

# Challenges to EU Integration in the Early Months of the COVID-19 Pandemic

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**Abstract:** The purpose of this paper is to elucidate the ways that COVID-19 has challenged the EU's diplomatic community and its narratives of solidarity. The period of focus for this paper is from late-February to early-April 2020. This paper discusses three main areas that concretely show these challenges. First, EU diplomatic integration was consternated due to the nature of the COVID-19 crisis. Second, the EU's vulnerability amid the crisis offered Beijing an opportunity to foster or enhance diplomatic ties with European countries, to the misfortune of Brussels. Third, discourses over economic measures to mitigate the COVID-19 recession inflamed EU relations, partly because the disagreements reflect longstanding discrepancies in EU economic distribution. Throughout the paper, it is argued that COVID-19 is a critical juncture for the EU, and that how it responds to this crisis will greatly affect the quality of its diplomatic relations and integrations in the future.

**Keywords:** COVID-19 Pandemic, European Union Integration, Balkans, China, mask diplomacy

## Introduction

THE EUROPEAN UNION REMAINS THE 'GOLD STANDARD' for regional governance and diplomacy. The success of its many functions partly depends on its branding of unity, solidarity, and cohesion. Given the post-World War II order and legacy that the EU emerged from, another source of success is the EU's ability to respond to international crises. This paper will research the hypothesis that the EU was challenged as an integrated diplomatic and socio-economic community during the early months of the COVID-19 pandemic. This paper will mainly analyse the period of late-February to early-April 2020 in order to highlight the various challenges that faced EU diplomatic integration. The timeline is

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highly circumstantial for the analysis on diplomatic and institutional developments in Europe. My argumentation is structured through an analysis of these three aspects:

- COVID-19 containment measures resulted in differentiated travel regulations and a stagnated flow of medical resources between EU members.
- China attempted to increase its soft power in Europe by capitalizing on the EU's socio-economic vulnerability during the early months of the COVID-19 pandemic.
- Discourses on the mitigation of COVID-19's economic impact saw a provocation of pre-existing economic discrepancies among member states.

An analysis of these three areas will demonstrate the many ways that EU integration was challenged from late-February to early-April 2020.

A discretion must be stated that research on the diplomatic ramifications and ripple effects of COVID-19 are dynamic, in the sense that, at the time of publication, the crisis is acutely ongoing. The research of this paper is less reliant on a literary review since the snapshot is very new. The analyses of this paper are targeted less at providing normative prescriptions and more on highlighting how the crisis has been understood through narratives. To that extent, some of the analysis made in this paper are historiographical.

## Theoretical Background: What is Regional Diplomacy?

Regional diplomacy denotes the operation of diplomacy specific to contoured regions with differing attributes. Regions are defined by increased integration economically, socially, politically, and institutionally. Due to the global trend of increased integration of formerly atomic nation states, synthesized (even dialectical) identity claims have emerged that place emphasis on the region as a whole. Regional identities contrasts identity claims associated to the parts of a given region— nationalism. The term 'pan-Europeanism' is an example of this kind of transcendental identity claim. As regions begin to integrate, foreign services also begin to do the same. An example of this trend is the European External Action Service (EEAS). The EEAS organizes departments into geographical 'neighbourhoods' of the world, listed as "Asia-Pacific, Africa, Europe and Central Asia, the Greater Middle East and the Americas", showing a change of *ethos* for diplomacy toward regionalism. (DEUM 2020) Diplomacy has been adaptive to the swift changes that globalization and regionalism have brought about.

Regional diplomacy can also mean something less particular, perhaps because the term is relatively new and has had less time to solidify. Regional diplo-

macy can refer to a geopolitical kind of diplomacy, in that the study and practice of diplomacy are conducted through the “plurality of ways in which the political world is spatially demarcated, scripted, imagined, and represented *as well as* the materials, practices, and embodied experiences which constitute it”. (Jackson 2017: 9) This definition is manifested in the foreign services of many states, who engage multilaterally with another state *and* its surrounding neighbours with relevant interests (e.g. U.S. regional diplomacy with North Korea often involves South Korea and China). Thus, regional diplomacy nuances the Westphalian and traditionally-European form of diplomacy where states engage with each other bilaterally.

