communication plan and the rise of disinformation.

Crisis Management and Risk Communication

Crisis management is a process of strategic planning, a procedure that removes someone from the risk and the uncertainty of a negative event and allows a government to better control its future. Effective crisis management includes crisis communication which not only reduces the crisis but can also bring an organization a better reputation than it had before. Risk communication; refers to the dialogue between the organizations and the public before, during and after a negative event. Dialogue includes strategies and tactics designed to reduce damage to a government's image. Risk Communication is vital especially in an attempt to contain the diffusion of already spreading risks or risk consequences, especially in cases of contagious diseases like Covid-19 pandemic. It is, also, connected with trust, an important element in understanding perceived risk.

Public health correspondents can be part of the crisis response team, so they need to be trained and regularly use technological tools

that can increase their preparedness. In health crisis management, timely and accurate risk information is needed. A government needs two-way symmetrical crisis communication in its processes to respond to the public and their need for information. It's important to use accurate messages to reach the audience with the most effective method. Ensuring message consistency can promote public trust in the government's approach in managing risks including Covid-19.

One potential challenge to achieving the target of maximum immunization is vaccine hesitancy and a growing anti-vaccination movement across Europe, because coercion has resulted in increased and hardening distrust in authorities. Research into vaccine communication has argued that communicators should not be too optimistic in their expectations and communicate to these nations that they will not go 'back to normal' any time soon, particularly in the face of uncertainty about timelines. Government agencies sometimes lack public trust and credibility and officials often use technical, legalistic, or bureaucratic language which is difficult to comprehend and gives the impression that officials are being unresponsive or evasive. Health policy analysis is a multi-disciplinary approach to public policy that aims to explain the interaction between institutions, interests and ideas in the policy process.

Greece

The Greek government has managed the Covid-19 pandemic through strict lockdowns and preventative measures, imposing one of the longest lockdowns in Europe. The

hesitancy against the Covid-19 vaccine can be explained due to the concerns about the safety and effectiveness of it or the belief that the individuals are not at risk of becoming ill. Therefore, the Greek government had to deal with a public with high distrust to the former and to the vaccine. Greece communicated through daily press conferences, campaigns in social media and a specialized website, aimed to inform citizens about Covid-19 vaccine. The vaccination campaign started on the 22nd of December 2020 named "National Vaccination Campaign 'Operation Freedom", raising the ambitions of the public that the vaccine will give them back their freedom, something that was partially true because people can still be affected albeit vaccinated. The press conferences were made by a scientist and a politician. The prioritization of the vaccine was for the health care workers, older people who are housed in structures such as nursing homes and then people over 85 years old. On the 17th of January 2021, the vaccine was available for people older than 85. On the 5th of February, the vaccine of Astra Zeneca was decided to be available for all the citizens younger than 64 years old. People between 60-64 and 75-79 would get the vaccine from 10th of February and 12th of February, respectively. At the end of March fully vaccinated were 565.000 citizens.

Germany

The German government took repressive measures to counteract the Covid-19 pandemic. Chancellor Angela Merkel was responsible to communicate and inform the citizens about the situation, announcing measures about the vaccination program. In Germany the pandemic is managed by local and regional governments, with the central government having a supervisory role. The vaccination campaign began on the 26th of December 2020 and the vaccine was planned to be distributed in four priority groups. The beginning was with everyone over 80-year-old and high-risk medical personnel. The second group consists of people aged 70 to 79 and those with high-risk preexisting conditions. The third group included people between 60 to 69, employees of the government, shops and vital infrastructure and teachers. The German government has been optimistic about vaccine rollout. Only around 10% of

the population had received a first dose by late March. The domestic vaccine rollout was decentralized and controlled by the Bundesländer resulting in slow progress until April. The German government vaccination communication strategy used a poor choice of imagery, not offering real incentives to get vaccinated, and exhibiting inconsistent policy and communication. Recent communications promoting vaccination have used images of clinical settings and images of people getting vaccinated in their arms, which may have the reverse impact by triggering fear or other negative emotions among unvaccinated individuals due to the presence of needles.

Conclusion

Greece and Germany entrusted the management and communication to specialized experts and scientists. Greece in contrast -to Germany has a centralized decision-making system leading to a faster response and to low vaccination rates until late March compared to Germany. Germany is characterized by trust to state institutions, science and media, an element that lacks in Greece. Both countries followed ambitious vaccination campaigns and advanced to predictions about the rates. The Greek government followed one-way oriented communication through press conferences and traditional media while the content published on webpages lacked visualizations and interactivity and made use of high scientific language. The German government communicated more effectively without using high-scientific language, following a two-way communication and using all the possibilities given by new media.

