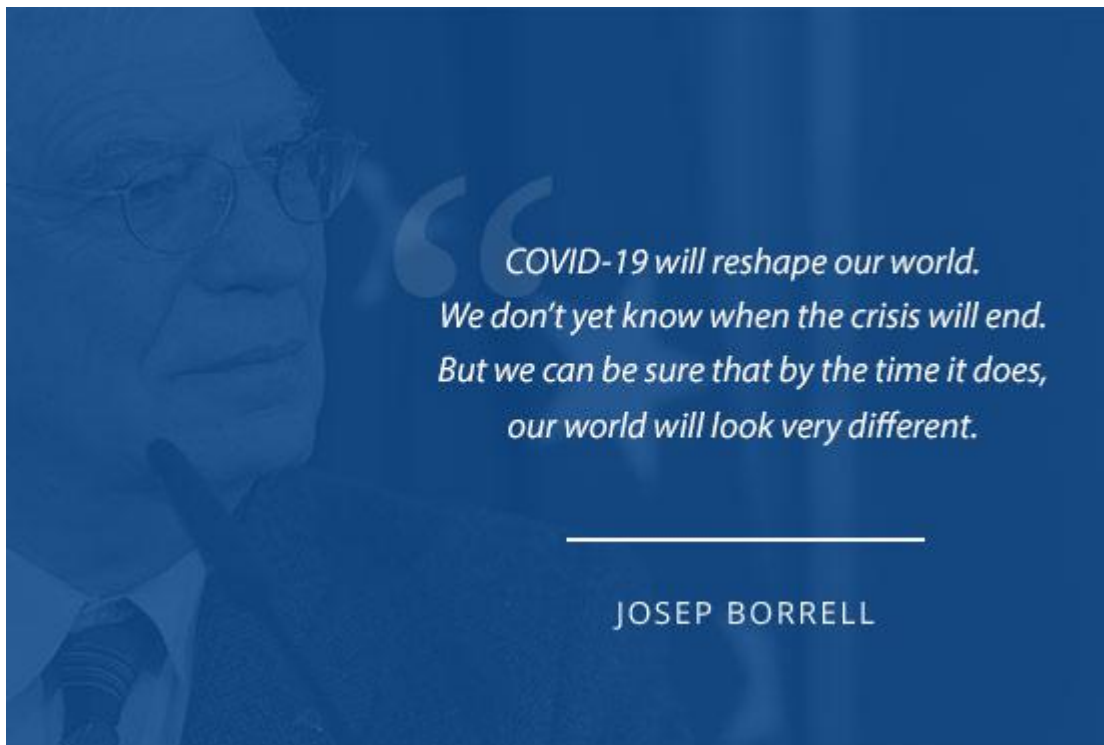




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From the blog

The Coronavirus pandemic and the new world it is creating



COVID-19 will reshape our world. We don't yet know when the crisis will end. But we can be sure that by the time it does, our world will look very different. How different will depend on the choices we make today.

The COVID-19 crisis is not a war but it is 'war-like' in that it requires the mobilisation and direction of resources at unprecedented levels. Solidarity between countries and a readiness to make sacrifices for the common good are decisive. **Only by pulling together and cooperating across borders can we beat the virus and contain its consequences - and the EU has a central role to play.** This was the clear and united position of EU Foreign Ministers when we discussed the crisis on 23 March via video-link.

It is sometimes said that wars are won not by tactics or even strategy, but by logistics and

communications. This seems true for COVID-19 as well: whoever is best at organising the response, quickly drawing on lessons learnt from around the world and communicating successfully towards citizens and the wider world, will come out strongest.

There is a **global battle of narratives** going on in which timing is a crucial factor. In January, the dominant framing was of this being a local crisis in Hubei province, aggravated by the cover up of crucial information by Chinese party officials. Europe was sending a lot of medical equipment to help Chinese authorities that were overwhelmed at the time. Since then, China has brought down local new infections to single figures – and it is now sending equipment and doctors to Europe, as others do as well. China is aggressively pushing the message that, unlike the US, it is a responsible and reliable partner. In the battle of narratives we have also seen attempts to discredit the EU as such and some instances where Europeans have been stigmatised as if all were carriers of the virus.

The point for Europe is this: we can be sure that perceptions will change again as the outbreak and our response to it evolves. But we must be aware there is **a geo-political component including a struggle for influence through spinning and the ‘politics of generosity’**. **Armed with facts, we need to defend Europe against its detractors.**

There is also a battle of narratives within Europe. It is **vital that the EU shows it is a Union that protects and that solidarity is not an empty phrase**. After the first wave in which national authorities took centre stage, now the EU is coming to the fore with joint actions on all tracks where member states have empowered it to act: with joint procurement of vital medical equipment, with a joint economic stimulus and a necessary relaxation of fiscal and state aid rules.

In addition, the EU's role contains a big external component. **We are assisting member states with their consular efforts, helping to bring stranded Europeans back home**. For example, in the past week, joint efforts in Morocco enabled the repatriation of around 30.000 EU citizens. This shows that we can deliver together.

Much more remains to be done. Worldwide, around 100,000 European travellers have registered at local embassies or consulates but the true figure of those that need to come home lies much higher.

A global pandemic needs global solutions and the EU has to be at the centre of the fight. I am in touch with partners around the world, from Asia, Latin America and Africa, to help build a coordinated international response. In a crisis, the human instinct is often to turn inwards, to close borders and fend for yourself. While understandable, this stance is self-defeating. The COVID-19 emergency cannot be solved within one country, or by going it alone. Doing so simply means all of us will struggle longer, with higher human and economic costs.

What we should work for instead is a radical **scaling up of international cooperation among scientists, economists and policy-makers**. At the UN, the WHO and the IMF. Within the G7 and G20 and other international fora. Pooling resources to work on treatments and a vaccine. Limiting the economic damage by coordinating fiscal and monetary stimulus measures and keeping trade in goods open. Collaborating on re-opening borders when scientists tell us that we can. And fighting on-line disinformation campaigns. This is a time for solidarity and cooperation, not blame games which will not heal a single infected person.

While the needs are great at home, the EU should also be ready to assist others in fragile situations who risk being overwhelmed. Just think of the refugee camps in Syria and what would happen if COVID19 broke out there to people who have already suffered so much. In this respect Africa is a major concern. With Ebola it may have built more recent experience with handling pandemics than Europe, but health systems overall are very weak and a full outbreak would wreak

havoc. Social distancing and living in confinement is exponentially more difficult in densely populated urban areas of Africa. Millions in Africa make their living in the informal economy and will have to handle the outbreak without any social safety net. Even before the virus has hit the continent, Africans, with other emerging economies, have to deal with a massive level of capital withdrawal.

Elsewhere countries like Venezuela or Iran may well collapse without our support. This means we should ensure they have access to IMF assistance. And with Iran, we need to make sure that legitimate humanitarian trade can proceed despite US sanctions.

We should also **remember that none of the other problems that we focused on before the corona-crisis, has gone away. In fact, they may get worse.** COVID-19 may well deepen some of the longer running conflicts in the neighbourhood. As Europe we already had to navigate a world of growing geo-political tensions, especially between the US and China. Here too, the risk is that COVID-19 will compound pre-existing trends.

Overall **the task for the EU is to defy the critics and demonstrate in very concrete terms that it is effective and responsible in times of crisis.** Jean Monnet wrote in his memoirs that "Europe will be forged in crises, and will be the sum of the solutions adopted for those crises." Let that be our guiding philosophy as we battle this crisis and prepare for what comes after.

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