## Premises

This paper sees the European Union as an institution that is geared toward promoting unity among European citizens, a model for crisis-response, and a diplomatic institution that is still largely governed by inter-European relations (thus it cannot achieve a unified foreign policy until this is “resolved”, if you will). Another premise of this paper holds that the European Union is itself in a continuum of public diplomacy by its mere existence; the EU depends upon the support of its citizens and is therefore in a (sometimes uphill) battle to maintain its legitimacy. According to the European Commission in 2007: “public diplomacy deals with the influence of public attitudes. It seeks to promote EU interests by understanding, informing, and influencing. It means clearly explaining the EU’s goals, policies and activities and fostering understanding of these goals through dialogue with individual citizens, groups, institutions and the media”. (Duke 2013:2). Sandrin and Hoffmann (2018:1) correctly assess this statement as a “declared aim” of fostering a “positive image of the EU”. The EU, however, was not always at its forefront dedicated to social solidarity. In fact, for the European Steel and Coal Community, European integration meant layered economic interdependence, and from this would result in social connectivity. Over the years, economic interdependence has transformed into social solidarity (pan-Europeanism), delimitations on travel (Schengen Passport), and institutional integration (European External Action Service).

The European Union is many things: an economic community, a role model for regional diplomacy, and a commitment to quell the dangers of nationalism. However, the EU’s “grand narrative” of peace, as reflected in its awarded Nobel Peace Prize in 2012, has legacy in its historical origin. Underneath it all, the EU is described best as a crisis prevention and relief system as a result of this history. Post-World War II, European nations collaborated to create an antidote to the conflicts that plagued the Continent for a good part of two thousand years. For decades, this antidote has worked— and it is a remarkable achieve-

ment, given the history of Europe. The fact that the EU has functioned to prevent war between great powers serves as a major source of political legitimacy for Brussels. The logic holds that, *if the EU becomes unable to prevent or contain crises, its political legitimacy will be damaged*. Epitomizing this notion is the EU Commission's rendering of the EU Civil Protection Mechanism— the institution for crisis-response, that functions to strengthen cooperation between member states.

In the last decade alone, the EU has been challenged to meet these aims of cooperation and coordination through various crises with qualitative differences. The European debt-crisis, that resulted in several bailouts for countries unable to pay back loans, exemplifies a problem that the EU is ideally designed to solve. This point is self-evident in the formation of the European Central Bank, which functions to manage finances between members of the EU. Secondly, the ongoing migrant crisis has been arguably far more complicating to navigate since migration policy is largely a national issue, and it has left members like Italy and Hungary with deeply-embedded grievances. These grievances manifested in the popularity of far-right leaders like Matteo Salvini and Viktor Orbán. A third example was the intensification of terrorism in Western Europe resulted in robust crisis-response measures, often administered by the European community as a whole. A lesson of these crises is that responding to crises unitarily is good for European solidarity. Moreover, it is often logistically effective since members share resources, and beneficial for maintaining a positive image of the European regional model to the rest of the world. President of the European Council, Charles Michel, states “The only way forward is a common strategy in a spirit of solidarity” for COVID-19 response. (European Council 2020) In a later section, this paper will analyse how the unprecedented situation of the COVID-19 pandemic is profoundly challenging to the EU narratives of solidarity, and to intra-European regional diplomacy in practice.

While institutions like the European External Action Service (EEAS) strive to create a more unitary image of Europe externally to the global community, the European Union's diplomacy is still greatly occupied with inter-European relations. Even the EEAS is a hybrid of both EU and national diplomats, respectively. (Bichi and Bremberg 2016: 395) The fact that the EU strives for a unitary foreign policy, but still has complex inter-European diplomacy, has been deemed a “double standard”. (Bátora 2006) Henry Kissinger once whimsically remarked that when he called Europe, he was unsure of which European country to call. (Cherrier 2012: 8) Another joke among Brussels elites has the EU's foreign-policy chief telling Hillary Clinton that, “she now has the single telephone number so that America can ‘call Europe’. But when the secretary of state dials it, all she gets is a recording: “*For French foreign policy, press 1. For British foreign policy, press 2...*”. (The Economist 2010) For Beijing, this is no joke, since

“Xi phoned French President Emmanuel Macron, German Chancellor Angela Merkel and Spain’s King Felipe over the past week...it was left to Premier Li Keqiang to make the call to Von der Leyen”. (Lau 2020) Tellingly, the President of the European Commission was the only major head of European leadership to not receive a call from President Xi Jinping. (Ibidem) The diversity of the European Union naturally creates divergences and differences of opinions among its members; the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic on the Continent made these differences saliences.

