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## COVID-19 IN THE SOUTHERN EUROPEAN STATES: LOCAL EFFECTS AND EUROPEAN IMPLICATIONS



NECMETTİN ERBAKAN  
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*Covid-19 in Southern European States:  
Local Effects and European Implications*

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# COVID-19 IN THE SOUTHERN EUROPEAN STATES: LOCAL EFFECTS AND EUROPEAN IMPLICATIONS

Borja W. González Fernández Ph. D

## **1. INTRODUCTION**

Ever since it was first reported, on December 31, 2019, as a concatenated series of atypical pneumonia cases in Wuhan, China, the sickness caused by the new coronavirus SARS-CoV-2 has rapidly become the worst health crisis in world history ever since the outbreak of the wrongly-named Spanish flu back in 1918. The rapid spread of the virus, which, in less than six months, has reached every corner of the globe, affecting over seven million people and causing the death of slightly less than 6% of all confirmed cases, has, moreover, interrupted the normal flow of life by imposing various restrictions on the free movement of people both across and within state boundaries, confining citizens to their homes and forcing the closure of most commercial and entertainment activities.

While the center of the epidemic is presently located in the Americas, with the United States and Brazil concentrating almost 40% of all confirmed cases worldwide, its effects in Europe, where four EU states have reported infection cyphers above 100,000 cases (Spain, 241,550; Italy, 234,998; Germany, 185,869; France, 153,977) and mortality rates well in excess of 10% in several countries (France, 18.93%; Belgium, 16.20%; Italy, 14.42%; Netherlands, 12.64%), have been particularly insidious, insofar as the virus has revealed both the precarious foundations of Europe's welfare systems—particularly in regard to care homes, whose mismanagement and institutional neglect have become fatally evident in the course of the health crisis—and the weakness of the economic recovery initiated after the early 2010s financial crisis.

The fact that the present health crisis has been particularly virulent in the EU's Latin states (Spain, Italy, France), whose economies are still very much suffering the lingering consequences of the previous financial shock, together with the perceived unwillingness of certain, less hardly-hit, states to pool further resources to alleviate the pandemic, has, once again, brought into the open the fragility of the European project by threatening to revive the fraught north-south divide that was on the verge of tearing the fabric of the



Union apart less than ten years ago.

This paper, by using Spain as a case study, will try to shed light on both the measures undertaken by the different Southern European governments to face the worst consequences of the health crisis and the long-term effects that it might have for the future of the EU as a whole at a time when euroscepticism seems to have become the norm, rather than the exception, in the continent's southern flank, traditionally perceived as an unshakable bastion of euro-optimism.

<sup>1</sup>SAVAGE, Maddy (05/19/2020). "Coronavirus: What's going wrong in Sweden's care homes?," BBC News ([www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-52704836](http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-52704836). Accessed June 5, 2020); HOLT, Ben & HOLT, Alison (05/15/2020), "Coronavirus deaths: how big is the epidemic in care homes?," BBC News ([www.bbc.com/news/health-52284281](http://www.bbc.com/news/health-52284281). Accessed June 5, 2020); GAURIAT, Valérie (05/14/2020), "The deadly impact of COVID-19 on Europe's care homes," Euronews ([www.euronews.com/2020/05/08/the-deadly-impact-of-covid-19-on-europe-s-care-home](http://www.euronews.com/2020/05/08/the-deadly-impact-of-covid-19-on-europe-s-care-home). Accessed June 5, 2020); SOSA TROYA, María (05/07/2020). "Data shows over 17,500 confirmed or probable Covid-19 deaths at Spain's care homes," El País (english.elpais.com/society/2020-05-07/data-shows-over-17500-confirmed-or-probable-covid-19-deaths-at-spains-care-homes.html, Accessed June 5, 2020);

<sup>2</sup>OKDiario (29/04/2020). "El primer ministro holandés a un trabajador que le pidió que no dé dinero a los españoles: «¡No, no, no!»," OKDiario ([okdiario.com/internacional/risas-del-primer-ministro-holandés-cuando-trabajador-dice-no-des-dinero-espanoles-italianos-5535507](http://okdiario.com/internacional/risas-del-primer-ministro-holandés-cuando-trabajador-dice-no-des-dinero-espanoles-italianos-5535507). Accessed June 5, 2020); La Razón (27/03/2020); "El primer ministro de Portugal defiende a España y tacha de "repugnantes" las acusaciones de Países Bajos," La Razón ([www.larazon.es/internacional/20200327/7i3w2j4vpvhbrfk3gp6rvgn7e.html](http://www.larazon.es/internacional/20200327/7i3w2j4vpvhbrfk3gp6rvgn7e.html). Accessed June 5, 2020).

<sup>3</sup>SCHULMEISTER, Philipp M. (2020). "Public Opinion Monitoring at a glance in the time of Covid-19", DG Communication's Public Opinion Monitoring Unit, pp. 32-34; BALAMPANIDIS, Ioannis (2019), "The Abduction of

## 2. COVID-19 IN SPAIN: A CASE STUDY IN QUARANTINE POLITICS

The first COVID-19 case in Spain was detected on January 31 in the island of La Gomera (Canary Islands), when a German tourist displaying only slight symptoms was tested positive and subsequently hospitalized and quarantined. Just a few days afterwards, on February 9, another case was reported, again in the Canary Islands—specifically, in La Palma. Thence, the virus took almost a month to reach peninsular Spain, with a case being reported in Catalonia on February 24, immediately followed by a deluge of new cases all throughout the country, which made the grand total skyrocket to half a hundred hospitalized patients by February 29. Against this backdrop, and despite the rapid spread of the infection—by March 4, the number of cases had more than tripled to 198, the central government was initially adamant in its refusal

to adopt wide-ranging restrictive measures, the repeated warnings it received from European and international institutions notwithstanding, which prompted several regional governments to unilaterally implement such measures as the closure of schools and other educational facilities, the suspension of public events or the cancellation of all non-essential medical procedures.

