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LESSONS LEARNED BY THE EUROPEAN UNION IN THE CONTEXT OF COVID-19 THAT CAN BE USED AS POTENTIAL SOFT-POWER TOOLS

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Brussels, December 2020

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The research aims to analyse the extent to which the European Union can be an effective promoter of democracy and multilateralism at a global scale following the domestic lessons learned during the pandemic. In this regard, we will firstly be looking at the measures implemented by the Member States, with focus on a selection of three (Romania, Hungary and Bulgaria) that had an impact on democracy in order to identify the preliminary outcomes for the civil society, the fundamental freedoms and data protection among others. Secondly, we will be identifying the European Union's response (European Commission and the European Parliament among others) to the above-mentioned situations to see the extent to which it managed to send relevant signals regarding the safeguarding of democracy in the respective Member States. Thirdly, deriving from the previous overview, we will be seeking to detect a series of lessons that can be learnt   from the European Union's experience in dealing with domestic challenges for democracy. Fourthly, we will be aiming to assess how these lessons can be further promoted as soft power tools at a global scale and if the EU can be an effective promoter of democracy in current and future multilateral settings.

The core structure

The introduction presents the context, the sources used, the main concepts integrated in the paper and details about how the research question will be answered. Next, *Section 1* looks into a series of specific measures adopted by several EU Member States (Bulgaria, Hungary and Romania) during the pandemic and investigates the potential impact on democracy. Accordingly, *Section 1* seeks to pinpoint the EU response to the measures taken by the selected EU Member States and to briefly analyse its effectiveness. *Section 2* draws lessons that can be learned from the EU experience in dealing with domestic challenges for democracy and points out how these know-hows can be further used as potential soft-power tools at a global scale. The paper concludes with a series of recommendations for the European Union.

Short bio

Eliza Vaș has been working for the European Institute of Romania since 2014, as an expert in European Affairs. She is author and co-author to several publications, her research being focused on European policies, democracy, and citizen participation. She has been involved in the Romanian non-governmental sector since 2009 and is currently Policy & Strategy Director of the Young Initiative Association, a Romanian education-based NGO. Her non-governmental work is focused on projects promoting European values, civic engagement, and youth empowerment. As a PhD candidate in International Relations and European Studies with the Babeș-Bolyai University, she is conducting research on the role of civil   society in the East and Central Europe democratization process.

INTRODUCTION

On 24th January 2020, the European Union (EU) registered its first case of infection (in France) with the new coronavirus. Almost a year later, at the time of completing this paper (November/December 2020), more than 15 million cases have been reported in the EU/EEA and the United Kingdom, and more than 370 000 deaths occurred (European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control, 2020). During this time, numerous measures have been adopted and implemented by the authorities with the main purpose of reducing the spread of the virus and thus protecting the health of the citizens. The sanitary crisis caused by the infection with SARS-CoV-2 was amplified by consequent negative effects in vast areas of the society. The virus has not challenged just the health of the people. The virus questioned democracy itself.

Against this background, the paper aims to supply an answer to the following research question: how can the European Union be an effective promoter of democracy and multilateralism at the global scale following the domestic lessons learned during the COVID-19 pandemic? The main argument for working on this topic derives from the need to better understand the outcomes of the measures taken by the national authorities on matters related to the pandemic that might have affected the quality of democracy. At the same time, the paper attempts to show if the EU response and calls for coordination were efficient and to see which are the lessons that can be learned from a   European perspective when dealing with a crisis that troubles not just the people, but also the democratic system.

For achieving these research goals, the paper uses qualitative data sources. In this sense, a content analysis on relevant decisions, reports and publications issued in 2020 was conducted. The materials selected for the research belong mostly to European institutions (e.g., public releases, declarations, reports) or are state-related (e.g., decisions, public interviews etc.). Thematic reports have been consulted such as the ones published under the aegis of the European Agency for Fundamental Rights. In addition to this, there will be references made to similar researches and aggregated quantitative data such as the *Global Monitor of COVID-19's impact on Democracy and Human Rights* and *The Democratic Space Barometer*.

The paper starts by analysing the national measures taken in Bulgaria, Hungary and Romania and continues with showing the EU response to those approaches. Furthermore, it broadens the analysis and investigates the lessons that can be learned by the European Union in the context of the domestic challenges faced. Lastly, it draws recommendations and policy proposals about EU's possibility of promoting the lessons learned as potential soft power tools.

The main concepts used in the paper are democracy, soft power, human rights, civil society, and data privacy. For the first concept, we will use the definition presented by David Beetham (1992) as cited by Gruegel (2002/2008), who sees democracy as 'a way of making decisions about binding rules and policies for the community, over which the population exercises control'. To frame soft power, we have started from the definition coined by Joseph S. Nye Jr. (2005) who said that 'it arises from the attractiveness of a country's culture, political ideals, and policies … when our policies are seen as legitimate in the eyes of others, our soft power is enhanced'. For the purposes of this paper, fundamental freedoms will be primarily seen from the perspective of freedom of expression and freedom to vote. Data privacy is understood according to the provisions set by the General Data Protection Regulation of the European Union. For civil society, we will be using the European Commission's definition 'civil society organisations (CSOs) are independent actors, organised on a not-for-profit and voluntary basis, and active in different fields, such as poverty reduction, emergency aid, human rights, environment etc.'

