The European Union’s two-fold multilateralism in crisis mode: Towards a global response to COVID-19

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Abstract
The European Union (EU) has been strongly criticized from the outset for its alleged mismanagement of the COVID-19 pandemic which began early in 2020. Several observers even predicted the end of European integration. This article examines how the EU has been managing the crisis, with a focus on how this has impacted its external relations, notably with Canada. It will argue that this crisis, as most crises the EU has gone through, has brought to light existing ambiguities in European governance, but that it has not led to fundamental questions about the EU’s and its member states’ overall commitment to Europe’s “two-fold multilateralism” (i.e., internal and external collaboration). EU representatives have re-emphasized this principle when reiterating the need for both European coordinated actions as well as a global response to the COVID-19 pandemic, working closely with their partners, including Canada. Therefore, amid the evolving and serious health-related and economy-related challenges, the crisis offers an occasion for the EU to strengthen and deepen both its integration and its global role.

Keywords
Canada, European Union, COVID-19 pandemic, multilateralism, transatlantic relations

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Introduction
At the outset of the COVID-19 pandemic in early 2020, most countries, overwhelmed by the virulence of the virus, turned inwards and acted in isolation. Borders were closed, flights halted, while a global race for face masks and medical equipment ensued. European countries were no exception. Instead of mobilizing their joint resources and tools, as embodied in the European Union (EU), the 27 member states invoked national strategies against this health emergency. Jacques Delors, iconic former President of the European Commission (1985–1995), deplored the national responses to the pandemic, which not only undermined European solidarity but also “put the EU in mortal danger.”\(^1\) In the same spirit, and as a result of its apparent ineptitude in managing the crisis, journalists and experts rushed to write the chronicle of a death foretold for the EU.\(^2\)

Against this background, this article examines the EU’s management of the COVID-19 crisis from a Canadian perspective, asking how it has impacted the EU’s global role and its immediate relationship with Canada. Similar to former crises, the current COVID-19 pandemic has indeed underlined the limits of European governance and disclosed internal struggles once again. However, I argue that the crisis has not led to fundamental questions about the EU’s and its member states’ overall commitment to Europe’s “two-fold multilateralism,” namely the essential collaboration within the EU as the underlying principle of European integration and the endeavour for successful cooperation with the international community as a core principle of its external action.\(^3\)

In this regard, EU representatives did propose a series of initiatives to support and stimulate cooperation among member states. Likewise, they confirmed their prioritization of close coordination with their global partners, including the Canadian government, claiming that an effective response to the COVID-19 pandemic requires joint bilateral and multilateral actions. Undoubtedly, the COVID-19 pandemic offers a major challenge for the EU as much as for the world, but it also presents an opportunity for strengthening and deepening both EU integration and its global role through the collective management of the crisis.

In light of these dual priorities, the article is structured in two parts, each of which demonstrate how the EU’s “two-fold multilateralism” has operated through the COVID-19 crisis. First, it examines the measures the EU has initiated or supported to contain the spread of the virus, showing that internal struggles resulting from the EU’s unique governance structure have also had their imprint on COVID-19 countermeasures; however, these internal struggles were not striking

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1. Sophie de Ravinel, “Le manque de solidarité est un ‘danger mortel’ pour l’Europe, selon Jacques Delors [Lack of solidarity is a ‘mortal danger’ for Europe, says Jacques Delors],” Le Figaro, 28 March 2020, https://www.lefigaro.fr (accessed 9 April 2020). [In French.]
2. Christian Rioux, “A quoi sert l’Union européenne par rapport à la crise?” [What is the European Union for in relation to the crisis?], Le Devoir, 4 April 2020, B8. [In French.]
3. European External Action Service, “Shared vision, common action: A stronger Europe: A Global Strategy for the European Union’s Foreign And Security Policy,” Brussels, June 2016, 15, https://eeas.europa.eu/archives/docs/top_stories/pdf/eugs_review_web.pdf (accessed 7 December 2020).
enough to render EU responses unsuccessful. Second, the article analyzes the extent to which the EU’s international relations have been used to promote global collaboration, including with Canada.

