

The European Council as COVID-19 crisis manager: A comparison with previous crises

The COVID-19 outbreak confronts the European Union with a severe crisis, affecting both individual EU citizens' lives and society as a whole. Due to its role and centrality in the EU's institutional framework, the European Council is once again called upon to exercise its crisis-management role. Similarities can be drawn with past crises as regards both short and long-term responses. The main difference to previous crises, for instance, in the economy or on migration, which impacted a limited number of EU policies, is that the COVID-19 crisis touches the entire spectrum of policies at both European and national level, making a common response more challenging, as competences are divided between the different strata of the EU's multi-level governance system. Ultimately, this crisis has the potential to reshape EU policies, leading to increased cross-policy cooperation and possibly a centrally coordinated response mechanism.

European Council's crisis-management role

The European Council's crisis-management role developed over time, outside the Treaty framework, as a result of successive EU crises in the past decade. Although not Treaty-based, both academics and practitioners [consider](#) crisis management as the European Council's main role. Between 2009 and 2016, the European Council has had to respond to several severe crises – economic, migration or foreign policy related – and has been operating de facto in a 'permanent state of crisis'. Sometimes, as in the case of the migration and Ukrainian crises, it has had to address multiple crises simultaneously. These various emergencies are diverse in both their cause and impact on the EU's development. Jointly however, they have resulted in the consolidation of the centrality of the European Council at the heart of the EU institutional system. They have also shown that there are cases, such as the economic governance and Ukraine crises, when only the Heads of State or Government can swiftly and efficiently reach political agreement on highly sensitive matters.

European Council response to the COVID-19 outbreak

A disease first reported in China in December 2019, COVID-19 presents the European Council with a crisis on a far larger scale than ever before. Its rapid worldwide spread, causing mild to severe respiratory distress, led the World Health Organization (WHO) to raise the contamination risk to 'very high' on [28 February 2020](#), characterise the outbreak as a pandemic from [11 March 2020](#), and encourage governments worldwide to step up their individual and collective response.

However, the European Council only returned to crisis mode to discuss COVID-19 on 10 March 2020, when the situation in Italy was already extremely difficult and other Member States, including Spain and France, faced rising infection rates. This tardy reaction shows the nature of the crisis and its impact on the EU as a whole has been [under-estimated](#). It also illustrates the failure to anticipate the size of the crisis and its implications at individual, societal, healthcare system and economy levels.

Nature of the crisis

By its nature, the COVID-19 outbreak is an imported crisis, similar to the migration and economic governance crises. It is also an existential crisis, directly threatening the right to life of individual EU citizens. It has thus the potential to affect the EU domestically, since it may boost nationalist rhetoric

should government measures undertaken to fight COVID-19 be perceived as insufficient, as is the case in several Member States, including the [Netherlands](#). Contrary to the migration crisis, border closures during the COVID-19 crisis have not been a consequence of nationalistic rhetoric, but rather a whole-of-government crisis response that does not jeopardise the Schengen Area. Another difference to previous crises is that the COVID-19 crisis spans the full spectrum of policies, and that the competences are shared between the EU, national and even regional levels. The COVID-19 crisis requires concerted action on internal and external borders, health systems, competition policy, research, patents, economic and fiscal rules, education, social security, transport and foreign policy. As it touches on such a wide spectrum of policies, the crisis is an opportunity for the EU to overcome the current 'silo approach' and privilege cross-policy cooperation.

Crisis anticipation

Failure to anticipate the crisis is a common element in the economic governance, migration, foreign policy (Syria, Libya and Ukraine) and COVID-19 crises. So far, the European Council response has been 'reactive' and not 'pro-active'. Although a series of early indicators pointed to both the imminence and the magnitude of such a health crisis in an interconnected globalised world, the COVID-19 crisis appears to have been unanticipated. It is urgent to strengthen, not only sectoral early-warning mechanisms such as the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control, but also early-warning capacity across various policy areas to ensure that external crises with a domestic impact are anticipated early and that an appropriate cross-policy response is put in place.

European Council approach to crisis response

Previous [analysis](#) of the migration crisis and the policy cycle has identified different phases of European Council operations during crisis management. As shown in Figure 1, the institution starts by setting strategic priorities and calls for specific action, with legislative or non-legislative implications. It then advances to discuss or endorse a proposal from or an action by another EU institution, most often the European Commission. It finally comments on the adoption or implementation of this action or proposal. This cycle can be renewed a number of times during a crisis. A clear-cut distinction can be made between short-term responses and long-term planning.

Figure 1 – Graphic representation of the policy cycle



Source: EPRS, first published in [The European Council in 2016](#).

Two elements are key and recurrent in the European Council's crisis behaviour: 1) achieving and maintaining unity among the EU Member States; and 2) finding a common EU approach. They are equally important during the initial moments of a crisis as well as later on, until a crisis is resolved.

Achieving unity

The European Council has not been uniformly successful in achieving and maintaining unity during crises. It managed to achieve and maintain unity from the early stages of the economic governance and the Ukrainian crises. However, it took longer to achieve unity on migration due to persistent national sensitivities. The COVID-19 crisis shows that, faced with medical equipment shortages, it was difficult for EU Member States to display solidarity, a factor affecting their unity. Unity could, in future, be achieved from the outset of a similar crisis only if the EU and the Member States achieve strategic autonomy, including in the industrial domain. The European Council's President, Charles Michel, who has a crucial role in achieving and maintaining unity in times of crisis, recognised that Member States and the EU could only overcome the COVID-19 crisis if they are [united](#). He also spoke of a paradigm shift for society and the economy generated by this crisis.