Recommendations

Both of the governments need to create, plan and implement policies that convince and educate the public about the real risk. Crisis management and risk communication implemented by the two countries raises and highlights issues of capacity and legitimacy. Both of the countries should have a better healthcare and governing system so as to avoid the spread of disinformation. Covid-19 pandemic has exposed governments to an unknown danger but they should be prepared and have a well-structured plan. The existence of a pre-crisis action plan as well as training and the ability to improvise during a crisis are

particularly important elements. The role of the leader of a state is important as it is a symbol of legitimacy and trust for the citizens. Greece should communicate early to avoid creating gaps to public consciousness which can be easily taken up by conspiracy theories spread through social media, leading to the infodemic phenomenon. Germany should organize better and more effectively the management of vaccine rollout by local and regional governments. The policy of the states needs to be oriented towards the protection of human health and the upgrading of the emergency system. Citizens need to be educated on preventive strategies to handle health crises, i.e., to have health literacy. Health literacy enables individuals to learn about the dynamics of the outbreak, to implement the practices that will protect themselves and people around them, and to resolve the dilemmas that they encounter in the environment of infodemics by introducing the causality principle. Reasoned transparency in communication alongside consistency and clarity are key elements to avoid long-term vaccine hesitancy and widespread vaccine refusal.

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Ukrainian Crisis: A checkpoint for Common Foreign and Security Policy?

Georgios Dimakos

Introduction

An old crisis has revived in the East for the European Union (EU) as Russia gathered its troops along the Ukrainian borders. Russia has been steadily increasing its forces over the last months, making the Ukrainian government and the West nervous regarding its intentions. The Russian President, Vladimir Putin, is making clear that a potential expansion of NATO will not be tolerated and the possibility of a NATO membership for Ukraine is a serious security threat for Kremlin. This membership has ignited a serious dispute between NATO/EU and Russia with severe implications for the stability of the European continent and economy; the provision of Russian gas to the EU[1] and European energy reserves are in historic low levels, Nord Stream 2 (a gas pipeline connecting Russia to Germany – and one of the most important projects of GAZPROM) might be halted indefinitely[2], the energy prices are suffocating the European economy, and the Ukrainian integrity is in jeopardy.

Background

The Ukrainian crisis began in 2014 when the pro-European movement forced the pro-Russian President to resign, thereby creating a political si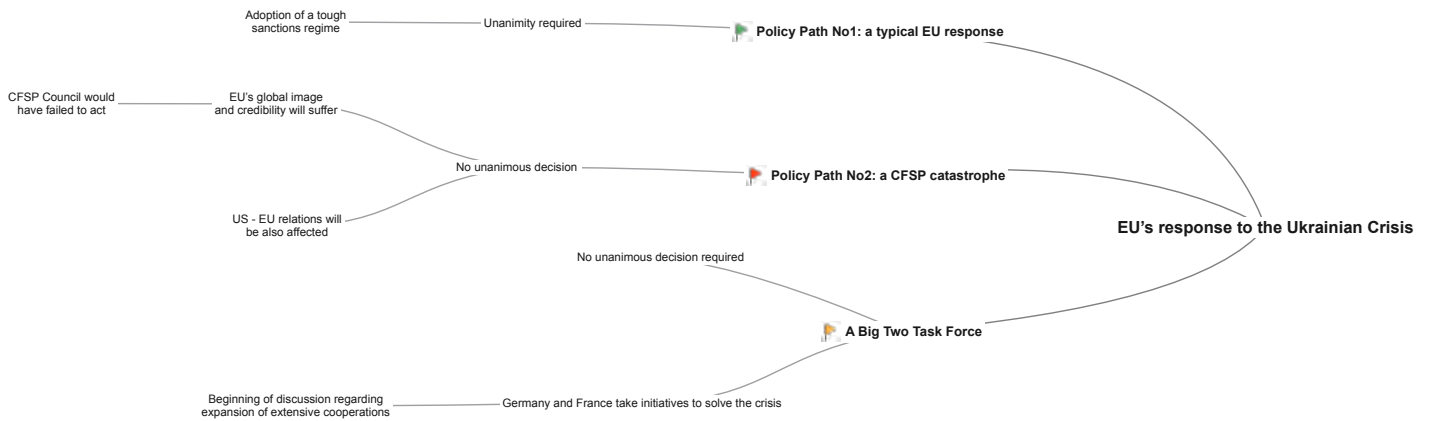tuation that would open the door for Russia to invade the country. Kremlin considered Ukraine to be in its sphere of influence, and the possibility of EU or NATO membership was viewed as a threat for Russia. In 2014, the Ukrainian drama was at its peak; Russia surprised the world with an invasion that would result in the illegal annexation of the Crimea region. The invasion and the annexation were a shocking event. The EU tried to respond to the crisis, but it was already too late. The heads of the Member States choose to use a sanction policy as the primary way to tackle Russian hostility. Several companies and individuals were added to a European blacklist and a series economic sanctions were approved by the Council. Economic sanction regime has been in place since 2014.[3] Five years later, Ukraine's territorial integrity is not restored, and the country remains in deep political crisis, mainly due to the interference of Russia. The current situation is a political nightmare for Brussels and Washington. European leaders and the American President, Joe Biden, are issuing statements of support towards the Ukrainian government while the Russian President and the Chinese President seal a new partnership to stop the expansion of NATO in Beijing.

