

Josep Borrell: "No part of the world can overcome this crisis alone"

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Body

Josep Borrell Fontelles (Puebla de Segur, Catalonia, 1947), Spanish and Argentine, is the High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Common Security Policy, the "chancellor" of the bloc. An aeronautical engineer and training economist, Borrell has a long political career that began in the 1970s at the Spanish PSOE. From the 1980s he was minister (Promotion and Transport) in the government of Felipe González and between 2004 and 2009 MEP, coming to preside over the European Parliament between 2004 and 2007.

After leaving politics for a few years and giving the battle against Catalan nationalism, he returned to the front line in 2018 as Spanish chancellor and last year rose to European post. **With a clear speech and sometimes different from the classic positions in Brussels,** Borrell tries to make the block look beyond its perimeter and give more importance to Africa and especially Latin America. Confinement measures forced this videoconference interview.

-You say that this crisis, rather than a change of course, is a trend accelerator. Are we going to a less globalized, less cooperative world?

-At the moment there is not much cooperation. Other crises of this kind had been resolved with much more international cooperation and we are now instead attending a Chinese-American confrontation. More than cooperation there is confrontation.

-Can this crisis cause Europe, as in 2008-2012, to stop looking abroad to focus on its internal problem?

-The euro crisis was the consequence of an external crisis, without which we probably would not have had the euro crisis. But it is true that to solve it there was a certain self-absorption, because of problems of architecture of our monetary union that is still incomplete. Now, on the contrary, there is a dimension outside the solution of the crisis, because it is difficult to imagine that no part of the world can overcome it alone. If Africa, our immediate neighbourhood, does not sanitarly control the pandemic, we cannot feel safe because it will return unless we systematically and permanently interrupt human contacts, which would have much more serious consequences. And from an economic point of view the same thing. If Latin America and Africa enter a severe recession, as unfortunately it seems to be going to happen, it will also have consequences for us because we are a great export economy and so that you can export others they have to be able to buy you.

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-Compared to the rest of the world, Europe experienced the worst of the crisis. He's already got over 170,000 dead. Was there overconfidence?

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-Everyone reacts with the information available to them. If the virus had reached Latin America first, we would probably have reacted better in Europe. You Latin Americans reacted better because you saw the neighbor's beard soak. I remember when President Donald Trump said in Davos that that was a flu that would possibly leave a couple dead and in America there are almost 100,000. It's easy to criticize in hindsight but each has been reacting based on what he has seen that has happened to others.

-Was the European Commission's reaction not slow at first? Couldn't Italians and even Spaniards feel lonely?

-Definitely. There was a very first reaction from each country. But to some extent it is explainable because health is the responsibility of the Member States, the European Union does not have these competences. The European Union is often asked to do things it cannot do because it has no competence to do so. And health is one of these issues. At first each Member State did so as it could or knew. But then it has entered a phase of convergence and coordination. In terms of economic measures, it was acted very quickly, much faster than in the euro crisis.

-What is Europe in the post-virus world?

-There is a dialectical confrontation, a battle of narratives, of whom he best tells the story and presents himself as the most capable of solving problems like these, but which hides a potential conflict over world hegemony. Europe has to be in an autonomous position. We certainly share with the United States the same political system of democratic representation and consider China to be the great power that is from a multiple and complex perspective. China, inevitably, it is our great trading partner, it is more than 1 billion euros per day, it is an economic and technological competitor and we have also called it a systemic rival because it has a system other than our own. And this all at once. That makes the relationship complicated and unsimplified. But we're not in a confrontation with China.

-The United States announced that it is abandoning the Open Skies Agreement, abandoning the Iranian nuclear agreement, leaving the World Health Organization and threatening to leave the WTO. How disruptive are these movements?