The EU’s internal response to the COVID-19 pandemic

The spread of COVID-19 has affected all EU member states, albeit with variation in the outbreak’s timing and momentum, the governments’ strategic responses, and the responsiveness and resilience of the national health systems. However, the evolving turbulence and grave consequences have caught all European governments by surprise, triggering, initially, an almost embarrassing withdrawal from EU principles (such as the sudden limitation of free movement of people, goods, and services across borders). Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán instrumentalized the pandemic for a further power grab and extension of his already excessive authority.4 Chancellor Sebastian Kurz closed Austria’s borders to its southern neighbours, reportedly with the additional intention to prevent more refugees from the Western Balkans from coming into the Alpenrepublik.5 Similar to the peak in Mediterranean migration in 2015, with a million war refugees moving from Syria towards Europe, a substantial number of EU leaders showed again that they see salvation and relief in times of crises less in EU-wide cooperation, but in strictly independent (and often uncoordinated) national measures.

EU governance and the health crisis

The roots of the EU’s difficulties in coordinating national actions in the fight against the COVID-19 pandemic lie in the EU governance structure, where some sectors, such as public health, remain primarily in the hands of member states.6 Given the progress the EU has made in other policy areas, such as agriculture or trade, Sven Biscop observed that, ironically, the EU “is better placed to deal with swine flu than with any human flu.”7 To understand this apparent paradox, it is important to have an understanding of the division of powers between the EU institutions and the member states.

4. Peter Kreko, “The world must not let Viktor Orbán get away with his pandemic power-grab,” The Guardian, 1 April 2020, https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2020/apr/01/viktor-orban-pandemic-power-grab-hungary (accessed 1 April 2020).
5. Markus Sebestyen and Stephan Schild, “Corona bremt auch die Einreise von Flüchtlingen,” Kleine Zeitung, 7 September 2020, https://www.kleinezeitung.at/kaernten/5862682/Zahlen-gehen-zurueck_Corona-brems-auch-die-Einreise-von-Fluechtlingen (accessed 26 September 2020).
6. Barthélémy Gaillard, “Covid-19: ce que l’Union européenne peut faire (et ne peut pas) faire [Covid-19: What the European Union can (and cannot) do],” Toute L’Europe, 30 April 2010, https://www.toutel europe.eu/actualite/covid-19-ce-que-l-union-europeenne-peut-et-ne-peut-pas-faire.html (accessed 4 May 2020). [In French.]
7. Sven Biscop, “Take me to your leader! Or how the EU could emerge stronger from the Corona crisis,” Commentaries, Egmont Institute, 6 April 2020, http://www.egmontinstitute.be/take-me-to-your-leader-or-how-the-eu-could-emerge-stronger-from-the-corona-crisis/ (accessed 9 April 2020).
The EU policies are principally guided by the European Council, composed of the 27 heads of state and government, with the addition of the European Council President, currently Charles Michel (former Belgian Prime Minister, 2014–2019) and the European Commission President, currently Ursula von der Leyen (former German Minister of Defense and, interestingly, medical doctor in epidemiology and public health from 1998 to 2002). They meet regularly, every three months, and set the general guidelines for the EU’s overall policies. The Council of the European Union is the permanent meeting place of the national governments that send in their respective ministers to frequent meetings on all types of EU policies, including the health ministers. Both institutions have the capacity to enable collective action to fight COVID-19 at the EU level.