The dramatic increase of cases in the first weeks of March, which had reached over 4,000 by March 13, would finally force the national executive to adopt nation-wide regulations to tackle the

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<sup>4</sup>ARROYO, Jesús (03/23/2020). "Coronavirus: infectados en España y la evolución del brote desde el origen," *Redacción Médica* ([www.redaccionmedica.com/secciones/sanidad-hoy/coronavirus-infectados-espana-y-evolucion-covid19-desde-origen-4148](http://www.redaccionmedica.com/secciones/sanidad-hoy/coronavirus-infectados-espana-y-evolucion-covid19-desde-origen-4148)). Accessed June 6, 2020).

<sup>5</sup>LÁZARO, Àlex (02/25/2020). "El coronavirus llega a la península: confirmado un positivo en Barcelona," *Redacción Médica* ([www.redaccionmedica.com/autonomias/cataluna/el-coronavirus-llega-a-la-peninsula-confirmado-un-positivo-en-barcelona--7168](http://www.redaccionmedica.com/autonomias/cataluna/el-coronavirus-llega-a-la-peninsula-confirmado-un-positivo-en-barcelona--7168)). Accessed June 6, 2020).

<sup>6</sup>DEPARTAMENTO DE SEGURIDAD NACIONAL (02/29/2020). "Coronavirus (COVID-19) – 29 de febrero 2020. Situación Actual," *Dirección General de Seguridad* ([www.dsn.gob.es/es/actualidad/sala-prensa/coronavirus-covid-19-29-febrero-2020](http://www.dsn.gob.es/es/actualidad/sala-prensa/coronavirus-covid-19-29-febrero-2020)). Accessed June 6, 2020).

<sup>7</sup>DEPARTAMENTO DE SEGURIDAD NACIONAL (03/04/2020). "Coronavirus (COVID-19) – 04 de marzo 2020. Situación Actual," *Dirección General de Seguridad* ([www.dsn.gob.es/es/actualidad/sala-prensa/coronavirus-covid-19-04-marzo-2020](http://www.dsn.gob.es/es/actualidad/sala-prensa/coronavirus-covid-19-04-marzo-2020)). Accessed June 6, 2020).

<sup>8</sup>EUROPEAN CENTRE FOR DISEASE PREVENTION AND CONTROL (03/02/2020). *Outbreak of novel coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19): increased transmission globally – fifth update*. Stockholm: ECDC ([www.ecdc.europa.eu/sites/default/files/documents/RRA-outbreak-novel-coronavirus-disease-2019-increase-transmission-globally-COVID-19.pdf](http://www.ecdc.europa.eu/sites/default/files/documents/RRA-outbreak-novel-coronavirus-disease-2019-increase-transmission-globally-COVID-19.pdf)). Accessed June 6, 2020).

<sup>9</sup>PÉREZ JIMÉNEZ, Alberto (03/09/2020). "Madrid cierra todos los colegios, institutos y universidades desde el miércoles," *El Confidencial* ([www.elconfidencial.com/espana/2020-03-09/coronavirus-colegios-universidades\\_2488908/](http://www.elconfidencial.com/espana/2020-03-09/coronavirus-colegios-universidades_2488908/)). Accessed June 6, 2020); RAMOS, Ana B. & CASTRO, Cristina (03/09/2020). "Madrid suspende las clases en centros públicos y privados y el Gobierno recomienda el teletrabajo," *El Independiente* ([www.elindependiente.com/politica/2020/03/09/la-comunidad-de-madrid-cierra-todos-los-colegios-institutos-y-universi](http://www.elindependiente.com/politica/2020/03/09/la-comunidad-de-madrid-cierra-todos-los-colegios-institutos-y-universi)

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<sup>10</sup>DEPARTAMENTO DE SEGURIDAD NACIONAL (03/13/2020). "Coronavirus (COVID-19) – 13 de marzo 2020, Departamento de Seguridad Nacional ([www.dsn.gob.es/es/actualidad/sala-prensa/coronavirus-covid-19-13-marzo-2020](http://www.dsn.gob.es/es/actualidad/sala-prensa/coronavirus-covid-19-13-marzo-2020)). Accessed June 6, 2020).

spread of the virus. On March 14, the Cabinet issued a royal decree declaring the 'state of emergency' throughout the country and imposing a fortnight-long quarantine of all the population, as well as the closure of all non-essential commercial activities and the limitation of several fundamental rights. The decree, in effectively putting all authority in the hands of a restricted cabinet committee (integrated by the defense, homeland security, transportation and health ministers), brought about an unprecedented centralization of power in the history of democratic Spain that contradicted the quasi-federal structure created by the 1978 Constitution and turned regional authorities into virtually powerless executors of central government orders.