Section 1 – The impact on democracy of the measures taken by Bulgaria, Hungary, and Romania during the pandemic and EU's response

The first intention of this paper is to name and compare the measures taken by some EU Member States that were related to the pandemic and that had an impact on democracy. For achieving this purpose, we have selected three Member States from Central and Eastern Europe. The key criteria for this choice were: to have at least one state with elections in 2020, to have at least one state with active protests/civic movements that have started/intensified in 2020 and to have a state that has previously experienced a decline in democracy quality. Thus the states selected are Bulgaria, Hungary and Romania. For each of these states, the following types of information have been structured: the first case(s) related to COVID-19, the state of emergency, measures on fundamental freedoms (freedom of expression, freedom to vote), measures that affected civil society and measures on data privacy. The time frame considered for this concise analysis varies between the 26th of February 2020 (the first confirmed case in Romania) and the 13th of December 2020 (the date of submitting this paper).

Bulgaria

Bulgaria is the first country reviewed for the measures adopted by central authorities during the COVID-19 pandemic. Between the moment of its first confirmed cases and the time of the analysis, more than 170 000 people in Bulgaria have tested positive and more than 5600 deaths were reported (European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control, 2020). *Table 1* exemplifies that the measures to counter the spread of infections with the new coronavirus have been adopted quite early, but the population failed to see them as appropriate or effective. The country has spent most of this year in an epidemic emergency state, but it was also marked by a series of civic events that challenged both the status quo and the way the Government decided to manage the crisis caused by the pandemic. The Global Monitor of COVID-19's impact on Democracy and Human Rights (International Idea, 2020) marks areas related to civil liberties, social rights and equality and predictable enforcement as concerning developments for Bulgaria. Civil society, effective Parliament and access to justice are labelled as developments to watch.

Table 1. Overview of the measures (selection) adopted in Bulgaria

| Member State	The situation related to the first case(s)	The state of emergency	Measures on fundamental freedoms (expression, voting)	Measures and/or events related to civil society	Measures on data privacy
Bulgaria	The first cases were reported on the 8th of March 2020, when two women from Pleven and two from Gabrovo were confirmed positive when tested. At the beginning of the pandemic in Bulgaria, March 2020, the national authorities introduced restrictions of access to and from Roma communities even though there were not confirmed cases. (European	The state of emergency was declared on the 13th of March 2020. At that moment, there were 23 confirmed cases. In the period that followed, the authorities extended the state of emergency until the 30th of June 2020. Based on the rising number of cases, the Government extended the epidemic emergency state until July 31, then September 30 and most recently until the 30th of November 2020	In April, a piece of legislation aimed at criminalizing disinformation on the internet was drafted and made public. The penalties included fines of up to 1000 euros and imprisonment for up to three years. The OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media, Harlem Désir, said about the draft that it 'poses a risk of undue restriction on media freedom, the work of journalists, and the free flow of information, both in the context of the current pandemic and thereafter' (Organization for Security and Co-	A series of protests started in summer (July) soon after representatives of the prosecution and police entered the presidency and arrested two officials of the presidential administration. Besides the reasons connected to the widespread corruption, the protesters accused the Government of mismanaging the pandemic effects in Bulgaria. The demonstrators called for the resignation of the Bulgarian Prime Minister and Government and early parliamentary	An app (ViruSafe) has been developed by a private company and was approved by the Bulgarian Health Ministry at the beginning of April. The app requires users to enter personal data, such as ID, age, any chronic diseases they may have and allow the app to use their location. The app supports features such as daily symptoms and health status tracker, location tracker, enabled voluntarily by the user, notifications on the pandemic, information and best practices. (ViruSafe, 2020)

	Union's Agency for Fundamental Rights, 2020).	(The Global State of Democracy Indices, 2020).	operation in Europe, 2020).	elections, among others. (Euronews, 2020	

Source: author's comparison based on the references indicated in the table.

To present the impact on democracy of the measures taken in Bulgaria, we will use data from the Pandemic Backsliding Project developed by the Varieties of Democracy Institute (V-Dem), which tracks state responses to the COVID-19 pandemic. As it can be observed from *Figure 1.* major violations have been associated to the discriminatory measures (especially the ones related to the Roma community) and minor violations have been observed in relation to the restrictions of media freedom (the draft legislation criminalizing disinformation). In addition to this, we have included the data made available by Freedom House. The data released in 2020 shows a negative change for Bulgaria's Democracy Score (Freedom House, 2020), which declined from 4.61 to 4.54[1], due to political meddling in the media sector (harassment of journalists) and negative adjustments to the electoral process (which increased the influence of special interests). Bulgaria is thus classified by Freedom House in 2020 as a semi-consolidated democracy.

Figure 1. Pandemic Democratic Violations Indicators for Bulgaria (March-September 2020)
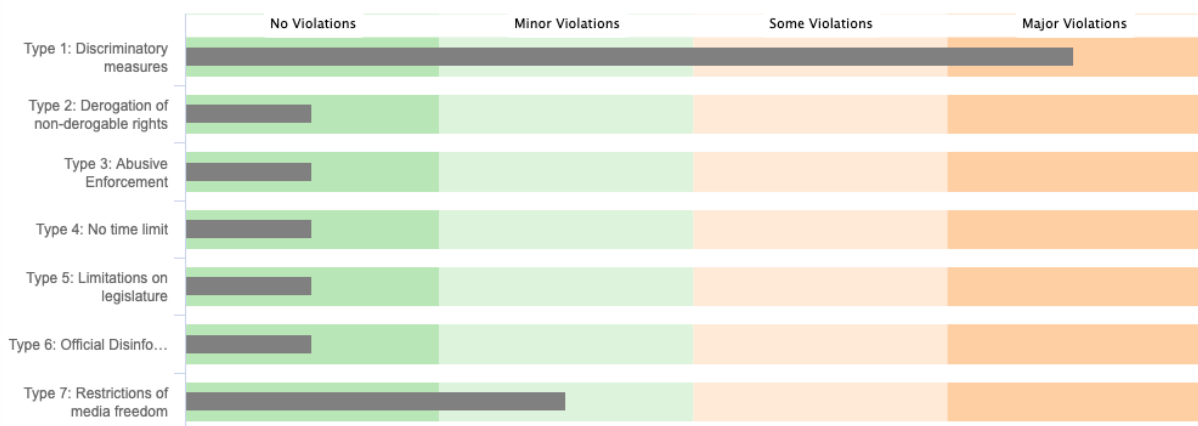
Source: Pandemic Backsliding: Democracy During Covid-19 (PanDem), Version 4. Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) Institute (2020)