However, given the prominence of “national interests” in these meetings, a consensual approach to realizing progress at the European level was almost impossible to achieve in the initial months of the crisis. In contrast, national representatives rarely hesitated, even in the most pro-European countries, to discredit the European Commission (or, how it is often portrayed, “Brussels” or “the EU as such,” since it is the most powerful supranational institution that can propose and later impose policies on EU member states, albeit only after a lengthy legislative process involving the European Parliament and the Council of the EU\textsuperscript{8}). In times of crisis and uncertainty, the EU is a particularly welcomed scapegoat that is easy to blame for apparent failures,\textsuperscript{9} an actor both omnipresent in the daily lives of Europeans and distant from them, and wielding considerable but often diffuse power. With the COVID-19 pandemic, the EU, as a fuzzy but influential actor, became once again the catalyst for a number of anxieties and frustrations. Even European intellectuals have started accusing the European Commission of showing poor leadership in coordinating efforts—obviously disregarding the fact that the European Commission has the exclusive right to trigger initiatives in many sectors—but not in health.\textsuperscript{10}

In the area of health, the European Commission can only encourage cooperation and policy coordination. In the case of COVID-19, it additionally worked to ensure that anti-COVID-19 measures taken by individual member states did not disproportionately impact basic (and guaranteed) EU rights and principles. The dispute between Poland and Germany over the intolerable tie-up of trucks after the rigorous border closure between both countries could be resolved in this spirit, for instance. Despite its limited room for manoeuvre in the health sector, the European Commission quickly activated the alert system “ARGUS” for crisis

\textsuperscript{8} Council of the European Union, “The ordinary legislative procedure,” 8 October 2020, https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/council-eu/decision-making/ordinary-legislative-procedure/ (accessed 4 December 2020).

\textsuperscript{9} Frank Schimmelfennig, “Politicisation management in the European Union,” \textit{Journal of European Public Policy} 27, no. 3 (2020): 342–361; R. Kent Weaver, “The politics of blame avoidance,” \textit{Journal of Public Policy} 6, no. 4 (1986): 371–398.

\textsuperscript{10} Gesine Schwan et al., “Without European patriotism, EU decline is inevitable,” \textit{EU Observer}, 1 April 2020, https://euobserver.com/opinion/147954 (accessed 9 April 2020).
coordination and created a coordinating response team at the political level. It mobilized financial support to member states for the purchase of medical equipment and for initiating counterstrategies against rising unemployment and economic hardships. In this respect, it proposed a first-response package at the beginning of April 2020 for “Temporary Support to Mitigate Unemployment Risks in an Emergency” (SURE), which the Council of the EU adopted a month later. In May, the European Commission hosted a donor conference to fund vaccine research, during which €7.4 billion were raised for “global solidarity,” supporting fair distribution of the potential vaccine around the world. Not least, it proposed, with the President of the European Council, a road map to ease the lockdown across Europe in a coherent manner after the first wave of infections.

In response to these measures, Josep Borrell, the EU’s High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, rightly stated that “in the rest of the world, health has become a security issue, but in Europe it is a matter of integration.” In his eyes, the COVID-19 pandemic is “an existential moment” for the EU, arguing that the way it will be managed would affect not only the stability of every member state but also the conditions for future European integration. Europeans who shared this view, such as Guy Verhofstadt, former Belgian Prime Minister (1999–2008) and leader of the liberal Renew Europe group in the European Parliament, went a step further and called for necessary progress in EU integration. Specifically, they argued for the creation of a “European Health Agency,” that could be invested with more powers to aid the European Commission in effectively managing the pandemic. Similarly, veteran French diplomat Yves Aubin de La Messuzière proposed the initiation of an EU pandemic policy, and Ursula von  