The seemingly uncontrollable spread of the pandemic in the second half of March, with over 7,000 fatalities being recorded by March 30, forced the government to adopt, through royal decree-law 10/2020, even tougher measures, including a complete freeze of economic activity and a tightening in freedom of movement restrictions for a fortnight. The adoption of these restrictions, while justified from an epidemiological point of view and eminently successful in slowing down the spread of the virus, as will be seen below, wreaked havoc on the Spanish economy, which is expected to contract at an astounding rate of up to -15.1% in the present fiscal year (including an "unprecedented" collapse of economic activity in the second trimester ranging between -16% and -21.8%) at the same time that unemployment climbs to 18.1% and public debt is expected to rise to levels unheard of in well over a century by reaching around 115% of GDP.

In order to alleviate some of the worst effects of the pandemic on the economy, the emergency decrees were accompanied by a wide array of measures aiming at both protecting the various economic sectors which had been forced into hibernation and extending a socially protective net over the growing ranks of the unemployed and other vulnerable groups. Particularly relevant, in this

context, are the mobilization of up to €200 billion in State-sponsored bank guarantees to support companies and self-employed people with liquidity problems, as well as the 6-month moratorium in the payment of taxes and social security dues extended to all private companies in trouble. Among the economic relief measures designed by the Cabinet, it is also worth mentioning the total ban imposed on hostile takeover bids directed by foreign capital (initially limited to extra-European

<sup>11</sup>GOBIERNO DE ESPAÑA (03/14/2020). Real Decreto 463/2020, de 14 de marzo, por el que se declara el estado de alarma para la gestión de la situación de crisis sanitaria ocasionada por el COVID-19.

<sup>12</sup>GOBIERNO DE ESPAÑA (03/29/2020). Real Decreto-ley 10/2020, de 29 de marzo, por el que se regula un permiso retribuido recuperable para las personas trabajadoras por cuenta ajena que no presten servicios esenciales, con el fin de reducir la movilidad de la población en el contexto de la lucha contra el COVID-19; MEL-GUIZO, Javier (04/04/2020). "Sánchez anuncia que la hibernación de la economía finalizará el 9 de <sup>11</sup>GOBIERNO DE ESPAÑA (03/14/2020). Real Decreto 463/2020, de 14 de marzo, por el que se declara el estado de alarma para la gestión de la situación de crisis sanitaria ocasionada por el COVID-19.

<sup>12</sup>GOBIERNO DE ESPAÑA (03/29/2020). Real Decreto-ley 10/2020, de 29 de marzo, por el que se regula un permiso retribuido recuperable para las personas trabajadoras por cuenta ajena que no presten servicios esenciales, con el fin de reducir la movilidad de la población en el contexto de la lucha contra el COVID-19; MEL-GUIZO, Javier (04/04/2020). "Sánchez anuncia que la hibernación de la economía finalizará el 9 de abril," Bolsamanía ([www.bolsamania.com/noticias/economia/sanchez-hibernacion-economia-finalizara-abril-7416397.html](http://www.bolsamania.com/noticias/economia/sanchez-hibernacion-economia-finalizara-abril-7416397.html)). Accessed June 6, 2020); CUÉ, Carlos E. (03/29/2020). "El Gobierno ordena la "hibernación" de la economía para evitar el colapso del sistema sanitario," *El País* ([elpais.com/espana/2020-03-29/el-gobierno-ordena-la-hibernacion-de-la-economia-para-evitar-el-colapso-del-sistema-sanitario.html](http://elpais.com/espana/2020-03-29/el-gobierno-ordena-la-hibernacion-de-la-economia-para-evitar-el-colapso-del-sistema-sanitario.html)). Accessed June 6, 2020).

<sup>13</sup>GIL, Andrés (06/09/2020). "La UE confirma un desplome histórico por la crisis del coronavirus que deja a España entre los países más golpeados," *El Diario.es* ([m.eldiario.es/economia/UE-historico-coronavirus-Espana-golpeados\\_0\\_1036246484.html](http://m.eldiario.es/economia/UE-historico-coronavirus-Espana-golpeados_0_1036246484.html)). Accessed June 9, 2020); PONCE DE LEÓN, Rodrigo (06/08/2020). "El Banco de España eleva el impacto del coronavirus con una caída de la economía española de hasta el 15,1% en 2020," *El Diario.es* ([m.eldiario.es/economia/Banco-Espana-coronavirus-economia-espanola\\_0\\_1035896478.html](http://m.eldiario.es/economia/Banco-Espana-coronavirus-economia-espanola_0_1035896478.html)). Accessed June 8, 2020); CINCO DÍAS (05/19/2020). "La deuda pública sube 22.000 millones en marzo por el Covid y marca un máximo de 1,22 billones," *Cinco Días* ([cincodias.elpais.com/cincodias/2020/05/19/economia/1589878529\\_104871.html](http://cincodias.elpais.com/cincodias/2020/05/19/economia/1589878529_104871.html)). Accessed June 6, 2020); PONCE DE LEÓN, Rodrigo (05/01/2020). "El impacto del coronavirus hará que el déficit suba al 10,34% y la deuda pública escale al 115,5% del PIB en 2020," *El Diario.es* ([m.eldiario.es/economia/medidas-coronavirus-deficit-publica-PIB\\_0\\_1022597797.html](http://m.eldiario.es/economia/medidas-coronavirus-deficit-publica-PIB_0_1022597797.html)). Accessed June 6, 2020); TAHIRI, Javier (04/13/2020). "La deuda pública se disparará a su mayor nivel en más de un siglo por la epidemia," *ABC* ([www.abc.es/economia/abci-deuda-publica-disparara-mayor-nivel-mas-siglo-epidemia-202004122247\\_noticia.html](http://www.abc.es/economia/abci-deuda-publica-disparara-mayor-nivel-mas-siglo-epidemia-202004122247_noticia.html)). Accessed June 6, 2020).