## The COVID-19 Pandemic and European Integration

It is a truism to describe the COVID-19 crisis as unprecedented. Regardless, there are qualitative differences between this particular crisis and the aforementioned crises impacting the European Union that must be explicated. First, this crisis is not ‘human’ — global pandemics are a ‘silent killer’. The COVID-19 pandemic has created confusion among the diplomatic community because diplomacy is a dynamic process that is defined by human contact and in-person communication. Second, this crisis involves the norm of inter-European diplomatic relations coupled with an unusually high interference and influence from major outside players, especially China. China’s “mask diplomacy” is highly important and consequential for the Continent, socio-politically, strategically, and for the medical crisis on the ground.

Third, COVID-19 has drastically affected every member of the EU, and the mutuality of COVID-19 to the EU distinguishes it from other crises. In the ongoing migrant crisis, geographical proximity to the Mediterranean or Aegean Seas is consequential, whereas for countries farther from the southern seas such as Denmark, migration policies are easier to regulate and enforce for the state. The mutual impact of COVID-19 to all EU member states is immense in terms of individual health and in terms of the economy, social relations, and electoral politics. The diplomatic fallback of this crisis is unlike any other *because all European countries’ diplomatic behaviour has shifted*. Overall, European states struggled to retain the cooperation of their intra-regional diplomatic relations while simultaneously containing the deadly virus.

### *Diplomatic Integration in Times of COVID-19*

A dilemma for the EU continues regarding enacting coordinated travel regulations; this component reflects a long-standing debate over the coordination of European law-making in general. In ‘EU Diplomacy at 27’ (2012), the authors conduct a prisoner’s dilemma to assess the behaviour of European states vying

for leverage in regard to their foreign policies. (Cherrier 2012: 8) Among other things, the paper speaks to the process of the “unanimity of decision making”, the transactional costs of transnational governance, and the differences of preferred outcomes for member states in the EU. (Ibidem) There are overlapping themes between this discussion and the travel restrictions that followed in the wake of the COVID-19 crisis on the Continent.

While some European countries, like Hungary, relinquished travel days before the EU decision, others like Belgium, the home of the EU, contained travel days after. Ultimately, a lack of coordination results in a net loss, just like a prisoner dilemma. Showing the problems arising from a lack of coordination, the United Kingdom acted markedly different from the rest of the European Union in the early days of COVID-19. 66 million people, the UK’s population, were governed by a *laissez faire* strategy of “herd immunity” for weeks while the pandemic wrecking through Europe, allowing the virus to spread within the UK and elsewhere unhindered. (Conn et al. 2020) The UK’s deviance from Brussels’ policy was resoundingly to the detriment of both EU and non-EU countries. (Hunter 2020)

COVID-19 containment precisely requires the limitation on the unregulated travel of people. Needless to say, this includes travel across national boundaries. The European Union banned incoming travel on 17 March from all non-EU and European Economic Area long-term residents, immediate family members, and citizens (Switzerland and United Kingdom were exempt). The initial hope for Brussels was that a restriction on travel coming from outside the Eurozone would convince national European countries to limit restrictions on intra-European travel. (Bayer and Cokelaere 2020) It would turn out that this hope could not be farther from the reality. Moreover, the European Commission had a distaste for the term “travel ban”, suggesting that the EU was self-conscious of the way these policies were advertised to the populace. (Ibidem) The dilemma for the EU is that legislation, implementation, and enforcement of travel bans are mostly the authority of the many national governments within the Union. For this reason, “Commission spokesperson Adalbert Jahnz said that the border restrictions would be a coordinated set of ‘national decisions’”. (Ibidem)

While the official EU regulation came on 17 March, travel restrictions were set in place days before by some national governments. Given the swift-moving timeline of the COVID-19 situation, days are profoundly significant increments for the efforts to contain the spread of the virus. On 13 March, Slovakia, Czech Republic and Malta were the first to announce a border closure to most fellow EU member states. (Schengen Info 2020) Most other countries implemented travel bans on 17 March, coinciding with the EU’s official decision. However, there were some late exceptions. Belgium, for example, only closed

its borders to “non-essential” travel on 20 March. (Cokelaere 2020) Romania’s border closure came two days later on 22 March.