11. European Commission, “Proposal for a Regulation of the European Parliament and of the Council amending Council Regulation (EC) No 2012/2002 in order to provide financial assistance to Member States and countries negotiating their accession to the Union seriously affected by a major public health emergency,” COM(2020)114 final, Brussels, 13 March 2020, https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:52020PC0114&from=EN (accessed 26 September 2020).
12. European Commission, “Proposal for a Council Regulation on the Establishment of a European Instrument for Temporary Support to Mitigate Unemployment Risks in an Emergency (SURE) following the COVID-19 Outbreak,” COM(2020)139 final, Brussels, 2 April 2020, https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:52020PC0139&from=EN (accessed 12 August 2020).
13. L’Express, “Un téléthon mondial permet de lever 7,4 milliards d’euros pour financer un vaccin [Global telethon raises 7.4 billion euros to finance vaccine],” L’Express, 4 May 2020, https://www.lexpress.fr (accessed 5 May 2020). [In French.]
14. European Union, “Joint European Roadmap Towards Lifting COVID-19 Containment Measures,” Brussels, 8 April 2020, https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/info/files/communication_-_a_european_road_map_to_lifting_coronavirus_containment_measures_0.pdf (accessed 17 November 2020).
15. Beatriz Ríos, “La pandémie ‘fait sauter’ l’ordre mondial, selon Josep Borrell [Pandemic ‘shatters world order,’ says Josep Borrell],” EURACTIV, 8 May 2020, https://www.euractiv.fr (accessed 10 May 2020). [In French.]
16. Josep Borrell, “COVID-19: Le monde d’après est déjà là [COVID-19: The next world is already here],” Politique étrangère, no. 2 (2020): 23. [In French.]
17. Guy Verhofstadt, “Time of coronavirus shows importance of being European,” EU Observer, 17 March 2020, https://europeobserver.com/opinion/147781 (accessed 17 March 2020).
18. Yves Aubin de la Messuzière, “La géopolitique de la pandémie [The geopolitics of the pandemic],” Revue internationale et stratégique 118, no. 2 (2020): 89. [In French.]
der Leyen, during her State of the Union speech in September 2020, confirmed the need “to build a stronger European Health Union.”¹⁹ In November, the European Commission introduced concrete proposals in its statement, “Building a European Health Union: Reinforcing the EU’s Resilience for Cross-Border Health Threats”²⁰ and an affiliated regulation proposal,²¹ sketching ways to move forward in this endeavour and to improve EU coordination in the health sector without any complicated treaty changes.

**EU concrete measures**

After their initial uncoordinated responses, several member states, including heavily affected Spain and Italy, were quick to return to European multilateral actions, notably calling for a genuine European “Marshall Plan” for economic recovery. In addition to the already ongoing economic cooperation, French President Macron called for European solidarity and the relaunch of the EU as “a political project” in response to the COVID-19 pandemic.²²

Regarding economic measures, the European Council formally mandated the European Commission to develop a recovery plan in its April 2020 summit, which von der Leyen indeed proposed a month later.²³ All this happened while the EU’s forthcoming multiannual financial framework for 2021–2027 was negotiated and in the process of adoption. This momentum certainly helped speed discussions and facilitate the overall management of the economic consequences of COVID-19. In its recovery plan, the European Commission proposed to provide in the budget for a temporary emergency recovery instrument called “Next Generation EU,” comprising €500 billion in grants and €250 billion in loans for affected member states.²⁴ This plan, promoted especially by France and Germany, offered several initiatives in various domestic sectors but also demanded a leading position for the EU in the global response.

Nevertheless, national representatives have on many occasions expressed differing views on the measures to be adopted. The health crisis coupled with an

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19. European Commission, “State of the Union Address by President von der Leyen at the European Parliament Plenary,” Brussels (16 September 2020).
20. European Commission, “Building a European Health Union: Reinforcing the EU’s Resilience for Cross-Border Health Threats,” COM(2020) 724 final, Brussels (11 November 2020) https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:52020DC0724&from=EN (accessed 16 November 2020).
21. European Commission, “Proposal for a Regulation of the European Parliament and of the Council on Serious Cross-Border Threats to Health and Repealing Decision No 1082/2013/EU,” COM (2020) 727 final, Brussels (11 November 2020) https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/info/files/proposal-regulation-cross-border-threats-health_en.pdf (accessed 16 November 2020).
22. Victor Mallet and Roula Khalaf, “Macron warns of EU unravelling unless it embraces financial solidarity,” Financial Times, 16 April 2020, https://www.ft.com/content/d19dc7a6-c33b-4931-9a7e-4a74674da29a (accessed 17 April 2020).
23. European Commission, “Europe’s Moment: Repair and Prepare for the Next Generation,” COM (2020) 456 final, Brussels (27 May 2020) https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:52020DC0456&from=EN (accessed 5 June 2020).
24. Ibid., 4.
economic crisis exacerbated old and recurrent debates between two main EU dynamics: intergovernmental cooperation—with the member states remaining in the driving seat—versus supranational integration—with more powers delegated to Brussels. The underlying questions of power and sovereignty, which found their infamous peak in the (often irrationally held) debates about Brexit (the withdrawal of the United Kingdom from the European Union on 31 January 2020), seem to remain a red line for some governments. Besides political doubts, the richer countries in the north show considerable hesitation when asked to help countries in financial difficulties (mostly in the south or the east of the EU) when requested reforms are insufficiently implemented by their governments.

