

**SPECIAL ISSUE: TOWARDS A
TRANSDISCIPLINARY
PERSPECTIVE ON COVID-19 IN
EUROPE**

Foreword by H.E. Nina Obermaier

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He waka eke noa. We are all in this together. No country can overcome the COVID-19 pandemic on its own, as it requires **cooperation and solidarity**. It is in this spirit that the European Union has sought to tackle the COVID-19 pandemic both within Europe and beyond.

When a number of EU Member States were hit hard by Covid in the early days of the pandemic, it became clear that the EU Treaties were not pandemic-proof. Public health was regarded largely as a matter for national governments, and initial action was taken at national level. Not long thereafter, however, EU leaders and their health ministers realised the benefits of a joined-up approach based on cooperation and solidarity and agreed on unprecedented action at European level to address COVID-19. This has included:

- helping ensure supply of medical equipment and vaccines through increased production in the EU and joint procurement;
- issuing guidelines on measures to stop the spread of the virus and on testing strategies;
- supporting research on vaccines, diagnostics and treatment.

At the same time, as it moved quickly to protect its citizens, the EU has not lost sight of its international commitments, and of the need for equitable vaccine distribution. Through its vaccine strategy, safe and effective vaccines were produced for Europe and the world. By October 2021, 75% of adults in the EU were fully vaccinated and the EU had exported over **1 billion vaccine doses worldwide, making**

the EU largest exporter of COVID-19 vaccines. The EU has exported about half of the vaccines produced in Europe to other countries in the world, as much as it has delivered for its citizens. For example, the Pfizer vaccine used in Aotearoa New Zealand is made in Europe.

Yet, there is much more work to be done to ensure access to COVID-19 vaccines worldwide. This is crucial, as nobody is safe until everybody is safe. And this requires an international effort. The EU has been leading the multilateral response. Team Europe (the EU, its Member States and its financial institutions) has contributed close to €3 billion (NZ\$ 4.88 billion) for the COVAX Facility to help secure at least 1.8 billion doses for 92 low and lower middle-income countries.

Drawing lessons from the pandemic, the European Union has taken first steps towards a **“European Health Union”**. This will involve more harmonisation of preparedness plans at European, national and regional level, and stronger EU agencies, including a new Health Emergency Response Authority (HERA). Similarly, there are lessons to be drawn at global level, as highlighted by the Independent Panel for Pandemic Preparedness and Response, co-chaired by Rt Hon Helen Clark. The EU supports the idea of an **international treaty on pandemics** within the framework of WHO. Such a treaty would support international efforts to reinforce global health security, in particular on preparedness and response to health emergencies, in light of lessons learnt from the pandemic.

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Beyond the public health response, the European Union has sought to **tackle the socio-economic impacts** of COVID-19, both in Europe and globally. Citizens have been at the heart of this response. The European Union has:

- supported the repatriation of EU citizens stranded abroad;
- ensured the flow of goods and worker's mobility in the EU single market;
- taken a number of unprecedented economic and budgetary measures to save jobs and companies and invest in a sustainable recovery.

At the outset of the pandemic, the EU took a number of steps to mitigate its immediate economic impact, notably temporary support measures to save people's jobs and to support companies hit by the crisis. However, overcoming the long-term economic effects of the pandemic will be a generational task. The EU has taken on the challenge of recovery also as an opportunity to accelerate the transitions to a green and digital economy. That is why in December 2020 it adopted an unprecedented **recovery package of €2.018 trillion** (NZ\$ 3.287 trillion), combining the EU budget for 2021-27 with the *NextGenerationEU* instrument, which allows the Commission to borrow up to €800 billion (to support reforms and investments undertaken by EU countries). The aim is to mitigate the economic and social impact of the coronavirus pandemic and make

European economies and societies more sustainable, resilient and better prepared for the challenges and opportunities of the green and digital transitions.

These transitions can only succeed in partnership with countries beyond the EU. The EU budget for 2021-2027 also includes €79.46 billion for cooperation under the Neighbourhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument (NDICI) entitled “**Global Europe**”. One of its objectives is helping our partners to cope with the health and socio-economic impact of COVID-19. Under this instrument, the EU will, for instance, continue to support sustainable development in the Pacific Island Countries, in close partnership with each country.

Finally, a very practical tool for citizens developed at EU level has been the EU’s **Digital COVID Certificate**. Since 1 July 2021, this allows EU citizens and their family members to exercise their right to free movement with a practical interoperable certificate showing their COVID-19 vaccination, test and/or recovery status. This tool has meanwhile become the international standard for resuming international travel. By November 2021, 22 countries outside the EU had introduced equivalent vaccination certificates, ensuring global interoperability and facilitating safe international travel. Aotearoa New Zealand’s international vaccine certificate is likewise linked to the EU system, making it easier for New Zealanders and Europeans to eventually visit each other again.

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The COVID-19 pandemic has affected many aspects of our lives and societies. Therefore the response to the pandemic has also been wide-ranging. Analysing COVID-19 in Europe, therefore, requires an interdisciplinary approach. This special edition of the *New Zealand Journal of Research on Europe* offers such an approach.

Giulia Interesse examines the role of digital technologies within the context of pandemic prevention and response in several EU countries, providing useful lessons for both digital readiness and epidemic preparedness in the future. *Logan Carmichael* looks specifically at the case of Estonia – a world leader in e-Government already before the pandemic – and examines how Estonia has further refined e-Government during the pandemic and how its approaches have been adopted internationally.

Filipe Guerra recalls the political debates within the EU on “Next Generation EU”; while the economic crisis galvanised action and solidarity at EU level, it also reopened some of the debates that surfaced during the sovereign debt crisis.

Nashie Shamoon examines the impact of COVID-19 on refugees, through the case study of Syrian refugees in Turkey, and highlights the particular vulnerability of refugees during the pandemic. Nashie’s contribution to this volume is a poignant reminder that, in a global pandemic, nobody is safe until everyone is safe.