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[1] Russia is the biggest gas provider of EU: 40% of gas comes from Russia.

[2] The White House has warned Russia that Nord Stream 2 pipeline could be terminated in case of Russian invasion in Ukraine.

[3] https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/policies/sanctions/ukraine-crisis/history-ukraine-crisis/

Adoption of a tough sanctions regime ———— Unanimity required ———— 🚩 **Policy Path No1: a typical EU response**

CFSP Council would have failed to act   EU's global image and credibility will suffer

No unanimous decision ———— 🚩 **Policy Path No2: a CFSP catastrophe**

US - EU relations will be also affected

EU's response to the Ukrainian Crisis

No unanimous decision required

🚩 **A Big Two Task Force**

Beginning of discussion regarding expansion of extensive cooperations ———— Germany and France take initiatives to solve the crisis

The European Institutions have issued a series of statements of support towards the Ukrainian government following the example of European national governments. In his recent trip to Kyiv, Josep Borrell, High Representative of the EU for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, stated that there is no security in Europe without the security of Ukraine and that the EU will support Ukraine. However, it is a long way from vague statements calling for de-escalation and respect of international conventions together with a financial support package to an actual act of support and a potential counteraction in case of invasion. The European Commission, the executive arm of the EU, is working full time to prepare for a potential action plan to tackle the crisis and respond to a possible Russian invasion. EEAS and the European Commission will present this plan of action to the European Council, where the leaders of the Member States will have the opportunity to pick and choose policy tools to respond to Russia. Considering the way the EU responded to the 2015 crisis, the EU probably will go forward with the implementation of sanctions. Still, the level of how tough the sanctions are going to be is up to the political intentions of the national governments of the Member States that are going to have heated discussions in Brussels.

The Three Scenarios

There are three main policy scenarios for the EU. Every scenario will have implications for the European economy and security, and will affect future discussions for the Common Foreign Security Policy (CFSP).

Scenario A: A typical response

In a case of an open Russian invasion, the level of the threat for the European security would alarm most of the Member States and would facilitate achieving unanimity in the European Council for an action plan. If the leaders manage to reach a consensus fast and adopt economic sanctions (especially targeting high-level officials of the Russian government), the political output of the EU will be maximized. Such a development will convey additional political value for the future of the CFSP and the ongoing discussion for military integration in the EU. This scenario might be an excellent choice for the EU but lacks reality. Reaching unanimity in the foreign policy issues has been a tricky business in the past and some Member States are willing to sabotage a solid European response towards Russia for reasons varying from close ties with Russian oligarchs, exposure to Russian banks, close trade partnerships, to using their veto power in the Council as political leverage towards the EU and for promotion of their national agenda. On top of that, Russia remains an important trade and energy partner. The EU is in the middle of a complex energy transition process as it aims to be climate-neutral by 2050 – essentially becoming the first major economy with net-zero greenhouse gas emissions. European countries are cutting the use of fossil fuels, shutting down nuclear power plants, and investing billions in renewable energy sources. The transition towards clean energy is a long process, and the EU can't still produce enough energy to sustain itself. The adoption of tough economic sanctions could backfire in a rather hard period for the bloc. EU will probably seek to balance the intensity of its response and the potential economic impact of the sanctions on its economy.