The Netherlands, Austria, Finland, Sweden, and Denmark were especially reluctant over the financial support foreseen in the European Commission’s recovery plan. In late July 2020, after extremely difficult negotiations, almost the EU’s longest marathon negotiations at the EU summit, the recovery package of €750 billion was finally adopted with “a grand bargain” that the financial support will be provided as grants (€390 billion) and (€360 billion) loans.\(^25\) So, as has happened in the EU’s trajectory, after very tough discussions a satisfying deal became possible. A number of observers attested that, with this agreement, Europe had once again “managed to turn a crisis into the spur for major institutional change.”\(^26\) EU officials, national representatives, and political analysts equally assessed the final agreement as “historical” because, for the first time, “the Commission will be authorized to borrow funds on behalf of the Union on the capital markets” and offer them as grants to member states mostly affected by the COVID-19 pandemic.\(^27\)

Irrespective of such solemn assessments, doubts over its realization persist. Especially after the second wave of COVID-19 started hitting Europe, again very harshly, fears of another division of the EU returned to the fore.\(^28\) The implementation of the plan has become the major task of the Council presidencies, held by Germany until the end of 2020 and Portugal for the first half of 2021. In November 2020, the Council and the European Parliament reached a political agreement on the next multiannual financial framework and on a key component of the recovery plan, namely “REACT-EU,” as part of “Next Generation EU.”\(^29\)

\(^{25}\) Joanna Gill and Lauren Chadwick, “EU summit: Leaders reach landmark €1.82 trillion COVID-19 recovery deal and budget,” Euronews, 21 July 2020, https://www.euronews.com/2020/07/21/eu-summit-deadlock-see-talks-stretch-into-sunday (accessed 22 July 2020).

\(^{26}\) Adam Tooze, “It’s a new Europe—if you can keep it,” Foreign Policy, 7 August 2020, https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/08/07/merkel-macron-eu-its-a-new-europe-if-you-can-keep-it/ (accessed 10 August 2020).

\(^{27}\) European Council, “Special Meeting of the European Council-Conclusions,” Brussels (21 July 2020) 2, https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/45109/210720-euco-final-conclusions-en.pdf (accessed 13 August 2020).

\(^{28}\) Elena Sánchez Nicolás, “Coronavirus: Will a second wave divide Europe again?” EU Observer, 23 September 2020, https://euroobserver.com/social/149507 (accessed 23 September 2020).

\(^{29}\) Council of the European Union, “A Recovery Plan for Europe,” 19 November 2020, https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/policies/eu-recovery-plan/ (accessed 4 December 2020).
The EU’s global response

In the end, intra-European cooperation not only triumphed over nationalist approaches in the EU’s internal response to COVID-19, its “two-fold multilateralism” has also been confirmed on the international scene. Hinting at the COVID-19 pandemic’s direct challenges to the global security environment, EU High Representative Josep Borrell supported the “appeal by UN Secretary-General António Guterres for an immediate global ceasefire.” In the same spirit, he also pushed for strengthening the EU’s Common Security and Defence Policy, notably with a European military task force. This task force was set up within the European External Action Service (EEAS) for addressing COVID-19 security consequences, coordinating national armed forces, and facilitating exchange of information and mutual support. The EEAS task force is deployed in complementarity with the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), with which it has informal contacts, including the Euro-Atlantic Disaster Response Coordination Centre. As part of its global response to COVID-19, the EU additionally launched in April the “Team Europe” package to support partner countries, especially in Africa. With Canada, it adopted a “Joint Statement Regarding International Collaboration in Addressing COVID-19.”