Travel restrictions are an obvious indicator of how EU diplomatic integration was challenged in the early months of the COVID-19 pandemic in Europe. However, more telling was the stagnation of medical equipment, sanitation supplies - and even doctors themselves, amidst national governments’ rational concern of meeting their own domestic demands. (Financial Times 2020) The timeline for this aspect is once again crucial in understanding the tensions facing European relations as a result of COVID-19.

## Narratives of Solidarity Challenged

In April, fellow European countries actively provided patronage to Europe’s most devastated country, Italy, to aid their overwhelmed health care system. Coinciding the material efforts to help Italy came a campaign for European solidarity. The European Commission tweeted on 26 March, “In the face of adversity, the people of Europe are showing how strong we can be together. This is the example that the EU must follow. EU countries are starting to help each other. #EU CO #EU solidarity #EuropeansAgainstCoronavirus”. (European Commission 2020a) Germany and France have donated millions of masks to Italy, and Austria donated over 1.6 million. France contributed 20,000 medical protective suits. (Ibidem) Furthermore, the EU enhanced RescEU, the apparatus for crisis control, to create stockpiles for essential medical equipment. Quoting the President of the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen, “With the first ever common European reserve of emergency medical equipment we put EU solidarity into action. It will benefit all our Member States and all our citizens”. (European Union 2020b)

Despite the EU’s official line as of late-March, the extent of logistical support flowing to Italy is a highly contentious issue. While the question of whether or not the EU is doing enough to aid Italy transcends the scope of this paper (and a subject deferred to the global health specialists), in mid-March, the general consensus among leading policy reviews, including *Foreign Policy* and *Foreign Affairs*, was that the EU was ‘abandoning’ and ‘letting down’ their colleague in the project of a more unified Europe. On 12 March, *The New York Times* acknowledged the early view that “the Coronavirus Tests Europe’s Cohesion, Alliances and Even Democracy”. (Erlanger 2020) Days later, *Foreign Policy* ran an article on 14 March with the title “The EU Is Abandoning Italy in Its Hour of Need”. (Braw 2020) The article’s subtitle read that the EU was committing “a shameful abdication of responsibility” due to the failure— at the time, to meaningfully contribute medical assistance in the early days of the outbreak.

(*Ibidem*) A 16 March article in *Foreign Affairs* highlighted that Europe behaved in protectionist fashion, as Germany prohibited the export of medical masks, “even though it is a member of the European Union, which is supposed to have a ‘single market’ with unrestricted free trade among its member states. The French government took the simpler step of seizing all available masks”. (Farrell and Newman 2020) Again in *Foreign Policy*, on 17 March it published “The Coronavirus Is Reducing Merkel’s EU Legacy to Ashes”; within the article it cites a poll: “it is hard to disagree with the 88 percent of Italians who, in a recent poll, agreed with the statement that the ‘EU was not helping [them]’”. (Bremer and Matthijs 2020) On 31 March, *Independent* ran the article that “The European Union will be destroyed by its immoral handling of the coronavirus”. (Mammone 2020)

To reiterate, the philosophy of the EU is oriented on pan-Europeanism, interconnectedness, unity, and cooperation, and the COVID-19 crisis concretely draws these tenets in question. It is for this challenge that COVID-19 is a critical juncture of the EU. The widespread acknowledgement of the EU’s irresponsibility from late-February to early-April, supported by immutable facts, taints the EU’s narratives of solidarity. The impression of the EU as falling short of meeting the needs of its citizens will outlast the pandemic itself. If the EU is to remain the gold standard for regional models worldwide, it is imperative that it meets the crisis in the trenches. The EU’s political legitimacy is intertwined with crisis prevention and relief; its political legitimacy is intertwined with these functions. The worry for Brussels is that Italians have strong cases to reject this narrative due to the COVID-19 crisis. The EU’s competitors are taking note of Brussels’ worries.