-It is and a lot. The abandonment of the open skies treaty will diminish our security because it allowed us to establish relationships of trust based on a possibility of mutual information. I think it's a very bad decision and we've asked the United States to reconsider it. From a commercial point of view, we need an instance that addresses trade disputes. In a globalized economy it is imperative. We cannot dismantle the multilateral order. It is true that before the crisis the virus was already in a fragile situation because it responds to parameters that respond to the world that arises after the Cold War. It will have to be adapted, but dismantling it at the stroke of a picket is not the solution. We don't like the United States withdrawing from the Iran nuclear deal or the agreement to control medium-range nuclear weapons, because in the middle range are Europeans. The open skies agreement was very useful for example during the Ukraine crisis.

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-The announcement of the Franco-German agreement for the European recovery fund is an important step, but is it sufficient?

-At the moment it is nothing more than a proposal from two countries. Anything has to be proposed by the European Commission, which is working on it and which in a few days should be able to put forward a proposal that achieved unanimity (the presentation is on Wednesday). The Franco-German proposal has very interesting points, as did the project presented by the Spanish government. It means a qualitative leap in the way European solidarity is organized. Until now, this solidarity was made on the basis of loans. If you were a country in difficulty you were helped to get into trouble. But the debts must be repaid. It is now being proposed that, given the peculiar characteristics of this crisis, instead of helping to go into debt there are transfers to the loss of waste. That's a qualitative leap. But that requires unanimity. We're at the beginning.

-If the plan is not for before summer we can talk about Failure?

-Let's wait and see what the European Commission proposes. France and Germany have a proposal. Other countries have others. The Commission has to do the synthesis. I want to believe that we will be able to find a solution to the challenge posed by this crisis, which has very different consequences for different countries because

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the sectors of economic activity very dependent on human mobility, such as tourism, are greatly affected and the countries that are more affected by tourism are very affected and others are not so much affected.

-Europe is surrounded by conflict: Ukraine, Syria, Libya. Do you have the means to influence these conflicts and the willingness to use these means?

-Obviously in the Syrian crisis Europe has had much less influence than Russia and Turkey have had because the European Union is not a military union and does not wield military power in conflicts like Syria's. We have been calling for a political solution arguing that there was no military solution and yet there has been a military solution imposed by the powers that have exercised military force: Russia and Turkey. Europe is a 'soft-power'.

-And in a country like Libya?

-We can say the same thing. We are currently seeing an increase in the direct and indirect presence of Turkey and Russia, supporting one or the other of the parties to the conflict. But the European Union is not going to do the same, because it is neither in its design nor in its capabilities.

-Should I?

-Where does duty come from?

-From the European interest in controlling a conflict affecting it.

. yes, right. The conflicts in our neighbourhood affect us, but the European Union is not a military union and has no military intervention capabilities on the ground.

-And do you think you should have that capability and should intervene in these conflicts that affect you?

-Each European country has its own military capabilities and there is a policy of building a Defence Europe to coordinate and harmonise those capabilities, but for now the treaty does not go beyond that.

-Israel seems determined to annex parts of the West Bank?. What European response can be expected?

-We have been discussing the prospects and implications that a hypothetical annexation could have and 25 countries have spoken in the line of considering that such a thing would be contrary to international law, but 25 countries are not unanimity.

-Don't you think you can convince these two countries?

-My role is not to convince. It's about building positions as common as possible. A common foreign policy is different from a single foreign policy. Europe spent a lot of time with a common currency (the ecu) that was not unique (the euro). That was a very important leap. The same thing happens in foreign policy. We are in the phase of each having their foreign policy and then sharing part, building a common but not unique policy. A foreign policy represents a certain interpretation of the world. And that interpretation of the world has a lot to do with history and culture, and every European country has its own. Forging a common interpretation of the world for countries that have had such different stories is a difficult task because it has to rely on strategic considerations, to share the same interpretation of threats, and to extrapolate history itself. On the subject of Israel, divisions will not be overcome overnight. But it is important to do so because if Europe wants to have a voice in the world it has to be united around an interpretation, accepted by all Member States, of how the world works.