One of the first European reactions to what happened in Bulgaria in terms of protests was attributed to Manfred Weber, a representative of the European People's Party (EPP) to which the ruling party in Bulgaria is affiliated. In an official statement, he expressed 'full support for the Bulgarian government of Boyko Borisov and its efforts to protect the economy against the negative effects of the Coronacrisis, fight against corruption   and the progress that is being made to join the Eurozone' (EPP Group, 2020). The Bulgarian President called for a European impartial reaction and said that 'EU can no longer keep its 'eyes wide shut' on Bulgaria's rule-of-law problems' (Politico, 2020). Although there was not any specific message issued by the European Commission (EC) on the topic, one of the spokespersons for the EC declared that the situation is being monitored and that 'peaceful demonstrations are a fundamental right in every democratic country and we support the right to peaceful protest' (Reuters, 2020). A more direct statement was issued by the Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights who expressed her concern 'at numerous reports of police violence against journalists covering demonstrations in Sofia' (Council of Europe, Commissioner for Human Rights, 2020).

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[1] The ratings are built on a scale of 1 to 7, where 7 represents the highest level of democratic progress and 1 the lowest.

Moving on to official documents, we have analysed the first report on the rule of law on Bulgaria (European Commission, 2020). The report mentions the keyword 'pandemic' four times. In one specific case, it shows shortcomings of the judicial system in the area of e-justice and in the other particular case it illustrates the negative impact of the changes proposed in the Criminal Code in order to criminalize disinformation. Another report taken into account for this analysis was requested by LIBE Committee (European Parliament, 2020). The report references 'Bulgaria' twelve times and includes a mention on the homophobic statements that were broadcasted during the pandemic.

Finally, considering the measures implemented and the response of the European institutions, it can be concluded for this part that Bulgaria is experiencing a low to medium risk to the quality of democracy (rank 52 of 144 countries analysed), an assertion   also supported by the Pandemic Backsliding Index (Varieties of Democracy Institute, 2020). However, the risk is not entirely produced by the measures adopted during the pandemic (some of which some were heavily criticised by different actors) but is also an indicator of other problems Bulgaria faced before the pandemic (the citizen's level of discontent with the Government and the widespread corruption). We argue that the ongoing demonstrations could eventually lead to a constructive shift in the democratic governance of Bulgaria, although we did not come across any research materials that found a strong correlation between the intensity/continuity of the protests and the outcome of having a more transparent and efficient decision-making process during the COVID-19 crisis and beyond.

Hungary

Hungary is the second country reviewed for the measures adopted by central authorities on matters related to the COVID-19 pandemic. Between the first cases registered on the 4th of March and the date of this paper, Hungary has reported more than 280 000 cases of infection with the new coronavirus and more than 7000 deaths (European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control, 2020). As *Table 2* shows, measures to counter the effect of the pandemic have been taken quickly and the state of emergency was declared one week after the first cases reported. The measures taken by the central decision-makers have been viewed by some of the citizens as unlawful and the first online protest was organised in a brief time span. One of the biggest issues that raised questions in Hungary and among international stakeholders was the increased powers for the Prime Minister for an indefinite period (the act that included this provision was ended in June, but a new state of emergency was declared at the beginning of November). The Global Monitor of COVID-19's impact on Democracy and Human Rights (International Idea, 2020) marks areas related to civil liberties and media integrity as concerning developments in Hungary. Social rights and equality, effective Parliament and media integrity are considered developments to watch.

Table 2. Overview of the measures (selection) adopted in Hungary

| Member State	The situation related to the first case(s)	The state of emergency	Measures on fundamental freedoms (expression, voting)	Measures and/or events related to civil society	Measures on data privacy
Hungary	The first cases were reported on the 4th of March 2020, when two Iranian students have tested positive. Two days later , the Hungarian Prime Minister declared that 'primarily foreigners brought in the disease'.	The state of emergency was declared on the 11th of March 2020 by the Hungarian government. In June, the Parliament ended the state of emergency powers handed to the government. A new state of emergency was declared at the	A law on protection against the new coronavirus was adopted by the end of March. The main provisions included an extension of the government's emergency powers, suspending any elections and introducing prison penalties for up to five years for people who produce or spread false information on the	Measures related to the suspension or prohibition of social gatherings with a high number of people have been taken soon after the break of the pandemic in Hungary. The „corona law" triggered the response of the civil society rapidly. After the bill was announced a petition written by lawyers and constitutional experts	A COVID-19 tracker app (VirusRadar, 2020) was developed and donated by a private company to the national authorities in the Spring. The app was approved for use by the Ministry of Innovation and Technology and is being run by the Governmental Agency for IT Development.