## Beijing Exploiting the EU’s Fallouts through Mask Diplomacy

The adversity facing EU integration leaves room for the EU’s competitors to make strategic gains in Europe. The EU’s foreign policy chief, Josep Borrell, said the EU and China are in a “global battle of narratives...China is aggressively pushing the message that, unlike the US, it is a responsible and reliable partner”. (Ferraresi 2020) For instance, the aforementioned tweet by the European Commission explicitly states that European countries are far out-contributing China. (European Commission 2020a) A European Parliament briefing perfectly describes the challenge that Brussels’ competitors pose to EU inter-relationships, “Both Moscow and Beijing seem to be driving parallel information campaigns, conveying the overall message that democratic state actors are failing



and that European citizens cannot trust their health systems, whereas their authoritarian systems can save the world". (Bentzen 2020)

In the early period of the pandemic on the Continent, China was restlessly distributing masks to European countries (both inside and outside the EU), from Italy, to Hungary, to Serbia, in order to promote a politics of goodwill that will foster bilateral relations in the future. This operation is called mask diplomacy. Optically, China's strategy is seen to have been working elsewhere in Europe, as Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić even "theatrically kissed China's flag when a team of doctors landed in Belgrade" (while Serbia is not in the EU, it will be shown that the country is a case of China's soft power at work). (Ferraresi 2020) The images of Orbán greeting China's pilots on the tarmac was a symbolic image captured by both the Hungarian press and Chinese state media. (Xinhua 2020a)

China's 'politics of generosity' can effectively put a wedge in the integration of the EU community if Beijing's narratives resonate with resentful countries. This notion was eloquently stated in a 2018 policy report, "by generating support of some EU member states for its positions, Beijing drives a wedge between European countries, exacerbating existing fault lines between EU member states with broadly liberal and integrationist agendas on the one hand, and those with Eurosceptic outlooks on the other hand". (Benner 2018: 15) In 2020, Beijing intentionally intends to exploit tension within the EU, left in the early days of Brussels' muted COVID-19 response. Beijing has strong incentive to challenge the regional interconnectedness of the EU where it can, notably because the Belt and Road Initiative seeks to gain partners in the nations that render themselves distanced by the policies of Brussels (interesting, that Italy was the first G7 country to get on board with the BRI). The future of Chinese regional diplomacy in Europe is not unlike its regional diplomacy in other continents, where China employs the BRI to foster partnerships that leaves much of the bargaining power in Beijing's hands. As an illustration of the BRI at work, Serbia has intertwined some of its technological and telecommunications sectors with Chinese corporations like Huawei. (Stojkovski 2019) The EU's concern over China's interest to interfere with European integration are endemic to many areas of policymaking and predate the COVID-19 pandemic. (Bohman and Ljungwall 2018)

Some of Beijing's state-sponsored narratives are reinforced by facts. Campbell (2020) writes that "when no European state answered Italy's urgent appeal for medical equipment and protective gear, China publicly committed to sending 1,000 ventilators, two million masks, 100,000 respirators, 20,000 protective suits, and 50,000 test kits". (Campbell and Doshi 2020) Italy has been grateful for these contributions. Quoting a former leader of the anti-establishment populist Five Star movement Luigi di Maio, "Those who scoffed at our par-

ticipation in the Belt and Road Initiative now have to admit that investing in that friendship allowed us to save lives in Italy". (Ferraresi 2020) China did send medical supplies rather timely in response to the outbreak in Italy on 12 March. It is imperative to state that an excessive amount of China's medical supplies have been ineffective or faulty, especially in contrast from supplies that are coming from the West in Europe. (BBC News 2020; Stojanovic 2020) With that being said, political rhetoric often does not need to match the facts on the ground to have the efficacy it desires.

The growing diplomatic relationship between China and Serbia represents a telling case of Beijing establishing diplomatic ties in Europe much to Brussels' misfortune. (Subotić, Janjić and Lazarević 2000: 2) Precisely because Serbia is not in the EU (it applied for accession in 2009), Beijing perceives it as a viable future partner for diplomatic, economic, and political ties. This partnership has various strategic and economic interests for both parties. For instance, since China sits on the P5 Security Council, it can help Serbia ensure that Kosovo never retains sovereignty. (Jianchao 2008) Serbia receives \$2.2 billion from China, mostly in the form of loans. (Milic 2020)

Serbia, like Italy, sent out early calls for assistance early amid outbreaks of COVID-19 within its borders. Enraged by the limitations of medical imports it can receive from European community, Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić said that "European solidarity does not exist" — a direct front to the EU project. (Popović 2020) Beijing realized Serbia's grievance and responded homogeneously as it did with Italy, sending its own national epidemiologists as well. The Chinese ambassador to Serbia collaborated with other Chinese diplomats to create a dedicated Twitter account that disseminates narratives of China's generosity and friendship with the Serbian people. (Albert 2020) Chinese state media, like *China Daily*, have been running articles emphasizing the positive role of Beijing, such as "Serbia announces massive testing for COVID-19 with Chinese help". (Xinhua 2020b) This follows the greater trend of state-run media projecting specific narratives; "Chinese aid hailed as nations reel," "As China recovers from COVID-19 blow, and "Chinese rush to Europe's rescue". (Ibidem)