EU–Canada partnership as lever for action

Since the Comprehensive Economic and Trade Agreement (CETA) has also strengthened the long-lasting EU–Canada partnership with a Strategic Partnership Agreement (SPA), Canada is often perceived as the EU’s new “best friend.” This strengthening occurred even more so after the difficult and

30. Council of the European Union, “Declaration by the High Representative Josep Borrell on behalf of the EU on the UN Secretary General’s appeal for an immediate global ceasefire,” Press release, 3 April 2020, https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/ (accessed 13 August 2020).
31. Alexandra Brzozowski, “European military task force to fight COVID-19,” EURACTIV, 16 April 2020. https://www.euractiv.com/section/defence-and-security/news/european-military-task-force-to-fight-covid-19/ (accessed 18 April 2020); and European External Action Service, “European defence: Fighting COVID-19, preparing for the future,” 14 May 2020, https://eeas.europa.eu/ (accessed 20 May 2020).
32. European External Action Service, “COVID-19: Lessons and implications for EU security and defence,” May 2020, https://eeas.europa.eu/sites/eeas/files/factsheet-covid-19_lessons.pdf (accessed 24 August 2020).
33. European Commission and EU High Representative, “Joint Communication on the Global EU Response to COVID-19,” JOIN(2020)11 final, Brussels (8 April 2020) https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:52020JC0011&from=EN (accessed 10 April 2020).
34. European External Action Service, “Coronavirus: European Union launched ‘Team Europe’ package to support partner countries with more than €20 billion,” Press Releases, Brussels, 8 April 2020, https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage/ (accessed 19 August 2020).
35. Laurence Marquis, “L’Accord de partenariat stratégique Canada-Union européenne: Jumeau politique méconnu de l’Accord économique et commercial global [The Canada–European Union Strategic Partnership Agreement: The Little-Known Political Twin of the Comprehensive Economic and Trade Agreement],” Revue québécoise de droit international (2018): 205–218. [In French.]
36. Alicia Prager, “EU and Canada are the world’s new best friends,” EURACTIV, 19 July 2019, https://www.euractiv.com/ (accessed 18 August 2020).
volatile relations with the then United States Trump administration pushed Canada out of the “American shadow” in transatlantic relations—not least the withdrawal of the United States from various important international treaties. Trump’s repeated attacks on NATO or the EU itself further fuelled this impression, not to mention United States withdrawal from the World Health Organization (WHO) amid the pandemic. For Canada, closer relations with the EU are lucrative as part of its strategy to diversify its economic relations and reduce its dependency on the United States.\footnote{Antoine Rayroux, “Réputation et perceptions de l’Union européenne au Canada: Un partenaire stratégique superficiel? [Reputation and perceptions of the European Union in Canada: A shallow strategic partner?], Revue Québécoise de droit international (November 2018): 253–272. [In French.]} The COVID-19 crisis has now confirmed again the common understanding that both partners have of the situation, reiterating their commitment to multilateralism and the global response. This includes the continuation of a functioning NATO, which is not only active in military defence but also in combatting disinformation about COVID-19.\footnote{SHAPE Public Affairs Office, “NATO Allied Command Operations continues to support the fight against COVID-19,” press release, NATO, 16 April 2020, https://shape.nato.int/news-archive/2020/nato-continue-to-support-the-fight-against-covid19 (accessed 20 August 2020).} As well, an EU–Canada partnership can help to strengthen broader and deeper transatlantic cooperation.