	In connection to this, the Interior Ministry mentioned that the two Iranian students would be expelled due to leaving the hospital quarantine hall without permission and not using protective equipment (France 24, 2020).	beginning of November. A few days later the Parliament passed a law that extended the state of emergency for a period of 90 days (International Communications Office, Cabinet Office of the Prime Minister, 2020).	pandemic. In June, the law was withdrawn. (International Center for Non-for Profit Law, 2020). The emergency legislation adopted during the pandemic also included provisions for postponing indefinitely elections and referenda (Edward Szekeres, BalkanInsight, 2020)	was published and managed to raise more than 100 000 signatures in support. Also, the first online protest in Hungary was organised on this matter by the Civil College Foundation. The aim of the protest was to criticise the law that criminalised fake-news and included serious concerns for the freedom of journalists. (Máté Varga, 2020)	VirusRadar requires users to enter their phone number so as to establish a connection to the app's unique ID. The app uses Bluetooth to reach other users and to issue reports about contacts made at a dangerous distance with other users. The people who become infected can notify epidemiologists and agree to send alerts to other users they have been in contact with (Hungary Today, 2020).

Source: author's comparison based on the references indicated in the table.

As it was the case for Bulgaria, we will use data from the Pandemic Backsliding Project developed by the Varieties of Democracy Institute (V-Dem) to present the impact on democracy of the measures taken in Hungary. As it can be seen from *Figure 2.* major violations have been associated to the restrictions of media freedom (this being also one of the main reasons for online protests and citizens' discontent), some violations have been observed in relation to the limitations on legislative   and minor violations have occurred on matters related to the time limit (as it was also the case for measures related to elections and referenda or others). In addition to this, we have included the data made available by Freedom House. The statistics released in 2020 shows a negative change for Hungary's Democracy Score (Freedom House, 2020), which declined from 4.07 in 2019 to 3.96 in 2020, due to polarization of state institutions, biased partisan coverage by state media, threats that opposition parties might lose funding, and others. In 2019, Hungary was classified by Freedom House as semi-consolidated democracy, while in 2020 was classified as transitional or hybrid regime.

Figure 2. Pandemic Democratic Violations Indicators for Hungary (March-September 2020)
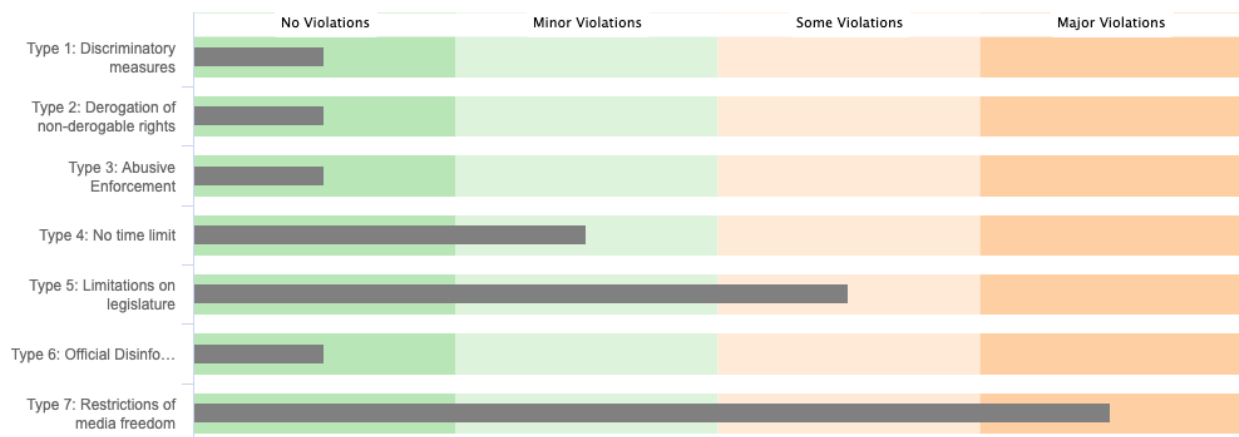
Source: Pandemic Backsliding: Democracy During Covid-19 (PanDem), Version 4. Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) Institute (2020)

The creative interpretation of democracy in Hungary was no news to European officials. In an April 2020 interview, Věra Jourová, European Commission's Vice-President for Values and Transparency, said that by 'killing corona, we should not kill democracy and human rights in Europe' and the rule of law can be a victim of the pandemic, by referring   to the Hungarian set of measures (Euronews, 2020). A couple of months later, the Hungarian Prime Minister sent a

letter to the President of the European Commission calling for the removal of the EU Commissioner Věra Jourová, after she gave an interview and mentioned that Viktor Orbán 'is building a sick democracy' given the level of freedom of expression and media in Hungary (Deutsche Welle, 2020). The EPP president has also raised questions about the respect for rule of law in Hungary and the need to adopt proportionate and time limited measures during the Pandemic (Financial Times, 2020).

Regarding the report on the rule of law for Hungary (European Commission, 2020), the keyword 'pandemic' appears eight times. In one specific case, it is acknowledged that independent media outlets faced systemic obstruction and that the measure to criminalize disinformation raised 'concerns as regards legal certainty and may have a chilling effect on freedom of expression'. The report drafted for the LIBE Committee (European Parliament, 2020) shows that while the Hungarian government reacted to the call of the European institutions and ended the emergency decree (in June 2020), serious concerns remain for the civil society which was considered to be at risk.