China's mask diplomacy in Serbia is significant for a few reasons. While Serbia is not an official member of the EU, it demonstrates a clear example of where China's soft power in Europe can be effective where Brussels' soft power— tied to the narrative of solidarity— cannot. The point of emphasizing Serbia-China bilateral relations is to show that a precondition of resentment with the EU can mean, for Beijing, a fertile ground for enhancing diplomatic relationships. At least from the period of late-February to early-April, the COVID-19 pandemic has seen Serbia-China diplomatic relations become closer. Importantly, the pandemic presented an opportunity for Beijing to find partners in a faltering EU.

Hungary demonstrates the epitome of a country that, not coincidentally, has strained relations with Europe and good relations with China. Orbán's illiberal governance has contributed to it being called the most disappointing EU member, making it an anomaly from the EU. (Végh 2020) Orbán's regime is opportunistically using COVID-19 as an avenue for consolidating more power. (Bottoni 2020) As a result, the EU Commission's support to Hungary during COVID-19 has been complicated due to its integral interests to promote democratic rights, and its obligation to support COVID-19 containment efforts in all member countries. (Politico 2020) For a number of reasons, China and Hungary are natural allies during the COVID-19 pandemic. On 23 March, China began importing significant medical resources to Hungary. (Seaman, Julienne and ETNC 2020: 32) By 15 April, "Chinese counterparts had delivered 46.9 million masks, 352 thousand test kits and 20.3 million PPEs. Besides these, 101 ventilators have been sent to Hungary from China". (Ibidem: 33) The COVID-19 pandemic has demonstrably shown Hungary's amicable relations with China.

Greece is another EU member state that is possibly distancing itself from Brussels and toward Beijing. According to a Pew Research Center study, Greece has the most unfavourable sentiments with the EU and the EU Parliament (it was higher than the UK in 2018). (Wike, Fetterolf and Fagan 2019) This is not unknown to Beijing, "The PRC embassy in Greece has launched an ambitious public diplomacy campaign in relation to the pandemic. The arrival of the State Grid-donated supplies on 21 March at Athens airport, in the presence of four Greek cabinet ministers and the PRC ambassador, was covered by many media outlets, including TV channels. The slogan of the event was an admittedly smart catchphrase attributed to the ancient Greek philosopher Aristotle: 'A friend is a single soul dwelling in two bodies'". (Seaman, Julienne and ETNC 2020: 30) Through mask diplomacy, Beijing intends to maintain access to the seaport of Piraeus in order to achieve the projects of the BRI. (Ibidem: 31)

China has indisputably contributed large amounts of material resources to European countries. China's efforts are not benevolent— to not understand the "politics of generosity" through the lens of grander geopolitical strategy is mis-apprehensive. EU elites are well aware of how Beijing's soft power functions. In response to China's battle of narratives, the EU emphasized its own contribution to China as well. According to the Commissioner for Crisis Management, The EU "delivered 56 tonnes of equipment to China" in February (this begs the questions as to where this aid was when Italy needed it the most in early-March). (European Commission 2020c) The EU declared that the aid received from China by Europe was more a gesture of reciprocity rather than of altruism. (Lau 2020) Ultimately, the EU realizes it must reinforce its claims of solidarity with tangible support for the narratives of solidarity to remain tenable post-COVID-19.

Some critics may question the logic that fostering closer ties with Beijing necessarily results in distancing from Brussels for European countries. This is not an absolute; but it is no secret that China's global ambitions seek to replace Western institutions with Beijing's economic expansionism. EU diplomatic integration is certainly a target— or at the very least a collateral, of Beijing's geopolitical agenda. In the past, China's soft power has struggled to gain grounds on the Continent. (d'Hooghe 2010: 36) COVID-19 presented the Chinese Communist Party with an opportunity they sought to capitalize on.