<sup>14</sup>ZULUETA, John DE (03/20/2020). "Medidas económicas frente al coronavirus," *El Economista.es* ([www.economista.es/opinion-blogs/noticias/10430445/03/20/Medidas-economicas-frente-al-coronavirus.html](http://www.economista.es/opinion-blogs/noticias/10430445/03/20/Medidas-economicas-frente-al-coronavirus.html)). Accessed June 6, 2020); LA

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investors, the ban was subsequently extended to EU capitalists as well) against "strategic" Spanish companies by taking advantage of the stock exchange collapse that accompanied the beginning of the health crisis.<sup>15</sup>

Despite the legal doubts voiced from certain sectors of the academia regarding the constitutional adequacy of the 'state of emergency' to impose such limitations of individual rights as those described above or to unilaterally thwart the faculties of regional governments, the 'state of emergency'—and its concomitant socio-economic measures—was renovated by the Congreso de los Diputados (Spain's Lower Chamber) in up to six occasions, albeit at great political cost for the government, which saw the parliamentary level of support for its measures progressively descending. The government's poor communication strategy, together with its apparent unwillingness to negotiate with the major opposition party, the right-of-center Partido Popular, forced it to reach out to various nationalist forces which, in turn, managed to extract valuable concessions from the central government, most notably the progressive restitution of powers to regional authorities after May 23 (Royal Decree 537/2020).

The success of the measures adopted to slow down the spread of the pandemic, as witnessed by the decrease in the number of new infections and fatalities reported daily by the Ministry of Public Health throughout the months of April and May, together with reasons of political expediency, particularly in sight of the government's parliamentary weakness, explain the initial adoption of a three-phase de-escalation program with the ultimate goal of reaching the 'new normal,' in the words of PM Pedro Sánchez himself, by the end of June. The plan, submitted to Congress on April 29 and initially enforced through executive order on May 3, organized the progressive lifting of most

<sup>15</sup>LAFRAYA, Conchi (04/02/2020). "El Gobierno amplía el blindaje contra opas hostiles desde el extranjero," *La Vanguardia* ([www.lavanguardia.com/economia/20200402/48266904564/ibex-35-bolsa-opa-compra-empresas-coronavirus.html](http://www.lavanguardia.com/economia/20200402/48266904564/ibex-35-bolsa-opa-compra-empresas-coronavirus.html)). Accessed June 6, 2020); CALLOL, Pedro (03/26/2020). "El blindaje anti-OPA de empresas estratégicas como medida para paliar la crisis del coronavirus," *Cinco Días* ([www.cincodias.elpais.com/cincodias/2020/03/26/le-gal/1585235589\\_635009.html](http://www.cincodias.elpais.com/cincodias/2020/03/26/le-gal/1585235589_635009.html)). Accessed June 6, 2020).

<sup>16</sup>FERNÁNDEZ RODRÍGUEZ, José J. (2020). "Cuestiones constitucionales sobre el estado de alarma en España y la pandemia del COVID-19," *Documento de Opinión IEEE* 43/2020 ([www.ieee.es/Galerias/fichero/docs\\_opinion/2020/DIEEE043\\_](http://www.ieee.es/Galerias/fichero/docs_opinion/2020/DIEEE043_)

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<sup>17</sup>LA SEXTA (06/03/2020). "El Congreso aprueba la última prórroga del estado de alarma tras un tenso debate entre Gobierno y oposición," *La Sexta* ([www.lasexta.com/noticias/nacional/congreso-aprueba-ultima-prorroga-estado-alarma-tenso-debate-gobierno-oposicion\\_202006035ed7da7bd84fea0001742d2f.html](http://www.lasexta.com/noticias/nacional/congreso-aprueba-ultima-prorroga-estado-alarma-tenso-debate-gobierno-oposicion_202006035ed7da7bd84fea0001742d2f.html)). Accessed June 6, 2020); BALLESTEROS (05/19/2020). "Del apoyo absoluto a la posibilidad de no tener suficiente este miércoles: así han sido las votaciones del estado de alarma," *20 minutos* ([www.20minutos.es/noticia/4262249/0/sanchez-se-enfrenta-por-primera-vez-a-la-posibilidad-de-perder-una-votacion-del-estado-de-alarma-por-coronavirus](http://www.20minutos.es/noticia/4262249/0/sanchez-se-enfrenta-por-primera-vez-a-la-posibilidad-de-perder-una-votacion-del-estado-de-alarma-por-coronavirus)). Accessed June 6, 2020).