Concluding this section, we can affirm that Hungary is approaching a medium risk about the quality of democracy (rank 35 of 144 countries analysed) according to the Pandemic Backsliding Index (Varieties of Democracy Institute, 2020). As it was the case for Bulgaria, the risk isn't caused entirely by the measures adopted during the pandemic crisis but is also an indicator of serious issues and challenges the state is being confronted with. However, the pandemic context seems to have worsened   the democratic governance in Hungary and recent measures such as the total ban on protests and fines associated with represent another trend that negatively affects the quality of democracy (European Center for Nonprofit Law, 2020).

Romania

The third country reviewed for the measures adopted during the pandemic is Romania, which was the only country from the selection that planned and organised elections in 2020. Between the first cases registered on the 26th of February 2020 and the date of this paper, Romania has reported more than 550 000 cases of infection with the new coronavirus and more than 13 000 deaths (European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control, 2020). *Table 3* shows that the measures were adopted soon after the first case and they were more deterring in the beginning than after the first few months. In comparison with Bulgaria and Hungary, the measures adopted by the Romanian authorities seem to have been less restrictive in some areas (the state of emergency lasted a total of two months). The Global Monitor of COVID-19's impact on Democracy and Human Rights (International Idea, 2020) marks areas related to media integrity, effective Parliament, social rights and equality, civil liberties and access to justice as developments to watch. On the   contrary to the other two states analysed, Romania is not experiencing concerning developments for the above-mentioned monitor.

Table 3. Overview of the measures (selection) adopted in Romania

| Member State	The situation related to the first case(s)	The state of emergency	Measures on fundamental freedoms (expression, voting)	Measures and/or events related to civil society	Measures on data privacy
Romania	The first case was reported on the 26th of February 2020, when a Romanian citizen that was a direct contact of an Italian citizen (tested positive upon his return to	On the 16th of March 2020, the President issued the decree establishing the state of emergency in Romania for a period of 30 days which was further renewed until the 15th of May 2020.	Romania had local elections scheduled for Spring 2020, which were later on decided to be organised in September 2020. During the electoral campaign it was allowed to organise indoor events of maximum 50 people and outdoor events of maximum 100 people. For street actions, the	At the beginning of March, the Head of the Department for Emergency Situations, announced a prohibition of all indoor or outdoor activities involving the participation of more than 1,000 people; this limit was subsequently changed according to	No app similar to the ones in Bulgaria or Hungary have been officially approved in Romania until the date of this paper. A couple of private stakeholders developed apps related to tracking the spread of the virus in Romania but they were not for official use.

Italy) was confirmed. One of the headlines used by a major TV news source in Romania was portraying the origin of the case as 'The Italian who brought coronavirus to Romania' (ProTV, 2020)	Following the state of emergency, a series of military ordinances were adopted with the purpose of preventing the spread of the infection in Romania (International Center for Nonprofit Law, 2020) Afterwards, the country was in a state of alert for consequent periods of 30 days.	maximum number was limited to six people and for door-to-door campaign messages to maximum 2 people (Permanent Electoral Authority, 2020). The Parliamentary were scheduled for 6th of December 2020 and were organised without any major incidents. One of the provisions associated with the state of emergency included restrictions on freedom of expression. A couple of websites have been called by a national communication authority to close on this reason. At the end of the emergency state, the websites have been unblocked.	the provisions set by the state of emergency or alert legislation. In the Summer and Autumn, a couple of protests were organised by citizens who questioned the public safety measures or the use of the potential vaccines. Most of the claims were related to removing the use of masks or not having a compulsory vaccine for COVID-19 (Digi 24, 2020).	In November, the Health Ministry together with the Special Telecommunications System developed a platform called Corona-Forms (only for medical authorities' use) with the purpose of sending the lab test results both to the patients and to their family doctors, the access also being granted to the Public Health Directorates. The authorities have mentioned that the platform/app is not based on tracking users' location. (HotNews, 2020)

Source: author's comparison based on the references indicated in the table.

Furthermore, we display the data retrieved from the Pandemic Backsliding Project on Romania. As it can be observed from *Figure 3*. minor violations have been associated to the abusive enforcement (probably related to the fines applied for breaking the mobility restrictions) and on the restrictions of media freedom (in direct connection to the websites that have been closed for spreading fake news). We have also included the data made available by Freedom House. The statistics released in 2020 shows the same Democracy Score as the one from 2019 (Freedom House, 2020), meaning 4.43 (out of a maximum 7 points). In 2020, Romania was classified by Freedom House as a semi-consolidated democracy.

