

Regional Health and Economic Responses to the COVID-19 crisis in the EU and Latin America

Andrea Ribeiro Hoffmann*
Dimitris Katsikas**

The COVID-19 pandemic constitutes a major health and economic challenge for the entire world. Major crises typically leave their imprint on global and/or regional cooperation. Often, the institutions of cooperation are strengthened in their wake, with the aim of addressing the causes that led to them. During the pandemic international cooperative initiatives were launched in both the health and economic fronts. Thus, for example, COVAX, the World Health Organization (WHO)-sponsored cooperative initiative was launched to ensure access to vaccines for the world's poorest countries. On the economic front, central banks in several countries facilitated access to dollars in the international currency market, mitigating exchange rate pressures in the early stages of the pandemic.

On the other hand, crises do not always beget more cooperation. During the pandemic we have witnessed individual states resorting to 'egoistic' policy responses. These ranged from attempts to secure medical equipment at the expense of the other countries to conflicts over the production and distribution of vaccines. The issue of vaccines, in particular, is crucial from both a medical and an economic perspective. So long as large parts of the population in the world remain without access to vaccines, the efforts to eradicate the virus will continue to be undermined. Similarly, the recovery of the global economy will be slower and unbalanced if restrictive measures continue to disrupt economic activity due to lack of access to vaccines. The production and distribution of different COVID-19 vaccines to every person across the globe, irrespective of their economic capacity, in a timely manner, is necessary to conclusively win the fight against the pandemic. The protection of global public health against COVID-19 is a global public good, whose provision depends

* Pontificia Universidade Católica do Rio de Janeiro (PUC-Rio), Rio de Janeiro, Brazil; a_ribeiro_hoffmann@puc-rio.br. ORCID: 0000-0001-5866-3817.

** National and Kapodistrian University of Athens (NKUA), Athens, Greece; dkatsikas@eliamep.gr. ORCID: 0000-0002-7977-6519.

on the active cooperation of states, international and regional organizations, civil society, and pharmaceutical companies around the world.

In Europe, the reaction to the pandemic has raised hopes that the mistakes of the previous crises will not be repeated. Following a few weeks of disputes and delays, the European Union's (EU) response to the pandemic became gradually more coordinated and efficient. The climax of this enhanced cooperation was reached in July 2020, when EU member states were able to agree on the Next Generation EU (NGEU). The NGEU was a plan to support member states in the battle against the pandemic, but mostly to help their economies recover after the crisis, while also taking into account EU's principal policy objectives: the green and digital transformations. Combined with the prompt, strong and continuous response of the European Central Bank (ECB), an array of other EU-coordinated measures designed to deliver considerable financial support, and the new EU budget, the NGEU sent a strong signal of solidarity at the international level. That said, obstacles and failures continued to inhibit cooperation and to delay the implementation of the policies agreed, at great humanitarian and economic cost. From the drawn-out NGEU negotiations to overcome the objections of certain member states to overrule law conditionalities to failures of coordination over vaccines' procurement – which at certain points in time raised the prospect of 'vaccine nationalism' – regional cooperation has been constantly challenged and therefore needs to be supported.

In Latin America and the Caribbean, regional bodies that have mandates and instruments to respond to health and economic crises include the Common Market of the Southern Cone (MERCOSUR), the Andean Community, the Pacific Alliance, the Central American Integration System (SICA), the Community of Caribbean Countries (CARICOM), the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States (CELAC), the Organization of American States (OAS), and the Pan-American Health Organization (PAHO), which serves as the Regional Office for the Americas of the World Health Organization (WHO). However, the proliferation of regional institutions and political polarization during the last decade has fragmented the region, and several organizations are now paralyzed or lost member-states. Despite some initiatives and collaboration with third countries and within the scope of COVAX, most responses took place at the national or sub-national level, and the role of regional organizations was only marginal in them.

The scientific journals *Contexto Internacional*, published by the Institute of International Relations (IRI) at the Pontifical Catholic University of Rio de Janeiro (PUC-Rio), Brazil, and *Region/ Periphery* published by the Research Centre for Economic Policy, Governance and Development (EKOPDA) at the Department of Political Science and Public Administration at the National and Kapodistrian University of Athens (NKUA), Greece, issued a joint call in May 2021 calling for the submission of original research articles on the theme of 'Regional Health and Economic Responses to the COVID Crisis in the EU and Latin America'. The purpose of the call was to attract submissions that investigate the handling of the COVID-19 crisis at a regional level, with a focus on the EU and Latin America. Articles focusing on the EU were submitted to *Region/ Periphery*, and articles focused on Latin America were submitted to *Contexto Internacional*.

The call was an initiative of the EU Jean Monnet Network Project ‘Crisis Management-Equity-Democracy for Europe and Latin America’, in which IRI/PUC-Rio and EKOPDA/NKUA are partners. The project promotes the comparative study of crises and crises management, as well as its socio-economic and democratic implications in Europe and Latin America, departing from the premise that these regions can both learn from their respective experiences on crisis response and the distributive and democratic implications at national and regional levels, as well as from the role of regional hegemony – especially in times of political polarization and increasing nationalism. The project allows the exchange of information and experiences between Europe and Latin America to take place, but also enables the opening of a bi-regional dialogue on the social and macroeconomic policies and crisis management, hence providing additional content to the Strategic Alliance the Summits EU-CELAC are supposed to build.