<sup>18</sup>SÁNCHEZ, Ana I. (05/06/2020). "Sánchez se niega a buscar un plan B al estado de alarma como le pide la oposición casi al unísono," *ABC* ([www.abc.es/espana/abci-sanchez-evitar-poner-fecha-final-estado-alarma-y-aumenta-brecha-casado-202005061144\\_noticia.html](http://www.abc.es/espana/abci-sanchez-evitar-poner-fecha-final-estado-alarma-y-aumenta-brecha-casado-202005061144_noticia.html)). Accessed June 6, 2020); ASUNCIÓN, Fernando (05/02/2020), "Test, alarma y oposición: los seis errores e imprecisiones de Sánchez este sábado," *Vozpópuli* ([www.vozpopuli.com/politica/rueda-prensa-sanchez-sabado-test-alarma-oposicion-coronavirus\\_0\\_1351365224.html](http://www.vozpopuli.com/politica/rueda-prensa-sanchez-sabado-test-alarma-oposicion-coronavirus_0_1351365224.html)). Accessed June 6, 2020); BAREÑO, Gonzalo (04/02/2020). "La falta de diálogo complica a Sánchez la mayoría para aprobar sus medidas," *La Voz de Asturias* ([www.lavozdeasturias.es/noticia/actualidad/2020/04/02/falta-dialogo-complifica-sanchez-mayoria-aprobar-medidas/0003\\_202004G2P29996.htm](http://www.lavozdeasturias.es/noticia/actualidad/2020/04/02/falta-dialogo-complifica-sanchez-mayoria-aprobar-medidas/0003_202004G2P29996.htm)). Accessed June 6, 2020);

<sup>19</sup>HERALDO DE ARAGÓN (04/28/2020) "Sánchez anuncia la "nueva normalidad" a finales de junio para todo el país," *Heraldo de Aragón* ([www.heraldo.es/noticias/nacional/2020/04/28/plan-desescalada-gobierno-espana-fases-calendario-nueva-normalidad-finales-junio-1372061.html](http://www.heraldo.es/noticias/nacional/2020/04/28/plan-desescalada-gobierno-espana-fases-calendario-nueva-normalidad-finales-junio-1372061.html)). Accessed June 7, 2020).

<sup>20</sup>The de-escalation plan would be finally ratified by Congress on May 8, as part of royal decree 514/2020 whereby the state of emergency was extended for yet another fortnight. The documents pertaining to the different phases of the de-escalation process have been codified in various volumes, which are readily available on the website of the Government's gazette *Boletín Oficial del Estado* ([www.boe.es](http://www.boe.es)). For the executive order organizing the initial de-escalation measures, *vid. MINISTERIO DE SANIDAD* (2020). "Orden SDN/386/2020, de 3 de mayo, por la que se flexibilizan determinadas restricciones sociales y se determinan las condiciones de desarrollo de la actividad de comercio minorista y de prestación de servicios, así como de las actividades de hostelería y restauración en los territorios menos afectados por la crisis sanitaria ocasionada por el COVID-19," *Boletín Oficial del Estado*.

restrictions on civil rights and economic activity according to the specific epidemiological situation of the different provinces or healthcare areas of each comunidad autónoma. Thus, by May 11, twenty-five out of fifty provinces, representing around half of Spain's territory and slightly less than half of its population entered 'phase 1' after a week-long preparatory period commonly referred to as 'phase 0,'<sup>21</sup> whereas, at the moment of writing these lines, forty three of the country's provinces encompassing 72% of its population have already entered the final step in the de-escalation process—codenamed 'phase 3'—with the state of emergency scheduled to end by June 20.

In a context of increasing political polarization between the Cabinet, whose apparently haphazard management of the crisis had given way to public protests in several cities throughout May, and the increasingly vociferous opposition, PM Sánchez finally revealed the rules that were to organize what has been commonly referred to as the 'new normal' in the course of his weekly address to the nation last June 7, after weeks of speculations and half-baked announcements. According to royal decree 21/2020, submitted to Congress on June 10, several of the preventive measures imposed during the state of emergency to halt the spread of the pandemic will remain in force until the virus is "definitely defeated" by means of a safe vaccine or an effective treatment against its effects. Thus, face masks, social distancing and capacity limitations in public spaces will remain a most visible reality in the foreseeable future.<sup>25</sup>

### **3. THE POST-COVID-19 ERA: CHALLENGES FOR THE EU'S SOUTHERN FLANK UNDER THE 'NEW NORMAL'**

It has already been stated hereinabove that Europe remains one of the world's regions most severely hit by the COVID-19 pandemic. As the Spanish case reveals, the virus has caused a hardly measurable level of suffering and death, while also wreaking havoc on the continent's economy, whose foundations remained comparatively weak in the aftermath of the 2010s financial crisis, with almost unsustainable levels of public debt whose growth, due to the bulging public deficits incurred into to shore up the healthcare systems during the pandemic, threatens to bring forth yet another sovereign debt crisis in the Eurozone.<sup>26</sup>

<sup>21</sup>ABC (05/09/2020). "Estas son las provincias que pasan a la fase 1 de la desescalada," ABC ([www.abc.es/sociedad/abci-provincias-fase-1-desescalada-202005082047\\_noticia.html?ref=https:%2F%2Fwww.google.com%2F](http://www.abc.es/sociedad/abci-provincias-fase-1-desescalada-202005082047_noticia.html?ref=https:%2F%2Fwww.google.com%2F). Accessed June 7, 2020).

<sup>22</sup>ABC (05/20/2020). "Caceroladas contra Sánchez, en directo: nuevas protestas contra la gestión del Gobierno," ABC ([www.abc.es/espana/abci-caceroladas-contra-sanchez-directo-nuevas-protestas-contra-gestion-gobierno-202005202000\\_directo.html](http://www.abc.es/espana/abci-caceroladas-contra-sanchez-directo-nuevas-protestas-contra-gestion-gobierno-202005202000_directo.html). Accessed June 7, 2020); LIBERTAD DIGITAL (05/20/2020). "Las caceroladas contra el gobierno de Sánchez se extienden por toda España," Libertad Digital ([www.libertaddigital.com/fotos/caceroladas-por-toda-espana-contra-sanchez-protesta-espana-1017090/madrid.jpg.html](http://www.libertaddigital.com/fotos/caceroladas-por-toda-espana-contra-sanchez-protesta-espana-1017090/madrid.jpg.html). Accessed June 7, 2020); 20 MINUTOS (05/19/2020). "Nueva jornada de caceroladas contra el Gobierno en distintos puntos de España," 20 Minutos ([www.20minutos.es/noticia/4262087/0/nueva-jornada-caceroladas-contra-el-gobierno-distintos-puntos-de-espana/](http://www.20minutos.es/noticia/4262087/0/nueva-jornada-caceroladas-contra-el-gobierno-distintos-puntos-de-espana/). Accessed June 7, 2020).