Figure 3. Pandemic Democratic Violations Indicators for Romania (March-September 2020)
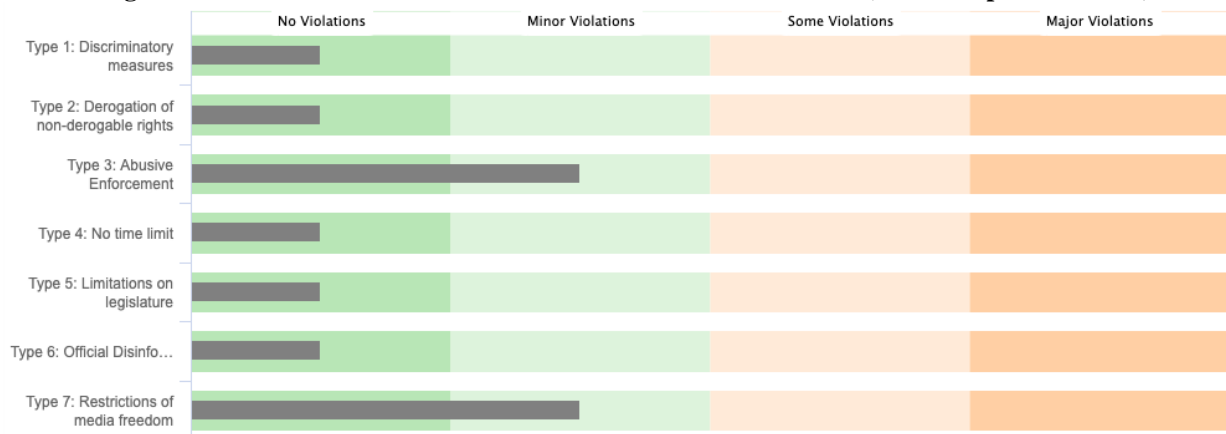
Source: Pandemic Backsliding: Democracy During Covid-19 (PanDem), Version 4. Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) Institute (2020)

One preliminary European response to the measures adopted by the national authorities in Romania was that of a Romanian MEP, who criticised the government for planning to derogate from the European Convention on Human Rights. Ramona Strugariu, a Renew Europe MEP, declared that she is 'afraid that many of these measures and attempts are actually to limit freedom of information and freedom of the media, which are essential right now' (Vlagyiszlav Makszimov, Euractiv, 2020). Regarding the national contribution in managing the effects of the crisis, the President of the European Commission has announced in an interview for the state television that

Romania was selected to be the first European country to host the strategic stockpile of medical equipments (Lucian Pîrvoiu, TVR, 2020).

Moving next and analysing the report on the rule of law for Romanian (European Commission, 2020), we have found six mentions of the 'pandemic' keyword. In one specific case, it is mentioned that following the request of the Ombudsman on the fines that were applied for the people who did not respect the quarantine rules, the Constitutional Court has ruled that the measure was unconstitutional and because the provisions affected or restricted fundamental rights or freedoms, they should have been adopted though a law and by not an emergency ordinance. On the other hand, the report drafted for the LIBE Committee (European Parliament, 2020) does not include specific observations on the measures adopted during the pandemic. However, it includes remarks on the impact of the 'NGO transparency laws' that were proposed in 2017 and that created administrative burdens for the civil society and put at risk the civic space in Romania.

By concluding with this section, we can say that Romania is experiencing a minimal risk on the quality of democracy (rank 115 of 144 countries analysed) according to the Pandemic Backsliding Index (Varieties of Democracy Institute, 2020). Citizens were able to contest some of the decisions made by the central authorities (e.g., the Constitutional Court has ruled the fines for breaking the state of emergency illegal) which may be one of the reasons behind such a good score. Also, the citizens were free to take part in protests manifesting their discontent with the sanitary measures albeit milder than the ones adopted by the neighbouring countries. The health care workers also organised a protest in November claiming that the promises made by the decision makers were not fulfilled (e.g., to cover staff shortages, to receive payment bonuses for working with coronavirus patients). The local elections (June 2020) and the parliamentary elections (December 2020) were organised without major incidents.

Section 2 – The lessons learned by the European Union and their use as soft power tools at a global scale

The first section of the paper dealt mostly with naming and comparing the measures taken by a couple of Member States as a response to the pandemic. The main purpose was to see if the national actions (a selection) triggered new concerns for the quality of democracy or if they did not affect it. For Hungary (mostly) and Bulgaria (to a certain extent), we have concluded that the measures adopted generated more challenges for the   democratic governance, while in Romania this assertion was not validated   . *Section 1* also included a series of European official reactions about the measures adopted in these states alongside with other opinions expressed by international actors. The effectiveness of these reactions was not further analysed (except for Hungary) due to the lack of available data on how the Member States perceived the European reactions and if there were concrete changes implemented at national level as a follow-up.

For this reason, *Section 2* introduces a SWOT analysis regarding the Member States' and the European Union's responses to the pandemic[2]. The focus is to identify the strengths and the weaknesses that can be further developed in the lessons learned by the European Union. The opportunities and threats will constitute the basis for building arguments related to potential tools of soft power that could be used at a global scale by the EU.

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[2] By choosing this approach, we aim to emphasise that the European Union is legally invested to support the national policies on health, but it does not have an exclusive competence in the field which would have allowed us to shift the focus from the Member States to the European Union.

Table 4. SWOT analysis on the Member States' and the European Union's responses to the pandemic[3]