## COVID-19 Exposing Pre-existing Economic Discrepancies

Another way COVID-19 has challenged EU diplomatic relations is by exposing pre-existing economic disagreements and regional discrepancies (the North contrasting the South) in the EU. Around late-March and early-April, the discourse began orbiting on the subject of 'coronabonds'. (Kalamov and Staal 2020) Coronabonds are defined as the joint debt issuances that alleviate deficit ceilings especially for European countries hardest hit by the disease. These economic measures would help the post-COVID-19 recovery. Just as the Eurozone debt crisis intensified conversations about the utility of the EU (not to mention the very existence of the institution itself), coronabonds have been a contentious and dividing issue among European leaders and between civil societies. This is especially true of the Spanish and Italian delegations who have waged heated arguments against opponents of coronabonds, namely the Dutch and Germans. The discourses over coronabonds are reflective of fundamental divisions in the EU, especially between the lower-middle range states of financial influence and the 'Frugal Four' plus Germany, respectively. The fiscally conservative members of the EU, especially the Netherlands and Germany, believe that a relaxed threshold for giving loans would result in financial irresponsibility, and even a moral hazard. (European Central Bank 2011: 78) The Netherlands and Germany perceive coronabonds as giving a blank cheque.

Many of the world's regional diplomatic models are centred around integrating economically and seek to ferment this integration by forming financial institutions (like the euro, to use the obvious example). By establishing institutions with a clearly defined set of rules and parameters, regional models like the European Union enact the integration of individual member states by creating laws and regulations that function mutually to all. Regarding the COVID-19 pandemic, the Spanish and Italian cases for coronabonds has precedent and legal grounding in EU policy. The European Union created the European Stability Mechanism as a permanent means of crisis management. The policy statement

itself states that “A credible crisis management framework should help shape market expectations by providing clear ‘rules of the game’ and thus influence the incentives for both private creditors and public debtors”. (*Ibidem*: 74)

While it can be argued that there exists an established precedent for European economic bailouts, this paper holds the premise that COVID-19 is an economic crisis that differs from all previous crises. All member states are severely impacted as a result of the pandemic, since COVID-19’s effects are inescapable. Thus, while the European Central Bank seeks to buoy sinking economies in the EU, the mutuality of financial recessions in all EU member states amid this crisis presents a major challenge to the EU’s economic integration. The ECB policy statement reads, “In times of crisis, however, close financial integration means that unsustainable developments in one member country can easily spread to others perceived as vulnerable by the market”, acknowledging that one country’s fiscal problems can cause unwanted ramifications elsewhere due to economic integration. (*Ibidem*)

The diplomatic disputes between European countries clearly reflect attributional differences, in terms of the way that EU members perceive fiscal policy. These regional differences persist despite the EU actively seeking to mitigate the discrepancies of its members as part of its fundamental mission. The COVID-19 pandemic is inflaming fundamental disagreements on fiscal policy, and it is moreover highlighting the differences in economic standing between EU members. It is no coincidence that disputes over coronabonds mirror differences in economic standing, since by the end of 2019 (right before the outbreak of COVID-19), “Germany and the Netherlands had debt-to-GDP ratios of 59 percent and 49 percent, respectively; the ratios in Italy and Spain were far higher, standing at 136 percent and 97 percent, respectively”. (*Jones E. 2020*)

These economic contrasts continue to be an Achilles heel for the EU, a regional model that has its origin in the integration of markets. Diplomatic integration came long after the economic integrations of the Steel and Coal Community, the Marshall Plan, and other integrating economic institutions; this is telling in regard to how policymakers place importance on diplomatic integration. Simply put, without economic integration, would the diplomatic community of Europe exist? (*Schiff M. and Winters 1998: 273*) It is unlikely this would be the case. If the EU cannot responsibly provide economic crises-relief mechanisms to the economic fallback of COVID-19, the integrated diplomatic community it has accomplished will potentially be the collateral. The Eurozone debt crisis saw this scenario become reality, as conversations about leaving the EU became increasingly prevalent in national discourses. Thompson (2017) called the eurozone debt crisis a ‘timebomb’ for the future of British membership in the EU. (*Thompson 2017*) The strength of the British political economy was one

reason why the British populace was confident enough to leave the EU (however, experts disagree).

Erik Jones, Professor of European Studies and International Political Economy at the Johns Hopkins School of International Affairs, states that the “The ECB has bought time with its latest measures. But it has not solved the economic problems Europe faces as a result of the coronavirus”. (Jones E. 2020) As COVID-19 continues to inflict upon the European and global economy, nation states could see their policies become increasingly protectionist even after the medical crisis is resolved.