Thus, functioning transatlantic relations lie at the heart of Canada’s and the EU’s interests. For that reason, on 14 April 2020, still at an early stage of the outbreak when speculations predicted that the EU would potentially break up from this ultimate crisis, Canadian Minister of Foreign Affairs François-Philippe Champagne adopted with Josep Borrell a “[j]oint statement regarding the international collaboration in addressing COVID-19,” in which they reiterated their “shared values and commitment to multilateralism […] to address the significant consular, public health and economic challenges of the COVID-19 crisis.”\footnote{Government of Canada, “Joint statement by Canada’s Minister of Foreign Affairs and the European Union’s High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy regarding international collaboration in addressing COVID-19,” 14 April 2020, https://www.canada.ca/en/global-affairs/ (accessed 10 June 2020; own omission).} They agreed on mechanisms to repatriate their citizens from around the globe and get them home safely, to collaborate in COVID-19-related research, to ensure the flow of vital supplies across borders, to counter disinformation through the G7 Rapid Response Mechanism, and to strengthen global efforts in containing the virus. In the last commitment of their statement, both sides more than ever pushed for multilateral cooperation in international organizations, especially the WHO and, more generally, the United Nations (UN).\footnote{Ibid.} This happened in full compliance with their first series of commitments related to their joint declaration “Canada–EU relations and the rule-based
international order,” agreed upon at the 2019 Canada–EU Summit where the SPA was presented as “a platform for cooperation on issues of common interest.”

In May 2020, Canadian Minister of Small Business, Export Promotion, and International Trade Mary Ng evaluated with Phil Hogan, then EU Commissioner for Trade, how Canada and the EU could support businesses and workers better during the COVID-19 crisis. They repeated the need “for strong international coordination through the G20 and the World Trade Organization.” On that point, in her “State of the Union Address,” Ursula von der Leyen explained “because this was a global crisis we need to learn the global lessons,” and suggested a Global Health Summit in the G20 framework in 2021 under the Italian presidency. On 29 October 2020, Canada’s Prime Minister Justin Trudeau met for the first time Charles Michel and Ursula von der Leyen in a joint virtual meeting. They reiterated their commitment to work together to fight the COVID-19 pandemic in international fora, such as the G20 (in which the EU is a full member), the G7 (in which the EU is a “non-enumerated member”), and the UN.

Remaining challenges

The CETA is seen as an important overarching tool for post-COVID-19 economic recovery between Canada and the EU, but some important transatlantic challenges remain. Only provisionally in effect since September 2017, the CETA still needs to be ratified by a little less than half of the EU member states, and even very local issues, such as the trademark protection of Cypriot goat cheese, halloumi, can mean its eventual failure. Such uncertainties about the future of the CETA are enriched by Brexit and the eventual future relations between the EU and the United Kingdom, with all the reverberations that this will bring to Canada. As of early December 2020, the exact terms of EU–United Kingdom relations from 1 January 2021 onwards are still not agreed upon. Consequently, much is still unclear in the future economic cooperation between Canada and the United Kingdom. Both sides agreed, in November 2020, on a transitional post-Brexit deal, but the real negotiations between Canada and the United Kingdom on

41. Government of Canada, Office of the Prime Minister, “Canada–EU Summit Joint Declaration,” Montreal, 18 July 2019, https://pm.gc.ca/en/news/backgrounders/2019/07/18/canada-eu-summit-joint-declaration (accessed 10 June 2020).
42. Government of Canada, “Readout: Minister Ng Meets with European Union Commissioner for Trade Phil Hogan,” News Release, 15 May 2020, https://www.canada.ca/en/global-affairs/news/2020/05/readout-minister-ng-met-with-european-union-commissioner-for-trade-phil-hogan.html (accessed 10 June 2020).
43. European Commission, “State of the Union Address.”
44. European Council, “Joint press release: EU–Canada leaders’ virtual meeting,” press release, 29 October 2020, https://www.consilium.europa.eu/ (accessed 2 November 2020).
45. Amanda Connolly, “Could Europe’s Cyprus halloumi dispute derail CETA? Maybe, but solution likely,” Global News, 7 August 2020, https://globalnews.ca/news/7255056/ceta-cyprus-halloumi-dispute/ (accessed 10 August).
their definite trade terms will happen only in 2021. However these will look, they will most probably not challenge Canada’s overall relations with the EU, which will become more robust and promising once the CETA is fully operational.