<sup>23</sup>ANTENA3 NOTICIAS (06/07/2020). "Pedro Sánchez anuncia las normas que habrá durante la nueva normalidad y que se aprobarán este martes," Antena3 Noticias ([www.antena3.com/noticias/espana/pedro-sanchez-anuncia-las-normas-que-habra-durante-la-nueva-normalidad-y-que-se-aprobaran-este-martes\\_202006075edcdd3965c5a](http://www.antena3.com/noticias/espana/pedro-sanchez-anuncia-las-normas-que-habra-durante-la-nueva-normalidad-y-que-se-aprobaran-este-martes_202006075edcdd3965c5a). Accessed June 7, 2020); ANDURO, Joaquín

(06/07/2020). "Mascarillas obligatorias y otras medidas de Pedro Sánchez para la nueva normalidad," *El Desmarque* ([eldesmarque.com/actualidad/coronavirus/1399763-mascarillas-obligatorias-y-otras-medidas-de-pedro-sanchez-para-la-nueva-normalidad](http://eldesmarque.com/actualidad/coronavirus/1399763-mascarillas-obligatorias-y-otras-medidas-de-pedro-sanchez-para-la-nueva-normalidad)). Accessed June 7, 2020).

<sup>24</sup>LA VANGUARDIA (06/09/2020). "'La nueva normalidad' se prolongará hasta que haya una vacuna contra el virus," *La Vanguardia* ([www.lavanguardia.com/vida/20200609/481697980437/la-nueva-normalidad-se-prolongara-hasta-que-haya-una-vacuna-contra-el-virus.html](http://www.lavanguardia.com/vida/20200609/481697980437/la-nueva-normalidad-se-prolongara-hasta-que-haya-una-vacuna-contra-el-virus.html)). Accessed June 7, 2020).

<sup>25</sup>JEFATURA DEL ESTADO (2020). "Real Decreto-ley 21/2020, de 9 de junio, de medidas urgentes de prevención, contención y coordinación para hacer frente a la crisis sanitaria ocasionada por el COVID-19," *Boletín Oficial del Estado*.

<sup>26</sup>MCCARTHY, Niall (2020). "COVID-19 wreaks economic havoc across Europe," *Statista* ([www.statista.com/chart/16934/percentage-economic-growth-expected-in-eu-member-states](http://www.statista.com/chart/16934/percentage-economic-growth-expected-in-eu-member-states)). Accessed June 7, 2020); VIAÑA, Daniel (05/11/2020). "La Autoridad Fiscal revela que la Seguridad Social y el SEPE sufrirán un déficit de al menos 55.000 millones," *El Mundo* ([elmundo.es/economia/macroeconomia/2020/05/11/5eb58b2bfc6c83f6078b4660.html](http://elmundo.es/economia/macroeconomia/2020/05/11/5eb58b2bfc6c83f6078b4660.html)). Accessed June 7, 2020); VALLE, Eva (05/07/2020). "COVID-19: An asymmetric impact on the Southern European Union States?," *Agenda*

In this worrying context, and despite the measures already undertaken by both the Commission and other EU institutions, including the suspension of the, hitherto sacred, budget rules regarding deficit and debt, and the announcement of a reinforced Union budget to be, at least partly, financed by a record debt emission of up to € 750 billion (the revamped EU budget, which is expected to grow to well over € 1.5 trillion, includes a € 560 billion "recovery and resilience" fund, and up to € 450 billions in solvency support and direct aid to private companies all through Europe), the European Union has displayed a crippling lack of leadership and an unwillingness to defend some of its most sacred principles (free movement of people and goods, unhampered competition in a free market) in the face of unilateral suspensions of Schengen and a return to public support for flag-carrier companies. The fact that most member States have resorted to such measures serves, moreover, as further proof of the return to intergovernmentality—rather than supranationality—evidenced ever since the failure of the Constitutional Treaty and the adoption of the Treaty of Lisbon.

Against the relative invisibility of EU institutions, the coronavirus crisis has, once again, revealed the prominence of the Franco-German axis as the centerpiece of the European Union, rather than Brussels institutions. In fact, the joint announcement of Paris and Berlin's support for a €500 billion reconstruction and recovery plan, to be financed through common European debt emissions, while certainly representing In this worrying context, and despite the measures already undertaken by both the Commission and other EU institutions, including the suspension of the, hitherto sacred, budget rules regarding deficit and debt, and the announce-



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The optimism among Southern European member states arisen by Germany's volte-face has been somewhat curbed by the adamant refusal of the so-called frugals, with Austria and the Netherlands at their forefront, to implement wide-ranging transfer-based recovery programs to combat the socio-economic consequences of the pandemic. In this context, the resurgence of ethnic

<sup>27</sup>*Economica Agenda Pública. El País* ([agendapublica.elpais.com/covid-19-asymmetric-impact-on-the-southern-european-union-states](http://agendapublica.elpais.com/covid-19-asymmetric-impact-on-the-southern-european-union-states). Accessed June 7, 2020).