Scenario B: a CFSP catastrophe and a non-European response

As mentioned above, unanimity is the only way forward for the EU to undertake any action in foreign policy. Considering the importance of foreign policy and the political sensitivity of the matters discussed in a CFSP meeting, it comes with no surprise that the negotiations are intense, and the outcome is uncertain. EU consists of 27 members, and the coordination of their strategies can be from a bureaucratic nightmare to an existential crisis for the bloc. In this case, the political and financial implications

of the EU's response might create a delay in the meeting of the leaders of the Union and their ministers. In such a case that no consensus is reached, the political damage for the bloc would be catastrophic. If the EU fails to act due to a lack of unanimity, the EU's image might never revive from that. EU is a significant economic player but seems to be unable to translate its economic force into power in global politics. The possibility of another international crisis handled by the US and Russia bilaterally with the EU in the role of observer will create an existential crisis for the most ambitious and long-term political project. The high stakes for both EU and the security of member states

(especially the Baltic states) would create a particular dynamic in the Council for a European response even if adjustments to the level of severity of actions were made to fit the national interests of Member States that would be more hesitant to act.

Scenario C: a task force of the Big Two

The last scenario is a bit more complex. In this scenario, the European leaders' unanimity plays a minor role, as the actual negotiations are carried out by the Big Two, Germany and France. The two biggest economies and the strongest army of the bloc come together to formulate a common strategy to tackle the crisis and save the dignity of the EU. It is not the first time that a small group of Member States represent the EU. In one of the EU's most significant diplomatic successes, the Big Three, UK, Germany, and France, together with the EEAS, managed not only to have a prominent role in the negotiations for the future of the Iranian arsenal but also to find a balance in a negotiation room full of tension. The Joint Comprehensive Plan Of Action (JCPOA) might be in uncertain waters but could be a useful model of crisis management for the Ukrainian crisis. France and Germany could lead the negotiations with Vladimir Putin for three reasons; First, Germany and Russia have close economic ties and both care about the survival of their common project Nord Stream 2, the future of which will be in danger if Russia invades Ukraine. In addition, Russia understands the importance of its economic partnership with the EU[4] and the impact of its potential disruption due to sanctions. Second, the US and Russia have a heated past that gives a very narrow window for political maneuvers to both countries, while when it comes to France and Germany, there is a certain political flexibility that could be the key for the solution. Third, Vladimir Putin might feel safer negotiating with representatives of the EU side than US and NATO. The French President, Emmanuel Macron, has publicly expressed his feelings for NATO and this could make him a favorable choice for negotiation with Kremlin.

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[4] EU is Russia's biggest trade partner.

A potential task force of the Big Two and the EAAS could ease the tensions between the US and Russia and lead the diplomatic effort to deescalate the tension. For the EU, such a scenario would reaffirm its global image and rebrand its soft power as a helpful tool. This scenario could also be the beginning of a public discussion for the potential change in the architecture of CFSP via strengthening the extensive cooperation between Member States to tackle international crisis.

Concluding Remarks

The Ukrainian crisis will be a milestone for the EU. One way or another will lead to exciting developments on CFSP as the EU faces its most significant security threat. The EU needs to reconsider its priorities and put its defense and security higher in its agenda. The bloc cannot afford to be just an observer and wait for the US to act on its behalf and protect its integrity. The US and the EU have been in an "awkward alliance" since the 2016 US elections. The four

years of the Trump Administration impacted the European trust to their closest ally. The possibility of a new Trump-like president poses tough questions for how long the EU will have to rely on NATO, a "brain-dead organization" according to Emmanuel Macron. A redesign in the current framework for CFPS aiming to increase the bloc's crisis management and responsiveness, could include expanding extensive cooperation amongst EU countries, and establishing an emergency mechanism for the cases that the EU countries fail to reach consensus.

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The "first wave": digitalizing the Balkans during the pandemic

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The Balkan states have been characterized over time by their "susceptibility" to change and adoption of new technologies in the state matters. However, in the case of the COVID-19 pandemic, we have observed that in many circumstances, states that have traditionally been slow to the adoption of changes have on the contrary responded to the emerging health crisis in an unexpected pace. This paper analyses the challenges and the opportunities that have arisen from the pandemic in the cases of Greece, Bulgaria, Albania and North Macedonia. The case studies focus on the adoption of mitigating measures in education and the public sector and the communication of the governments during the "first wave" of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Education:

With the first nationwide lockdown in Greece on March 11, 2020, with 89 confirmed cases and no deaths in the country, the operation of educational institutions at all levels was suspended. As a response to the school closures, the Ministry of Education launched digital tools enabling synchronous and
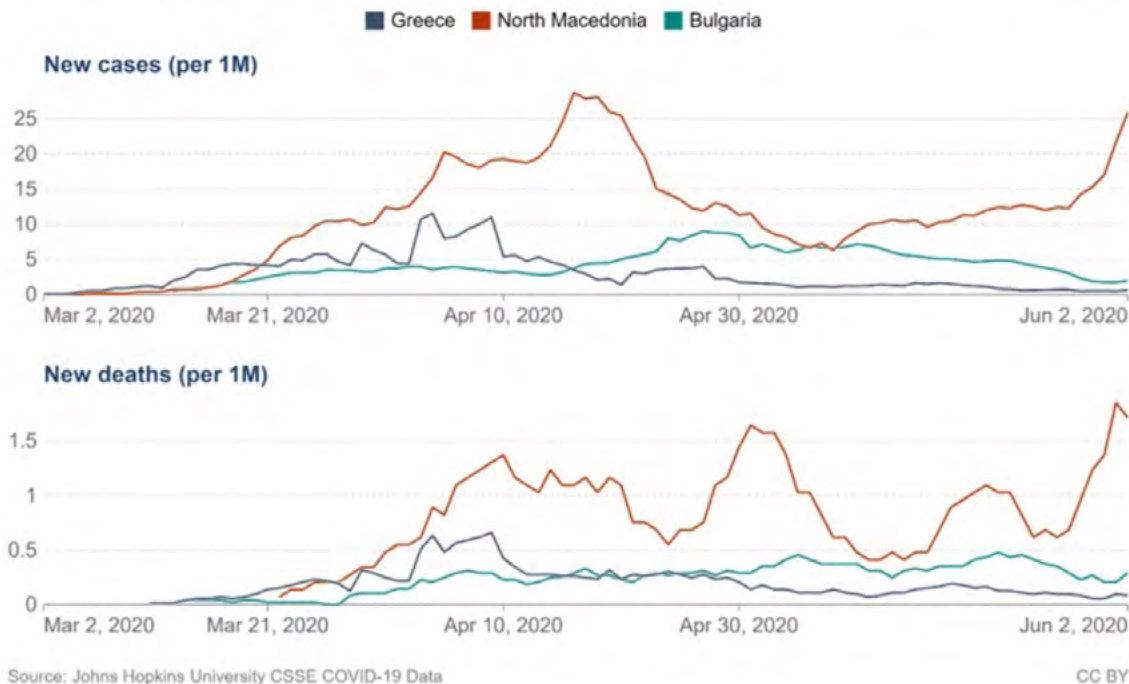

Figure 1 Evolution of the "first wave" of the pandemic in Greece, North Macedonia and Bulgaria

asynchronous long-distance learning and a specific web portal providing information for education and training programmes at all levels. The first guidelines for teachers were introduced by the Ministry already on March 21st. Distance learning was organised at various levels and priority was given to the implementation of synchronous classes in the last year of upper secondary education programmes. However, all learners in primary, secondary (including VET), post-secondary and tertiary education had access to distance learning through various tools, including television for primary education. The operating platform was chosen centrally by the Ministry of Education and at all levels the programme was organised by the Ministry in cooperation with the schools. When all levels of education moved to a synchronous mode of education through online classes the programme was organised based on a rolling schedule from morning to early in the afternoon in order not to exceed the capacity of the broadband connection.

In the case of Bulgaria, a variety of e-tools and applications was launched shortly after the beginning of the lockdown, depending on the specific needs of each school. The Ministry of Education created a National online library (e-content repository), where the content was significantly enriched -within a month. During the first trimester of the pandemic, 50 000 users visited the platform and the number of downloaded files exceeded 131,000. In the case

of Bulgaria, schools were not provided with a single operating platform, but deployed various tools and even social media to perform online classes.

In the case of North Macedonia, schools did not manage to operate online during the first wave of the pandemic and in autumn 2021 this approach was followed by delays. UNICEF repurposed an online platform and launched the e-classroom aiming at continuing the learning lifeline of students in the country.

