

The Coronavirus Stress Test Is Just Beginning for the Transatlantic Alliance

Susan Corke and Gregory Feifer

The last time transatlantic leaders faced an acute global challenge, Barack Obama's chief of staff, Rahm Emanuel, provided perhaps the most resonant quip: "You never want a serious crisis to go to waste." It was shortly after Obama's election in November 2008, when the United States stood on the brink of another great depression and the world was wracked by that year's global financial crisis.

Now the coronavirus pandemic is laying bare the major failures of the two main transatlantic partners, the United States and European Union, since then: the predictable bankruptcy of President Donald Trump's America First policy, along with the EU's inability to coordinate a common response to crises. Faced with a global catastrophe, competition, not cooperation has prevailed.

Despite some positive developments in Europe, talk about an existential threat to the EU—and the transatlantic alliance by extension—is far from alarmist: the pandemic is providing a serious stress test. A global public-health crisis should have been time for a values-based security alliance to show its worth by responding better than the nationalistic autocratic kind of government that has been infecting the transatlantic narrative for the past decade.

But the trial is just beginning. After the initial failures, the next phases of mitigating the pandemic's effects and recovering from crisis will determine the transatlantic alliance's future. To pass the test, both sides of the Atlantic must unite over common liberal democratic values by sharing responsibilities at a time when principled leadership is desperately needed from Washington over a coordinated strategy that could build trust and save millions of lives.

The United States and Europe Need to Be Better Role Models

The United States' lack of support for international efforts to tackle the coronavirus pandemic—the biggest absence of U.S. leadership since it emerged as a superpower in the Second World War—reflects more than simply failure. Trump has actively sabotaged the response to the pandemic at home and heaped scorn on the World Health Organization and others trying to coordinate measures abroad, enabling Russia and China to score easy propaganda victories by trumpeting their aid to stricken Western countries such as Italy. France

and Germany, key U.S. allies, have accused the Trump administration of unscrupulousness for seeking to appropriate critical medical supplies everyone needs.

The United States' lack of support for international efforts to tackle the coronavirus pandemic reflects more than simply failure.

Leadership has also been desperately lacking from the European Union. Although Brussels can impose only so much on member states for a healthcare response, it nevertheless performed poorly on any early measure of preparedness, coordination, and crisis containment. For example, the European Center for Disease Prevention and Control—established after the SARS epidemic in 2003—was supposed to act as a mechanism to help the EU manage health crises, but its €60 million budget is trifling in the face of the challenge. At a minimum, the amount should be considerably increased to allow a basic “whole of Europe” response for providing testing, medical equipment, and information sharing.

The EU has also proved politically feeble so far in confronting a member state whose authoritarian prime minister has been brazenly exploiting the pandemic to further consolidate power and erode democracy. Hungary's Viktor Orbán had already eliminated most checks and balances on his government's authority before parliament granted him sweeping emergency powers under which he can suspend existing laws and rule by decree indefinitely. A general declaration of concern by 15 member states that excluded mention of Hungary by name was so weak that even the country's government signed it. Orbán had demonstrated his “art of trolling” the EU's weakness, the Hungarian analyst Peter Kreko tweeted.

But it is the economic fallout from the health crisis that is, in the words of Italy's Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte, “the biggest test since the Second World War.” After tortuous deliberations, the EU eventually agreed a \$540 billion rescue package, a welcome step but one viewed as insufficient by the European Central Bank and the countries hardest hit by the pandemic. Germany, The Netherlands, and other fiscally conservative northern member states still face a bruising debate over financially struggling southern countries' demands for sharing debt in the long term, something they resisted in the current deal. Germany's Chancellor Angela Merkel is especially under justified mounting pressure to help restore deeply damaged EU unity by leading the fiscal response.