<sup>28</sup>SECURITIES FINANCE MONITOR (03/22/2020). “European Commission to activate

suspension of EU budget rules," *Securities Finance Monitor* ([finadium.com/european-commission-to-activate-suspension-of-eu-budget-rules](https://finadium.com/european-commission-to-activate-suspension-of-eu-budget-rules)). Accessed June 7, 2020); SMITH-MEYER, Bjarke (03/23/2020). "EU ministers suspend deficit limits to fight coronavirus slump," *Politico* ([www.politico.eu/article/eu-ministers-suspend-deficit-limits-to-fight-coronavirus-slump](https://www.politico.eu/article/eu-ministers-suspend-deficit-limits-to-fight-coronavirus-slump)). Accessed June 7, 2020);

<sup>29</sup>EUROPEAN COMMISSION (05/27/2020). *Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the European Council, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions: Europe's Moment: Repair and Prepare for the Next Generation*, European Commission (SWD(2020)98 final).

<sup>30</sup>INMAN, Phillip & OLTERMANN, Philip (06/06/2020). "Europe's big two kiss and make up for pandemic rescue deal," *The Guardian* ([www.theguardian.com/world/2020/jun/06/european-covid-rescue-plan-merkel-macron-make-up](https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/jun/06/european-covid-rescue-plan-merkel-macron-make-up)). Accessed June 8, 2020); COOK, Cindi (05/18/2020). "Germany, France announce \$543 billion recovery package," *Anadolu Agency* ([www.aa.com.tr/en/europe/germany-france-announce-543-billion-recovery-package/1845561#](https://www.aa.com.tr/en/europe/germany-france-announce-543-billion-recovery-package/1845561#)). Accessed June 8, 2020); BBC (05/18/2020). "Coronavirus: France and Germany propose €500bn recovery fund," *BBC News* ([www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-52712370](https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-52712370)). Accessed June 8, 2020);

<sup>31</sup>Cit. in TIMSIT, Annabelle (05/21/2020). "Because of Covid-19, France and Germany just made EU history," *Quartz* ([qz.com/1859261/the-franco-german-covid-19-bailout-could-secure-europes-future](https://qz.com/1859261/the-franco-german-covid-19-bailout-could-secure-europes-future)). Accessed June 8, 2020).

A shift in position already announced by Chancellor Merkel herself in her April 23 statement to the Bundestag and clearly expressed in her internal policies to face the consequences of Coronavirus, which have included a massive stimulus program well in excess of €130 billion.

<sup>32</sup>BRUNDTSEN, Jim & FLEMING, Sam (05/24/2020). "EU divisions laid bare by frugal four recovery proposal," *Financial Times* ([www.ft.com/content/add218acf63d-4b65-af5c-3c4e9033e015](https://www.ft.com/content/add218acf63d-4b65-af5c-3c4e9033e015)). Accessed June 8, 2020); MURPHY, François (05/19/2020). "Austria says EU 'frugals' to present alternative to Franco-German fund plan," *Reuters* ([www.reuters.com/article/us-france-germany-eu-austria/austria-says-eu-frugals-to-present-alternative-to-franco-german-fund-plan-idUSKBN22V2HS](https://www.reuters.com/article/us-france-germany-eu-austria/austria-says-eu-frugals-to-present-alternative-to-franco-german-fund-plan-idUSKBN22V2HS)). Accessed June 8, 2020).

slurs and national stereotypes which has become evident in recent weeks not only brings back memories of the public opinion mindset that accompanied the traumatic Greek bailout process, but also reveals the underdevelopment of a pan-European feeling of peoplehood which, as Richard Bellamy explains, is a fundamental requirement for the successful implementation of redistributive measures.<sup>34</sup>

If solidarity among EU member states is effectively limited by the absence of a pan-European demos as well as by political constraints stemming out of the social media revolution, which has fractured the traditional media landscape and stymied the ability of the political elite, subject to the all-encompassing dictatorship of Twitter, to accept compromise on long-term policy goals, far graver are the institutional limitations imposed by domestic bodies on prominent aspects of EU policies. In this context, the recent ruling of the German Constitutional Court whereby the European Central

Bank quantitative easing program was deemed “illegitimate” insofar as it exceeded, according to the Court, the ECB’s mandate, appears as a particularly threatening example of this trend of national institutions to encroach on aspects of EU competence, particularly when it is taken into account that the GCC’s resolution not only contradicts a previous ruling of the European Court of Justice—thus violating firmly-established principles of legal competence and court hierarchy—but also, and perhaps more importantly, threatens to destabilize capital markets by putting in question the Central Bank’s pledge to do “whatever it takes,” quoting Mario Draghi, to sustain the common currency and avoid a default risk in the Eurozone. While the ECB has committed itself to keep up its bond purchasing program and to defend its independence against the GCC’s ruling, it is nonetheless evident that the Union and her institutions have neither the political capital nor the institutional power to impose their overarching programs for Europe in face of the member states which remain, following yet another GCC ruling, die Herren der Verträge.<sup>39</sup>

#### 4. CONCLUSION

In his study of the Iberian integration process, Professor Sebastián Royo underlined how “economic success drives public opinion” in favor of the EU, a theory confirmed, among others, by Mark Harwood’s study of the Maltese experience. The economic prospects opened by the European Union served, indeed, as a useful way to justify the sacrifices imposed on the population in order to achieve the *acquis*, whereas integration also played a vital psychological role—especially in the case

<sup>34</sup>A particular example of this attitude has been given by the Dutch Elsevier Weekblad, whose cover, under the heading *Geen stuiver extra naar Zuid-Europa*, which could be roughly translated as ‘no more money for South Europe,’ depicted blond and laborious Dutchmen diligently making the cogwheel of Europe turn while the Southern Europeans enjoy life.