Strengths	Weaknesses
- The European Union triggered a prompt reaction to the crisis, by activating the Integrated Political Crisis Response on 28 January 2020 (Council of the European Union, 2020), which allowed the share of information at the highest political level; - While we are not aware of correlations between the moment of declaring the emergency state and the moment when European Commission was mandated by the European Council to coordinate the EU response, we can acknowledge that in all three analysed Member States the state of emergency has been declared after 10th of March 2020; - The European Commission supported by the Council of the EU and the European Parliament adopted a series of pragmatic solutions to counter the effects of the crisis: financial support to the Member States in various forms and instruments, bought medical equipment and distributed it to the Member States, ran negotiations with the pharmaceutical companies that were developing vaccines, provided recommendations for assuring the continuity of transports of goods between the Member States and not only; - Following these measures, the public recognition for the EU measures started to increase; in a poll conducted by Pew Research Center between June and August 2020, it is showed that 61% of the EU respondents thought that EU has done a good job in dealing with the pandemic; - The fact that Romania was selected to be the first state to host the strategic stockpile of medical equipment for the EU was a good signal for European solidarity and the need for every country to play its part.	- The European Commission only received a mandate from the European Council on 10 March, and it was from that moment on the Executive was invested with powers to support the Member States and to draw recommendations for a common approach to the crisis (Representation of the European Commission in Romania, 2020); - By 10 March, several EU Member States have already adopted multiple measures to cope with the crisis and some of them were unilaterally decided (without consulting the EU partners); - The European response to some of the measures adopted in the analysed Member States can be considered soft/delayed as we have not identified evidences that it has lead to positive changes in the decision taken by the national authorities; - At the beginning of the pandemic, the European Union was seen by the citizens as incapable to act quickly on an ongoing crisis; according to the public opinion survey commissioned by the European Parliament (and conducted between 23 April and 1 May), a majority (57%) of the response expressed a high level of dissatisfaction with the solidarity shown between the Member States and 52% were not satisfied with the measures taken so far (Public opinion in times of Covid-19, 2020); - Some of the measures adopted by the Member States to counter the effects of disinformation have represented a breach of the freedom of expression and media; - The communication and information for the measures adopted by the Member States' Governments was often missing or was lacking details to be better understood and received by the population;
Opportunities	Threats
- The public opinion survey mentioned in the weaknesses part also displays encouraging number in terms of EU having more competences to deal with crises such as the coronavirus pandemic; - The survey developed by Pew Research Center shows that the majority of the UK respondents have a favourable opinion about the EU (a significant change considering the numbers since the Brexit Referendum); - The international campaign started by the European Union in May 2020 for raising funds on the vaccination and medical equipment represented a relevant evidence for EU's role in promoting multilateralism in the decision-making processes around the world and the need to cooperate in the field of common vulnerabilities and threats; - The sanitary crisis had an unanticipated effect of reminding the European citizens of the freedoms they have enjoyed for so many years (especially related to the freedom of movement).	- According to a poll on G7 countries, 43% of European citizens think that the European Union will be weaker when the pandemic is over (Kantar, 2020); - The EU Member States have been heavily confronted with disinformation campaigns and messages, some of them stemming from pro-Kremlin sources; a poll made in Romania showed that 41% of the respondents thought that coronavirus has been developed by the USA as a biological weapon to rule the world (Eurocomunicare Association, 2020); - Some countries (e.g. China) have taken advantage of the tensions between a couple of Member States (e.g. Italy) and the European Union and send medical supplies to prove their support; in some of the cases, the medical equipment sent had a low quality, but the sender has used the proof of help to send disinformation messages about the origins of the virus (Mattia Ferraresi, Foreign Policy, 2020).

Source: author's analysis based on the references indicated in the table.

In an April interview, Commissioner Věra Jourová was classifying the pandemic as a game-changer for the European Union (Euronews, 2020). And it was an exact description for what was happening in the EU and the multitude of effects the pandemic triggered. To illustrate a couple of challenges for the EU and the Member States, *Table 4* has been compiled to show which were the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats in this crisis. Starting with the strengths and

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[3] The SWOT analysis includes information about the EU's response to the pandemic that has not previously presented in *Section 1*. The reason behind this is that *Section 1* deals mostly with comparing the measures adopted by the Member States and their impact on democracy. *Section 2* aims to analyse directly the EU's response to the crisis together with the Member States' response, without including a new descriptive & comparative part in the paper, due to space limitations.

weaknesses, we can draw a sum of lessons that can be learned by the European Union and applied in similar contexts.

Lesson 1 – Make room for a rapid coordination

Although the Integrated Political Crisis Response was activated a few days after the first cases reported in the EU, it was more than two and a half months later when the European Commission was mandated to coordinate the common response and develop specific measures. It is true that during this time an appeal for coordination between the Member States was promoted, but it was just a recommendation without a clear framework.

Lesson 2 – Be a provider of impartial news and scientific information

As some states failed to properly inform their citizens about the measures needed to be adopted and about the effects of the virus for the humans, the European Union could have acted as a provider of verified, scientific and impartial news. Situations like the one related to the efficiency of wearing masks could have been better managed if verified information and impartial news were disseminated to the European citizens (Joseph Lacey, The Conversation, 2020).

Lesson 3 – Communicate the decision-making process in a non-technical language

A reason behind citizens' discontent about how the European Union was (not) managing the crisis in the beginning was not knowing how the decision-making process works in the EU. Messages related to the steps that need to be taken, the legal competences held by the EU and the way it will cooperate with the Member States should have been delivered to the public in a non-technical language.

Lesson 4 – Publicly recognise the vulnerabilities that affect democracy

From Hungary's and Bulgaria's case, we have seen that at least in the beginning, the EU's response to the adopted measures was not very direct. In this case, the European Union should be the first to show when a European democracy is experiencing vulnerabilities and the quality of the democratic governance may be put at risk. Many times, the civic movements from the Member States asked for a sign of validation from the European Union (especially when protests were related to European values) and they have not received one early enough.

Lesson 5 – Be the leader in crisis management

It was thought-provoking to notice that the citizens were looking at the EU when the crisis began, and they were waiting for quick and solid solutions. That also means the citizens are expecting the EU to solve crises and as polls have later suggested - the citizens find satisfaction in the measures implemented by the European institutions. If a crisis is managed in a proper way, it could also represent a good reminder about how essential the freedoms people are enjoying in the EU.