Citizens' Information and interaction with the Public Sector

In the case of Greece, the strategic goals were structured mainly through 2 essential communication messages: "Security Bridge" and "Stay Safe - Stay home!". The campaigns were communicated through the specific platform (https://covid19.gov.gr/) created for this purpose and the taken measures were communicated by daily updating the platform (in its specifically designed thematic sectors) and through TV broadcasts from the authorities. The structure of the platform included all aspects of social and professional life and guidelines were graphically designed. Social media played an increasingly important role in the communication of the new measures and data and daily updates were also sent to citizens using Viber. It is notable that in the case of Greece, the institutional accounts of the relevant authorities and the personal accounts of the politicians have played an important

	TWITTER	FACEBOOK	INSTAGRAM
Ministry of Health (moh)	32000	57366	-
Government (gov)	81000	56656	-
Kiriakos Mitsotakis (personal account of the Prime Minister)	30100	279527	295000
Vasilis Kikilias (health minister)	68500	107388	93300
National Public Health Organisation	17700	94781	-
@PrimeMinistergr	617800	-	-
Stay Safe	299	3958	607

Table 1 Synopsis of followers/interactions of Social Media Channels/Greece

role in disseminating the key messages of the campaigns, rather than the channels used specifically for the "Stay Safe" campaign. The most notable product of the pandemic crisis in Greece was the establishment of the e-governance portal (gov.gr), where critical services were digitalized and provided easily and safely to the citizens through the specifically designed platform. Citizens could be safely accredited through their taxation system account or through their banking institutions.

North Macedonia, already before the appearance of the first positive case, had adopted a plan, which allowed it to develop a more coordinated and organized response to the impending health crisis. More specifically, the government, in the 25 February meeting, adopted a series of decisions, aimed at protecting the citizens' health. In this context, the creation of a permanent public information center by the Ministry of Health was proposed, aiming to collect and process the relevant information as well as to establish close cooperation with the media, so that citizens could be informed accurately and validly (Republic of North Macedonia, 2020). More specifically, the creation and distribution of brochures, press releases, the promotion of stories and examples as well as the promotion

of announcements and remarks by public bodies were promoted. Advertising has also played a catalytic role in promoting messages, through newsletters in magazines and newspapers and through advertisements on television, radio and the internet. Furthermore, the social media (Facebook, Twitter, Instagram,

YouTube), through their ability to broaden the common goal and their increased ability to interact, played an important role in the whole process. More specifically, the decisions of the government were posted on its official pages on Facebook, Twitter and Instagram, while the individual ministries also moved in this direction. In addition, the state's presence was further strengthened through the creation of a special website for the coronavirus (KoronavirusMK) and its respective social media pages as well as the creation of the corresponding mobile application. Comparing the dynamics of the government, the Ministry of Health and the KoronavirusMK social media pages, we can see that the government pages were more popular with the public. More specifically, the government had a stronger presence on Facebook and the Twitter community. The Ministry of Health, on the other hand, was characterized by a more dynamic presence on Instagram, while at the same time it was distinguished for its stable and growing presence on other social networking platforms. On the other hand, the page about the coronavirus, although it did not have a long-term presence on social media, managed in a short period of time to develop a dynamically evolving presence on the Facebook platform, while still having a rather limited audience on other social media networking.

In the case of Bulgaria, the main communication from the state to the citizens emerged through the platform "ViruSafe". The channel was created to be used by the national authorities to disseminate up-to-date information on the spread of the disease, its symptoms and individual prevention measures. The channel also allows the download of the "ViruSafe" application for mobile telephony, which allows users to report any symptoms / signs, receive personalized advice about their treatment and applicable disease reduction measures. In early May, a chatbot was launched on the popular social networking site Viber as part of the official COVID-19 portal. The channel was created to be used by the national authorities to disseminate up-to-date information on the spread of the disease, its symptoms and individual prevention measures. In addition, through the application "ViruSafe" for mobile devices, which is provided free of charge by the state citizens could interact and

receive advice from a specialist doctor in real time, as well as to be sent notifications about the development of cases near or within the area where they are active.

Conclusions

The pandemic is still an ongoing phenomenon and therefore its effects and outcomes at all levels can be holistically studied after its end. However, if we perceive the pandemic as an emergency crisis, one of which is expected to arrive in the years to come, we can conclude that there are valuable lessons-learnt through the process. The emerging crisis from March 2020 has shown that despite the continuous problems in the state response in the Balkan States, the state apparatus managed not only to survive the crisis but also to create opportunities to further enhance its future status and progress digitalization.

The management of the pandemic might have not been successful in various examples and for different periods of time, however, if the glass is seen as half full, the Balkans, as presented in the cases above, have managed to respond fast, but also develop toolkits that can simplify the processes in the future. During the crisis, we have observed, that the long and dark pathway of the Balkan bureaucracies has been in many ways critically surpassed overnight. The progress recorded during the pandemic should be seen in the future as the first step towards seeing the Balkans as modern states.

Online Sources

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