As guest co-editors, we are happy to launch the two Special Issues from *Contexto Internacional* and *Region/Periphery*. These issues cover a wide array of topics related to the policy and institutional reactions to the pandemic in the EU and in Latin America. In the 21st century, crises of different kinds occurred with increasing frequency, affecting not only individual countries, but also entire regions and the world as a whole. In this context, these special issues contribute to a growing literature on the impact of crises on regional cooperation and integration. Their concurrent publication in a comparative format adds (what we believe to be) a new and valuable perspective to the ongoing analysis.

In the case of the articles published at *Contexto Internacional*, K. Lehmann, L. Granja and K. Mariano, as well as R. Bressan and G. Ferreira address Latin American regional organizations responses to the pandemic with different analytical frameworks and focuses. Drawing on Complexity and Human Systems Dynamics, K. Lehmann argues that despite a good track record of health cooperation, such as in the context of UNASUR, internal political and social instability and ideological chasms led South American regionalism to fall back into an old pattern of fragmentation and into insignificant regional responses to the pandemic that were mainly handled by national governments. L. Granja conducts a comparative analysis of the policies adopted by Mercosur and the Pacific Alliance and argues that ideological divergences hindered health cooperation within Mercosur despite its institutions and prior experience in the field of health cooperation. Closer ideological affinity allowed the Pacific Alliance to undertake common initiatives, but mostly in order to keep trade flows and economic logistics operative. K. Mariano et al. also adopt a comparative perspective, but with a broader empirical scope, including the Andean Community and CARICOM, in addition to Mercosur. They argue that those organizations that had specific institutional channels dedicated to deal with health issues and had already faced other health crises in the past have had less difficulty in coordinating member states’ actions and in building regional policies. However, they note that economic interdependence and political convergence were relevant aspects to explain the differences among these blocs. While Mercosur was the less effective of the three cases, CARICOM had a more comprehensive collective response, also due to the extra-regional support it received.

C. Marconi, I. Santos and R. Miranda focus on the Organization of American States (OAS) and a particular aspect of its response to the COVID pandemic, namely its recommendations concerning the disposal of dead bodies; collective and family grief; and alternative ways to conduct funerals and memorial services, which they refer to as a regional governance of death. Drawing on the work of Foucault and his genealogical method, they point to a change in the treatment of death from a purely private to a politically infused issue and explore the correlation of forces that enabled the normative emergence of death in the OAS in this particular historical moment. Finally, B. Luciano assesses how the responses to the COVID-19 pandemic in Europe and Latin America have impacted EU-LAC inter-regional relations, considering the multiple – and sometimes – incompatible approaches taken by various national and regional actors. He argues that these responses have undermined the convergence of national health policies into regional ones, and concludes by exploring the existing challenges for EU-LAC overall relations and by delving on how EU-LAC actors have attempted to cooperate in order to develop a more positive and sustainable inter-regional partnership for the future.

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About the authors

Andrea Ribeiro Hoffmann is Associate Professor at the Institute of International Relations, PUC-Rio, a CNPq productivity scholar (PQ2), and Scientist of Our State (FAPERJ). She holds a degree in Economics from PUC-Rio (1991), a specialization in International Relations from the London School of Economics (1996), a master's degree in International Relations from PUC-Rio (1998), and a PhD in Political Science/International Relations from the University of Tuebingen, Germany (2003). She has taught at the London School of Economics (2008-10); at the University of Erfurt, Germany (2010-2012); and at the Freie Universität Berlin (2012-2015). She was a visiting researcher at the European University Institute in Florence (2002) and the Peace Research Institute Frankfurt (PRIF) (2017). In her teaching and research activities, she works mainly in the following fields: issues of legitimacy and democracy in international politics, global governance, international organizations and multilateralism, comparative regionalism with Latin America and Europe, and interregional relations, with a focus on Latin America-Europe relations. She is a Member of international research networks GRIDALE on integration and development in Latin America and Europe and of CLACSO's GT Decentrandos las RRII Latinoamericanas; and a Coordinator of the international research network Jean Monnet Network Crisis-Equity-Democracy for Europe and Latin America.

Dimitris Katsikas is Assistant Professor of International and European Political Economy and Director of the Research Centre for Economic Policy, Governance and Development at the Department of Political Science and Public Administration at the National and Kapodistrian University of Athens. He studied Business Administration at the Athens University of Economics and Business, and finance and international political economy at the London School of Economics (LSE). He received his PhD from LSE in the field of international political economy. His research focuses on international and European political economy. In recent years, the Greek and European crises have become his major research interests. He has participated as researcher and coordinator in a number of Greek and European research programmes related to the crisis. Between 2013-2019 he was Head of the Crisis Observatory at the Hellenic Foundation for European and Foreign Policy (ELIAMEP). Between January 2020 and August 2021, he headed ELIAMEP's new Greek and European Economy Observatory and was 'Stavros Costopoulos' Senior Research Fellow. From April to June 2022, he was Visiting Senior Fellow at the Hellenic Observatory, at the European Institute of the LSE. Some of his most recent publications include *Public Discourses and Attitudes in Greece during the Crisis: Framing the Role of the European Union, Germany and National Governments*, (ed.) Routledge (2020) and *Economic Crisis and Structural Reforms in Southern Europe: Policy Lessons*, with P. Manasse (eds.), Routledge (2018).

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