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The EU-UK Phony War on Vaccines



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The EU's vaccine rollout has been on the equivalent of life-support since its inception.

Likewise, the UK's Brexit rollout has also been on life-support, if not in a hospital bed immediately adjacent to the EU's— sisterly/brotherly love between the two not quite being what the doctor has been able to prescribe.

When it comes camouflaging their respective debacles with spin and PR, the UK has an easier time of it, since all it needs to do is cast Brussels as the villain responsible for its Brexit plight.

The UK's PR strategy has another tack in addition to blaming Brussels, that is, using a megaphone at every opportunity to insist that leaving the EU enabled it to have the successful vaccine rollout that has evaded the bureaucratically-mired EU.

The EU has no equivalent presumed villain easily within its purview. An organization with 27 nation-state members, with disparate and oftentimes incompatible interests, and lacking the fiscal clout and freedom of action of a nation state, may have several targets to aim at in the search for someone to blame for the EU's current situation.

The countries on the EU's periphery, mainly from the former Soviet bloc, blame Brussels. Brussels in turn fights within itself to apportion blame. The president of the European Commission (EC) Ursula von der Leyen has been much criticized— a German, and Germany is the biggest country in the EU, she has been accused by some EU members of being too preoccupied with “keeping Germany happy”.

The only recourse left to Brussels in this phony war is to hold the UK's feet to the proverbial fire when it comes to enforcing the terms of the Brexit agreement it had with the UK.

But for now, Brexit's problems are not at the forefront of public attention in the EU and UK. The EU has the bigger problem of dealing with the pandemic on its plate, and the UK would rather divert attention to its successful vaccine rollout than dwell on the internal impact of its Brexit fiasco.

Meanwhile the EU proposed, misguidedly, a more stringent regime to curb vaccine supplies going to countries less badly affected by the pandemic.

Admitting it is a Covid-19 “hotspot”, the EC said on Wednesday last week it may not approve exports to countries that have made more progress with vaccine rollouts or where the “epidemiological situation” is more satisfactory than the EU's.

The EC announced this step during a disagreement with AstraZeneca over vaccine provision, with the EC complaining that the UK is importing doses from Europe while not exporting any back.

The EC executive vice-president Valdis Dombrovskis said 10m doses had moved from the EU to the UK while “zero doses” had returned from British plants.

The disparity in the rate of vaccine inoculations between the UK and the EU is glaring: across the EU, just over 11% of adults have received a first dose of a Covid-19 vaccine while in the UK the figure is more than 54%.

The European continent is also experiencing a third wave of Covid infections as the UK claws its way back from a winter lockdown.

Spain's coronavirus infection rate rose last Friday to 138.6 per 100,000 people from 134 the day before, the Spanish health ministry reported.

Last week Poland reported a new daily record of 35,143 coronavirus cases, in the middle of a record number of infections for the third consecutive day.

Last week French health ministry data showed the number of people in intensive care units with Covid-19 rose by 57 to a 2021 high of 4,766.

Reuters reports that Germany has issued Covid travel warnings for several European countries, including neighbouring France, Austria, Denmark and the Czech Republic.

Travellers to Germany from countries on the list are required to provide a negative coronavirus test no more than 48 hours old upon arrival in Germany. They will also have quarantine for 10 days, though this period can be shortened if they get a second negative test after 5 days.

However, the EU's proposed curb on its vaccine exports, ill-thought-out all along, was abandoned quickly in the face of immediate push-back from within the EU itself.

Bernd Lange, chairman of the European Parliament's international trade committee, criticized the projected restrictions, warning it could have consequences for the EU's vaccination efforts— "Everyone should realise what kind of danger we are engaging in: we might end up with less vaccines for the EU".

Even Jean-Claude Juncker, until 2019 the head of the EC (and before that prime minister of Luxembourg), criticized the EU for being too cautious in its vaccine procurement, and for engaging in a needless tiff with the UK.

Juncker, legendary for his boisterous wine consumption at summit meetings and his ensuing Yeltsin-like antics (e.g., bitch-slapping other summit attendees in a supposed display of camaraderie, and needing to be taken away in a wheel-chair after reeling in a drunken stupor), said soberly:

"I would like the member states and the commission to speed up the efforts to provide vaccines for each and every one in the European Union.... Britain is in advance for different reasons, because Britain took the decision to have an emergency decision-based approach whereas the European Union, the commission and the member of states, were more budget conscious ... We were too cautious".

Juncker's boozed-up capers are much missed by some of us. Eurocrats tend to be a bunch of grey suits, and Juncker's carnivalesque conduct at summits was a welcome laugh for anyone of a moderately cynical disposition.

Even so, Juncker's current intervention on the pandemic is spot on.

The EU's procurement of vaccines was stalled for more than 2 months in 2020 by a number of member states refusing to accept their full share of vaccine provision because they feared having to spend money on a product that might turn out to be ineffective.

The EU's vaccine approval process was further slowed-down by concerns during negotiations with providers about costs, as well as the desire to avoid legal liability if the vaccines turned out to be unsafe for those inoculated.

Meanwhile the UK (and US), with a much less cumbersome approval process, sped ahead with their vaccine procurement.

The EU's quick reversal on its ill-advised curb of vaccine exports to the UK has not however ended this by-now highly politicized vaccine spat.

France's foreign minister Jean-Yves Le Drian said the UK will find it difficult to source second Covid inoculations since its success was due to pressing on with first doses, without having obtained the second doses required for a full vaccination of its population.

The British government responded by saying it had sufficient supplies, despite "challenges", to give people their second doses within its 12-week time frame—the UK chose the extended time frame for the second dose in order to administer a first dose to a larger segment of the population.

However, vaccine production is now global in scale, and last week the Indian government introduced a 2-3 month ban on vaccine exports in order to ensure supplies adequate to cope with its own growing Covid pandemic.

India's decision to curtail vaccine exports will delay 5m doses due to be sent to the UK. This forthcoming shortage will add a month to the UK's vaccination programme, and inoculations will not be made available to under-50s until 1 May.

This of course has nothing to do with any shenanigans between the EU and the UK, as well as the devastating non-availability of vaccines in the world's poorest countries, now having the barest of health and medical resources to deal with their Covid crises.

"Vaccine nationalism" is thus very much a game for richer countries, and the world's abjectly poor are consigned to be its spectators.

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