## Final Remarks

The COVID-19 pandemic has risen myriad challenges to the diplomatic integration that the EU’s solidarity-narratives cannot resolve alone. The first challenge to EU integration this paper highlights is the consternation experienced by the institutions of the EU’s inter-diplomacy, such as the Schengen Passport coupled with the varying travel bans. Secondly, this paper elucidated the narrative-battle waged between China and the EU, and the soft power efforts of Beijing to influence both member and non-member states. Both the late-EU response to COVID-19 and China’s mask diplomacy has significantly challenged Brussels’ narratives of solidarity that are aimed at integrating Europe. Thirdly, discourses over economic measures to mitigate the COVID-19 recession inflamed EU relations, partly because the disagreements reflect longstanding discrepancies in the EU’s economic distribution.

While the timeline shows that EU member states have retracted “nationals first” positions, the early failings of the EU to come to Italy’s aid will not be forgotten. Spain, a country that was already hit hard by the eurozone debt crisis, may not forgive its European counterparts for their veto on coronabonds. While the EU falters on building its economic unity and single market, Chinese regional diplomacy, in various regions, subtly invokes expansionism by gaining economic ‘partners’ amidst the COVID-19 pandemic.

If Italy and Spain lack confidence in the ability of the EU to respond to crises promptly, especially in the wake of what has been their most severe crises since World War II and the Spanish Civil War, then the likelihood that these two countries maintain their diplomatic openness with Europe in the future could be compromised. Indeed, Italy’s growingly amicable relationship with China is an early indicator of this scenario possibly playing out (and an indicator of Chinese regional diplomacy accomplishing its goals). Furthermore, this paper uses Serbia as an example of how closer ties to Beijing can come at Brussels’ expense. Serbia

is a prime case of China's soft power showing its potency, and it is clear that Beijing would like to replicate this elsewhere on the Continent.

Lastly, while quantitative figures are presented throughout the paper on matters such as the number of masks entering Italy via China, assessing whether these figures reflect responsible policymaking is outside this paper's defined scope. The intention of displaying these figures is mostly descriptive, rather than normative. What can be confidently stated is that the COVID-19 pandemic is a critical juncture for the European Union, especially since the EU is at its foundation meant to stabilize Europe in dire crises. Since the EU emerged from a legacy of negating war on the Continent—which is crisis aversion and response, the EU's potential failure to respond to COVID-19 promptly and timely could further delegitimize perceptions associated to its global governance. Without a doubt, the many integrated institutions of the EU would be the collateral. The pandemic is a test of European solidarity and diplomatic institutions. Perhaps most testing of all is that the early months of the pandemic that tested the will of its citizens to remain under the authority of a transnational polity. Italian prime minister Giuseppe Conte was on to something, when he told the *Financial Times* that "If Europe fails, I fear it will fade away in the conscience of our fellow citizens, giving space to the worst nationalistic instincts. This is a different virus that we need to defeat now". (Johnson, Ghiglione and Fleming 2020)

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## Suggestions for Further Research

Outside of the topic of EU integration, scholars ought to dedicate more analyses to the relationship between China's regional diplomacy and global health initiatives, to understand how diplomatic efforts like mask diplomacy seek to project a positive image of Beijing. These efforts have been crucial for expanding China's soft power. Furthermore, while this paper has analysed the narratives attributed to the aid distributed throughout Europe, experts can assess whether European countries allocated enough material supplies to the hardest hit regions. If research reveals that the Germans and French were 'hoarding' supplies unnecessarily, these revelations will give credence to a widely held view that Italians were 'abandoned' early in the crisis.

Scholars ought to conduct more research on how the EU uses narratives to foster diplomatic integration. Too often, scholars take for granted lofty, abstract terms such as 'European solidarity' and 'pan-Europeanism', without providing sufficient philosophical inquiry. These narratives are without a doubt positive messages, but without clearly defined meanings, populists can malleably interpret these messages to serve their agendas. Political scientists, linguists, and philosophers ought to conduct studies on what context the sign 'European solidarity' is codified. Judging from the preliminary research of this paper on this area,

European diplomacy heavily uses this term whereas it is sparser in economic discussions.

While this paper has dedicated its focus on regional diplomacy in the context of the EU, research on how COVID-19 has severely *damaged* China's soft power through diplomacy will surely reveal that the Chinese Communist Party's ability to influence the world has diminished, both domestically and abroad.

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