On the national level, COVID-19 has revealed surprising facets of the “loose federal systems” in both Canada and the EU. Ottawa, like Brussels, was mainly entrusted with financial support and coordination for the crisis, while the Canadian provinces and EU states have wielded full authority for managing the health emergency on the ground. The EU’s fundamental principle of “subsidiarity” clarifies the division of competences between the member states and the EU. It briefly states that affairs should be dealt with at the lowest administrative level possible, meaning that, in areas where competences are not exclusive to the EU, EU action is legitimate only if it brings added value. The handling of the COVID-19 crisis showed that the federal trajectory of the European integration is not a “pipe dream” anymore and might take shape earlier than some expected. Hence, both entities, the EU and Canada, might mutually learn from their respective experiences in the management of the crisis, irrespective of the fact that both belong to different models of federation—namely “coming together” among sovereign states in the EU compared to “holding together” the various provinces in Canada. Still, on the internal dimension of their crisis management, “lessons may be difficult to draw between them.” If some have criticized the EU for its apparent lack of coordination among member states, the same has been highlighted between Ottawa and the provinces, where provincial prime ministers have shown great autonomy in their individual crisis management responses without apparent coordination among provinces. Some argue that this situation is not in itself problematic because complementary pan-Canadian measures can be considered irrespective of the Canadian federalism. This is similar to what the European Commission’s communication and regulation proposed for cross-border cooperation against health threats within the EU.

Based on a long-lasting partnership, representatives from both sides confirmed on several occasions their common understanding of international issues, especially reiterating their shared commitment to multilateralism for an effective global response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

46. Mike Blanchfield, “No text yet for Canada–UK trade deal, minister says as Dec. 31 tariff deadline looms,” CBC, 30 November 2020, https://www.cbc.ca/news/politics/canada-uk-trade-committee-1.5822423 (accessed 4 December 2020).
47. Amy Verdun, “The Federal feature of the EU: Lessons from Canada,” Politics and Governance 4, no. 3 (2016): 100–110.
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Conclusions

The COVID-19 pandemic and the resulting challenges for politics, economies, and societies has revealed some obvious governance deficiencies within the EU, especially in the early phases of the health crisis. The early responses to the virus confirmed that internal struggles exist between EU member states based on their general attitudes towards the EU integration process. Such differences tend to become particularly obvious in crisis times, such as the 2008 financial crisis, the 2015 migration crisis, or, now, the COVID-19 crisis. However, the EU has proven again that those differences are not insurmountable and that it offers the appropriate framework. In the end, member states overwhelmingly remain committed to European multilateralism for managing the COVID-19 crisis, and unprecedented EU assets and steps towards a European Health Union have been initiated.

This article has shown how the rapid spread of the COVID-19 virus in early 2020 caught many European governments by surprise, triggering a cacophony of national initiatives in the beginning. While this early reaction of turning inwards and acting alone could be seen across the world, calls for European solidarity quickly made headlines again, such as when French, Italian, and Dutch COVID-19 patients were transported to German hospitals for intensive care treatment from late March 2020 onwards,51 a gesture that has been repeated during the second wave of infections in fall 2020 that by far outgrew the numbers from spring.52

Beyond such punctual efforts, EU representatives gradually succeeded in overcoming the internal struggles with a series of initiatives that eventually found the support of member states. Initial reactions on the national level questioned neither the EU’s role as such, nor its global prominence, nor its general commitment to its two-fold multilateralism—internally as an underlying understanding of European togetherness and externally as promotion of joint endeavours to counter the COVID-19 crisis. The EU’s eventual striving for a global response to COVID-19 has indeed shown the way to achieve multilateral actions, as well as increased bilateral actions with core partners. Canada has been a prime collaborator in both.

Given its extremely dynamic development, it remains to be seen how exactly the second and even third waves of COVID-19 will sweep through the world and how effective recovery plans will be. Yet, if the negative effects of this crisis become unexpectedly bad, a strong and resilient EU would be even better news for Canada and the future of EU–Canadian relations.

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