Mercosur and debtArgentina./h2>

-Europe supports in the Paris Club a moratorium on the payment of interest on the debt of the poorest countries. Shouldn't it support debt forgiveness for these countries and developing economies?

-It is true that so far the decisions have been very timid. Decisions taken by the G20 and the IMF relate only to interest payments, six-month moratoriums, and only to the poorest countries. We have asked the IMF to extend these measures to countries in the intermediate level of development, and there are many of them in Latin America, some very large and important ones, that can be directed into balance-of-payments crisis situations if the induced coma situation in the world economy continues. But this would require the IMF to issue new special drawing rights, which unfortunately some countries, including the United States, oppose.

-And the European Union unilaterally, without going through the IMF?

-The discussion is on the table, but right now the great creditor of developing countries is China. mainly in Africa.

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-A default from Argentina would be felt in countries like Spain or Italy. Is there any help?

-All default has side consequences. We are in an interconnected economy and any incident in one country has consequences for others, but I cannot give you any news about it.

-The Mercosur-EU agreement already signed is blocked. Is that the agreement and you have to approach it or does this agreement work either?

-The agreement raised many hopes, which are still pending ratification. It should be ratified, because re-negotiation it after years and years, in these circumstances, I don't think it was promising at all. This deal is like the Loch Ness monster. One thought it was already resolved and difficulties are coming up again. It is in everyone's interest to ratify it and get to work. But parliaments are sovereign and it is true that the pandemic has raised problems that did not exist when the agreement was closed.

-Why did you apply for Argentine nationality.

-In homage to the story of my father, who was born in Argentina, the son of Catalan emigrants who went to Argentina in difficult times for Spain of the beginning of the last century. He then returned to Spain with the bad luck that he arrived just in time to make the Civil War. When I was in Mendoza accompanying the Kings on their state visit to Argentina, I thought there are so many Argentinians who are nationalized Spanish that why a Spaniard could not nationalize Argentine.

-When he was appointed European Chancellor, Clarín titled: "An Argentine will lead European diplomacy"...

. And someone remarked, "May God protect the world."

Borrell smiles after an hour of video conferencing and asks to "be careful with that default."

Venezuelan refugee donors./h2>

-This week the European Union organized a donor conference to help Venezuelan refugees. What can Venezuela's neighbours who have already received more than five million Venezuelans expect from Europe?

-We try to help recipient countries cope with the costs of welcoming this population. According to the United Nations, it's more than five million. According to the Venezuelan government, it doesn't go past two million. In any case there are many. It is true that many are now trying to return to Venezuela because their situation has not become easy in host countries. That is why it is necessary for the international community to contribute resources. Unfortunately Latin America is not sufficiently present on the screen of Europe's political radar, which is very focused on the problems of its immediate neighborhood, but has to pay more attention to what is happening in Latin America and in particular to this problem.

-Channeling help to Colombia is simple. But how do you get aid to Venezuela. Because Europe recognizes Juan Guaidó as president in charge, but is it Nicolás Maduro? who controls the Administration and the territory.

-That's right, it's an objective fact that can't be ignored. But that's what international agencies and United Nations agencies are for. Each donor country will decide what part of its aid is devoted to Venezuelan emigration in neighbouring countries or is dedicated to addressing the situation within Venezuela. caused also by the consequences of economic sanctions. But each country will decide where to put its resources.

-Europe recognized Guaidó as president in charge, but the political situation is totally blocked. What's the next move?

-The situation is blocked and political dialogue must be called. The circumstances created by the pandemic and the need for further humanitarian action should probably facilitate this dialogue because the needs of the Venezuelan people are many and can only be resolved through a normalization of the political situation. Now let's try to deal with humanitarian urgency. But then we will have to re-examine the necessary political dialogue which has so far unfortunately failed.

Brussels, special

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