Recommendations for soft power tools that could be used by the EU globally

Based on the lessons that can be drawn from the current research and following the opportunities and threats shown in the SWOT analysis, we propose a series of recommendations that could evolve into soft power tools and ideas applicable to the European Union, as a global actor.

Recommendation 1 – Support the access to trustworthy information

The European Union has experience in dealing with disinformation campaigns and has developed special tools and services on the subject. The Member States have seen the worrying effects of disinformation and the spread of fake news, and in some cases, they have decided to go

against the freedom of expression and media to counter the effects. However, the Member States learned that disinformation cannot be solved by closing websites. The European Union learning from the consequences seen in the Member States should support the access to trustworthy information both at home and in the countries where freedom of media and expression is put at risk and disinformation is a real vulnerability for the society. One way of doing this could be to develop and host   platforms that could be used for free by journalists, activists, etc. from different extra-EU countries.

Recommendation 2 – Setting up common crisis management systems and standards

The crisis generated by the pandemic could be an excellent opportunity of the European Union to evaluate the impact of the measures adopted and to draw conclusions on how a common crisis international management system post-COVID-19 could be developed. This would further promote the European perspective and experience for the crisis mechanisms that are already in place and have developed by international organisations. At the same, it would be a good occasion to share and promote the standards used for dealing with the effects of the crisis, be it in the health sector, the economy, or the digital sphere.

Recommendation 3 – Offer models and instruments for exit and follow-up strategies

The next substantial global challenge will be that of finding and developing exit and follow-up strategies. The European Union has previously managed complex crises (e.g., the refugee crisis, the economic crisis of 2008) and it has the necessary capabilities to offer models and instruments for exit and follow-up strategies. This should also be a suitable circumstance for the EU to team up with other states that had a good record in keeping the pandemic under control (South Korea, New Zealand   , Japan, Singapore etc.).

Recommendation 4 – Promote evidence-based multilateralism and integrity in international relations

The pandemic has determined many countries to look inwards rather than to seek forms of collaboration on this common challenge. Albeit the complications and issues that have happened in different EU Member States (some analysed in the paper), the EU has managed to shift the attitude from 'my problem' to 'our problem'. The successes achieved and the lessons learned from the mistakes should be used to promote the benefits of multilateralism by the EU. The world is in a desperate need for a debate about integrity in decision-making (Yale University, 2020) and the European Union could come and fill this void.

Recommendation 5 – Be at the forefront of digital privacy and rights

The European Union has set a suitable standard for digital privacy when it approved the General Data Protection Regulation. In collaborating with international partners and supporting the development of democracy in various countries, the EU should always include matters related to digital privacy and rights on its agenda. The pandemic has represented an excuse for many governments to collect data about their citizens through apps and platforms and this could lead to significant breaches of human rights and data rights.

CONCLUSIONS

This paper started with an analysis on three Member States to see if the measures taken during the pandemic crisis have put at risk the quality of democracy. While this trilateral comparison might not be representative for the whole European Union, we believe that it points out tendencies (positive or negative ones) that were valid for other Member States as well. A couple of these negative tendencies include citizens' discontentment with how the crisis was publicly managed, political, and economic misunderstanding about the size of the crisis and about the effects, the risks for the freedom of media and freedom of speech (e.g., criminalizing disinformation), lack of transparency and accountability in collecting personal data about the population (through specific apps) and the rise of nationalist/extremist political forces (as we have seen in the 2020 Romanian parliamentary elections). In this regard, we support the assertion of the 2020 Rule of Law Report (European Commission, 2020) and consider that the COVID-19 pandemic was indeed 'a stress test for rule of law resilience'.

Furthermore, the research aimed to assess to which extent the European Union can function as an effective promoter of democracy and multilateralism following the domestic challenges faced during the COVID-19 pandemic. The answer is not straight, and it has never been like that. In Hungary's case (Spring 2020) following the pressure of the European institutions to respect the proportionality and the time frame of the measures adopted, the Hungarian Government has eventually ended the indefinite state of emergency. While this stood for an effective response from the European Union at that time, it has also received criticism that it was a delayed one. When it comes to Bulgaria, we have shown that similar criticism was directed to the EU in terms of not reacting to the civic movements or at least not expressing any direct message on the issue. With this in mind, another research question arises: how should the European Union react in this kind of circumstances given its competences? Is it legally, morally (or even both) to have a direct, immediate, and complex response to the internal situations of the Member States?

We believe that the EU is legally and morally capable to address the internal situations of the Member States and to show its support especially when the rule of law and other European values are at stake. The COVID-19 pandemic will eventually end, but the effects it has generated are here to stay at least for a medium period. It is important to learn from the current challenges to be better prepared for the following ones. And as one of the main characteristics of the EU is to learn from crises, we believe that it has a set of lessons that can be passed to other parts of the world, as soft power tools. One of these lessons is to promote evidence-based multilateralism and integrity in international relations. Most probably we are at a turning point in history and the future we make it will very much depend on what we have learned in the pandemic times, how we have collaborated, and which are out lessons to be shared with the world. Even though we   have pointed out a couple of lessons learnt   by the European Union during the pandemic and made recommendations on the EU's role at a global scale, we cannot ignore what was already happening in certain European democracies. However, we believe the European Union has the necessary savvies to be an efficient and honest promoter of democracy and multilateralism especially in times of crisis. By closely following situations in the Member States and acting according to its legal competencies, the EU can replicate the lessons learned and to show its commitment to democracy and multilateralism. Lastly, the EU can and should be at the forefront of global discussions about responsible and righteous political leadership.

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