<sup>35</sup>BELLAMY, Richard (2006). “The European Constitution is dead, long live European

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<sup>35</sup>BELLAMY, Richard (2006). “The European Constitution is dead, long live European constitutionalism,” *Constellations* 13/2, pp. 181-189.

<sup>36</sup>BUNDESVERFASSUNGSGERICHT (05/05/2020). Urteil des Zweiten Senats vom 5. Mai 2020 ([www.bundesverfassungsgericht.de/SharedDocs/Downloads/DE/2020/05/rs20200505\\_2bvr085915.pdf?\\_\\_blob=publicationFile&v=7](http://www.bundesverfassungsgericht.de/SharedDocs/Downloads/DE/2020/05/rs20200505_2bvr085915.pdf?__blob=publicationFile&v=7)). Accessed June 8, 2020).

<sup>37</sup>GRAND CHAMBER OF THE EUROPEAN COURT OF JUSTICE (12/11/2018). *Judg-*

ment of the Court in case C-493/17 (*Weiss and others*) (<http://curia.europa.eu/juris/document/document.jsf?jsessionid=4BE6B453667DD87157495A1ACB-F8A2AC?text=&docid=208741&pageIndex=0&doclang=en&mode=lst&dir=&occ=-first&part=1&cid=4659845>). Accessed June 8, 2020).

<sup>38</sup>ALCARAZ, Carlo; CLAESSENS, Stijn; CUADRA, Gabriel; MARQUES-IBÁÑEZ, David & SAPRIZA, Horacio (2019). "Whatever it takes: What's the impact of a major non-conventional monetary policy intervention," *ECB Working Paper Series* n° 2249; PÉREZ, Claudi (07/26/2012). "El BCE hará lo necesario para sostener el Euro," *El País* ([elpais.com/economia/2012/07/26/actualidad/1343298454\\_662169.html](http://elpais.com/economia/2012/07/26/actualidad/1343298454_662169.html)). Accessed June 8, 2020).

<sup>39</sup>ARNOLD, Martin (05/07/2020). "Christine Lagarde says ECB is 'undeterred' by German Court challenge," *Financial Times* ([www.ft.com/content/d93008c5-2b3c-4b2e-9499-5eabaaa959db](http://www.ft.com/content/d93008c5-2b3c-4b2e-9499-5eabaaa959db)). Accessed June 8, 2020).

<sup>40</sup>BUNDESVERFASSUNGSGERICHT (2009). *Urteil des Zweiten Senats vom 30. Juli 2009, 2 BvE 2/08*.

<sup>41</sup>ROYO, Sebastián (2007). "Lessons from the integration of Spain and Portugal to the EU," *PS. Political Science and Politics* 40/4, pp. 689-693.

<sup>42</sup>HARWOOD, Mark (2017). "How Euroscepticism was marginalised – Malta's post-membership euro-enthusiasm and the impact of BREXIT," *European Politics and Sociology* ([doi.org/10.1080/23745118.2017.1391515](https://doi.org/10.1080/23745118.2017.1391515)).

of Spain and Portugal, where European integration was understood as a return to the core of continental politics after the relative isolation they suffered under their long dictatorships. By the same token, it could be argued that a downturn in economic fortunes will, as has already become evident in the Italian and Greek scenarios, turn the tide of public opinion toward increasing hostility toward the EU, even in cases where leaving the Union remains a financially unfeasible project.

It is, therefore, relatively easy to forecast a return to inter-European tensions in a scenario where the financial pressures put by COVID-19 on already weakened economies has limited the ability of EU states to effectively respond to the health crisis without dangerously verging on the abyss of sovereign insolvency, with bubbling deficits and skyrocketing debts becoming the norm, particularly in the case of Southern Europe. As our Spanish case study has amply proven, the pandemic has forced the Southern European member states to overlook the stability pact in order to fund the unexpected expenses arising from the health crisis, despite their already precarious financial situation. In this context, were the European reconstruction and recovery plans to fail in the course of their being negotiated, it is highly probable that a wave of sovereign defaults would hit the Union's southern flank, particularly in the case of a probable epidemic rebound.

While it is hardly doubtful that the COVID-19 epidemic will bring down the edifice of European integration, it is nonetheless evident that it has brought to the fore, once again, its severe structural

defects as well as the resilience of European nationalisms almost seventy years after the Treaty of Rome. The resurgence of national stereotypes and ethnic slurs against Southern Europeans, who remain among the most severely hit by coronavirus, cannot hide the fact that the present health crisis will only be solved through the concerted effort of all member States. It is undeniable, though, that massive bailouts and direct handouts, important as they most certainly are, are not the answer to the EU's institutional problems. If the Union wants to remain a viable project in the long run, it needs to rally the Europeans around an exciting common project again; if it does not manage to do so, it will eventually become a 'jail of nations,' shackled by the enslaving handcuffs of an unpayable debt.



## About the Author



### **Borja W. González Fernández Ph. D**

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