Finding a common EU approach

The European Council amended its working methods to hold three video-conferences, all informal meetings, where it focused on a common European response to the COVID-19 pandemic. The first two video-conferences, held on [10 March](#) and [17 March](#), allowed EU leaders to grasp the magnitude of the crisis and articulate an [initial response](#). A third video-conference on [26 March](#) replaced the initially planned regular European Council meeting, now postponed indefinitely. It allowed leaders to take stock of the initial measures set in place at EU and national levels, consider measures to ensure '[normal functioning](#)' of society is restored and to start shaping a long-term response.

In a notable change to previous crises, the COVID-19 pandemic has forced EU leaders to convene by video in a new and challenging format. Their meetings have been more frequent, nearly once a week in the early stages, due to the rapid evolution of the outbreak. This exceptional frequency was not seen either during the economic governance or the migration crises. As video-conferences are not technically formal meetings, the conclusions drawn by the Heads of State or Government were 'Conclusions of the President of the European Council', and not, as is usual, the Conclusions of the European Council. Similarly, the Council has [adapted](#) its working methods, allowing EU ambassadors to use the 'written procedure' in accordance with the voting rule applicable for the adoption of the act concerned. Thus the normal requirement for unanimity for all decisions to use the written procedure will no longer apply. These measures could also be applied *ipso facto* to the European Council when necessary. Written procedure was occasionally used in 2015, during the Greek crisis.

Short and long-term response to the COVID-19 crisis

As shown in Table 1, the European Council's approach in the COVID-19 crisis is similar to that observed during the [migration](#) and economic governance crises. The three main elements of the policy cycle – setting strategic priorities, providing policy support and assessing implementation – are present in the European Council's short and long-term response to the COVID-19 crisis.

Table 1 – European Council crisis response to COVID-19

Meeting	Message	Policy cycle phase	Response	Action
10 March 2020	Maintaining unity Finding a common EU approach	Setting strategic priorities	Short-term	Deciding on an initial set of key measures
17 March 2020		Confirming existing strategic priorities	Short-term	Confirming the initial set of key measures Provide policy support by endorsing Commission actions Start follow-up on implementation
26 March 2020		Follow-up on implementation Setting long-term strategic priorities	Short and long-term	Follow-up on implementation Decide on long-term measures

Short-term response to the COVID-19 crisis

Early in a crisis, the European Council concentrates its response on: 1) deciding on an initial set of key measures; 2) following up on the agreed strategy; and 3) monitoring implementation. The European Council meetings dedicated to COVID-19 led to an agreement on a [key set of measures](#) along four main lines of action: limiting the spread of the virus; providing medical equipment; supporting research; and addressing the socio-economic consequences.

These measures have been further confirmed and strengthened at subsequent European Council meetings, whilst, in parallel, EU leaders started following up on implementation. For example, they [endorsed](#) the Commission's guidelines on border management and welcomed action taken by the

Commission as regards the export of medical equipment. They have also agreed to use the Union's Civil Protection Mechanism to repatriate EU citizens from abroad.

Long-term planning/response to the COVID-19 crisis

Only once short-term measures are in place and producing initial effects does the European Council start concentrating on a long-term response. So far, evidence from previous crises shows that long-term measures undertaken have led to redesign of the policy areas concerned. In the [economic crisis](#), EU leaders addressed the 'flaws of the initial design of Economic and Monetary Union (EMU)' by introducing initial temporary rescue mechanisms (European Financial Stabilisation Mechanism and European Financial Stability Facility), and later, a permanent mechanism (European Stability Mechanism). The migration crisis led to a similar result, as Frontex was transformed into a European Border and Coast Guard, relying on a [standing corps](#) of border and coast guards. In the case of the COVID-19 crisis, on 26 March, EU leaders [spoke](#) of the need for a 'coordinated exit strategy' and invited the EU institutions to prepare a roadmap and action plan.

COVID-19 crisis challenges

Crisis response is not limited to the formulation of short and long-term responses to crises. It also requires tackling collateral challenges deriving from a crisis. One such challenge is disinformation. The European External Action Service has produced a [first report](#) on disinformation activities related to COVID-19, identifying a list of false narratives, such as the falsehood that 'the EU could impose mass vaccinations', or that the COVID-19 virus did not originate in China. EU leaders stressed that the EU will counter disinformation with 'transparent, timely and fact-based communication'.

Role of the European Council President in the COVID-19 crisis

The European Council President plays a crucial role in times of crisis, particularly as the guardian of unity. Like his predecessors, Herman van Rompuy and Donald Tusk, Charles Michel, is facing a major crisis early in his mandate, testing his ability to keep EU leaders united. So far, Michel has actively consulted his colleagues ahead of COVID-19 meetings, to forge and maintain unity. His communication role has evolved and broadened as the crisis intensified. For example, he [deplored](#) the situation in Italy in a letter addressed to President Sergio Mattarella, in which he praised the country's 'unflinching sense of foresight, unity and resilience'. More recently, as the crisis intensified in Spain, Michel addressed a similar letter to the Spanish people, in which he [underlined](#) that 'Europe stands by your side in full solidarity, and we will spare no effort to help you – and all EU countries'. In addition to increased [social media](#) activity, Michel has also stepped up his media appearances, increasing the number of interviews given to both written media and [television](#) to explain the EU's contribution to the fight against COVID-19.

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