Although trust in political leaders and institutions is at a low point precisely when it is most needed, individual leaders around the world are setting examples. New Zealand's Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern has perhaps best embodied what the public needs: decisive action, honesty, and empathy. The coronavirus pandemic has already shored up weak or unstable governments in Europe, even if perhaps temporarily, not least in Italy with its coalition government. And in Germany, the stock of Merkel and her Christian Democratic Union has risen since the crisis began, while backing for the right-wing nationalist Alternative für Deutschland party has fallen. In countries where national leadership is lacking, most notably the United States, governors such as New York's Andrew Cuomo have been highly praised even by former critics.

An Opportunity to Build Back Transatlantic Trust

Devastating as it is, the pandemic provides a chance for transatlantic leaders to reestablish trust in democracy and transnational institutions by tackling the crisis and its aftermath in an open, responsible way. In recov-

14 April 2020

ering from a complex crisis such as this one, which will require public trust and a whole-of-society response, democracies have a deeper arsenal than autocratic governments that were able to quickly institute heavy-handed steps to fight the pandemic in the short term. Democratic countries benefit from freedom of the press to inform the public, robust civil society to support vulnerable populations, and checks and balances to hold governments accountable.

Devastating as it is, the pandemic provides a chance for transatlantic leaders to reestablish trust in democracy and transnational institutions.

Unlike the migration crisis of 2015 in Europe and other issues that have helped ethno-populists fan fears appealing to their supporters' identity, the coronavirus pandemic is an innate challenge for governments that rely on misinformation and the undermining of independent institutions. Countries in the EU and NATO that are some of the worst performers on Transparency International's Corruption Perception Index—including Hungary and Romania—have underfunded hospitals and political leaders who have enabled the kind of systemic corruption that will hamper informed, effective long-term measures. In China and Russia, freedom of the press is nonexistent; their citizens cannot trust their reporting on the pandemic.

Many political leaders are talking about wartime-like measures in the biggest global crisis since the Second World War, which ultimately prompted the creation of the EU and other international institutions. The current global challenge—this time against a common viral enemy, not each other—is again presenting stark evidence about the need for alliances and the benefits of transparent, responsive governance for earning the trust needed for a collective solution. Democracy is premised on the belief that every individual matters and relies on a broad array of stakeholders holding responsibilities. As Václav Havel proclaimed in his initial address as Czechoslovakia's first post-communist president, "Freedom and democracy include participation and therefore responsibility from us all."

The challenge is especially great for United States. Re-assuming its leadership of the democratic world order will require a new administration that must rebuild the country's alliances and beneficial influence, and encourage a return to a multilateral, democratic approach to security. It will also require leading by example, with humility, flexibility, honesty, and an approach based on social democratic values.

Although it will take time to play out, the coronavirus pandemic is a pivotal moment for the transatlantic alliance—a brutal, devastating test about collective responsibility and shared values neither side can afford to waste.

*Gregory Feifer is executive director of the Institute of Current World Affairs and author of *Russians: The People Behind the Power*. He is currently writing a biography of the Russian politician Boris Nemtsov.*

The views expressed in GMF publications and commentary are the views of the author(s) alone.

About GMF

The German Marshall Fund of the United States (GMF) strengthens transatlantic cooperation on regional, national, and global challenges and opportunities in the spirit of the Marshall Plan. GMF does this by supporting individuals and institutions working in the transatlantic sphere, by convening leaders and members of the policy and business communities, by contributing research and analysis on transatlantic topics, and by providing exchange opportunities to foster renewed commitment to the transatlantic relationship. In addition, GMF supports a number of initiatives to strengthen democracies. Founded in 1972 as a non-partisan, non-profit organization through a gift from Germany as a permanent memorial to Marshall Plan assistance, GMF maintains a strong presence on both sides of the Atlantic. In addition to its headquarters in Washington, DC, GMF has offices in Berlin, Paris, Brussels, Belgrade, Ankara, Bucharest, and Warsaw. GMF also has smaller representations in Bratislava, Turin, and Stockholm.



Ankara • Belgrade • Berlin • Brussels • Bucharest
Paris • Warsaw • Washington, DC

www.gmfus.org