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*Global Health Security:
COVID-19 & Its Impacts*

EU's Pandemic Management: Why More Credit Is Due

By Frederick Kliem

SYNOPSIS

The EU has turned from ostensible pandemic underachiever to COVID-19 management role model. Increasingly apt at containing COVID-19 at home, the EU is now providing substantial global assistance, too.

COMMENTARY

THE EU – European Union – is no stranger to being the scapegoat for pretty much anything that goes wrong in Europe. When the COVID-19 pandemic first hit the continent, the EU's value-added in times of crisis was questioned once again, [and criticism was harsh](#).

A [recent study](#) found that Europeans' trust in EU institutions has decreased substantially over the course of the pandemic. Despite initial mishaps, this lack of trust is not justified. The EU has proven itself as a slow, but remarkably successful and hands-on crisis manager – for its members and in support of its global partners.

EU Missing in Action

Partly because EU bureaucracy can be sluggish and aloof, partly because the EU was caught off-guard, and, most importantly, because health governance rests with the nation states, [the EU was virtually absent across the board in](#) the early days of the pandemic. Whenever it did act, such as with vaccine procurement, Brussels looked inept, damaging the EU's reputation.

National governments were left to do as they pleased. Some reacted not at all, others with draconian measures. Many were driven by a short-sighted national self-help instinct. For example, when badly COVID-affected, Italy activated an EU crisis support mechanisms (CPM), it was met with woeful silence.

Although this lack of European solidarity was not Brussels' fault and also immediately rectified, it reflected badly on the EU. Initial European COVID management resembled, as the Commission President [called it](#), a “painful story” of “only-for-me responses”.

But as her predecessor, Jean-Claude Juncker, used to say, when the EU goes through crises, it always emerges stronger from them.

Exhibit A: Travel

Extremes characterised shockingly uncoordinated European travel restriction measures, ranging from unilateral border closures — a sensitive topic in Europe — to laissez-faire approaches to travel, leading to some super-spreader vacations.

Following this cacophony, [with Brussels' help](#), EU members gradually found the right balance between the de jure guaranteed freedom of movement —a fundamental pillar of European regionalism — and prudent movement controls. The EU is now emerging as a role model for international travel, neither exceedingly cautious nor reckless.

Just as is the case in ASEAN, numerous EU countries depend on tourism, some to the tune of 15% to 20% of GDP. Countries such as Spain are now cautiously reopening in order to save their travel industry and the European aviation market in tandem.

This is perhaps risky, but an absolute necessity in order to avoid an uneven recovery, which would further increase unhealthy economic asymmetry in Europe, both across sectors and countries. Ultimately, this also symbolises that in Europe, health can never trump other fundamental civil rights for a prolonged period of time.

A prudent resumption of international travel is aided by coordinated instruments, such as a mass-testing and vaccination passports, potentially a blueprint for other regions grappling with the pandemic travel dilemma.

Exhibit B: Vaccinations

With the intent to prevent vaccine nationalism, EU leaders entrusted the Commission with vaccine procurement for the entire bloc. They sought to avoid asymmetric distribution across the EU and to counter the narrative of an ostensibly resurgent European nationalism.

Joint procurement proved less efficient as compared to the United States or Britain, and [criticism](#) ran wild. Although somewhat unfair, critics had a point: The Commission was inexperienced with large-scale procurement. Negotiators were slow and miserly and failed to secure sufficient and stable vaccine supply.

Predictably, supply became the inoculation programme's bottleneck. For example, by the end of April, Germany had only been able to vaccinate 7.5% of its people, half of Singapore's rate.

Despite the serious consequences of a slow vaccination roll-out, preventing European vaccine nationalism was noble and ultimately successful, on three accounts.

First, the EU demonstrated internal solidarity; two, it helped containing transnational infection chains across Europe's notoriously porous borders; and three, despite the slow start, the EU's inoculation programme is catching up fast as bottlenecks are loosening: EU-wide, [31% are now fully, 55% partially vaccinated](#). Germany vaccinates up to 1.4 million people in a single day.

Despite some outliers (Malta's vaccination rate is nearly 70%, Bulgaria's only 13%), most countries are on par. The EU is [expected](#) to even exceed its ambitious target of a 70% inoculation rate by September.

Exhibit C: Global Solidarity

Just like everyone else, the EU must look after its citizens first. And yet, despite false claims to the contrary, the EU remains the only Western bloc that exports vaccines on a large scale.

Granted, Brussels blocked the export of some AstraZeneca doses to Australia when the company failed to fulfil its delivery commitments to the EU, while exporting their product at the same time.

But this is an isolated case, and it is worth noting that these vaccines were largely donated to the COVAX Facility, the global coalition to support equitable access to vaccines, to which the EU is collectively one of the largest contributors.

Moreover, via its ["Team Europe" initiative](#), the EU offers substantial pandemic support to partner countries, thus far amounting to some €40 billion.

Over €800 million of this [went to ASEAN](#) in support of regional health infrastructure and technical assistance, paying specific attention to vulnerable and marginalised communities. The EU [also supports](#) the WHO Southeast Asia with €20 million, and Germany alone contributed €5 million to ASEAN's COVID Response Fund.

From Zero to Hero

There are several lessons here: One, perceiving political success in extremes, as either total failure or success, is usually a fallacy; two, anything involving the EU bureaucracy and complex power dynamics between institutions and member states is often slow, risk-averse, and overly complicated.

But once it gets going, European regionalism is capable of remarkable progress. Most importantly, EU solidarity is alive. Even under immense pressure, Europe practised internal solidarity and crisis management.

Equally important, it offered a counter-narrative to the ostensibly globally resurging nationalism and national “me-first” attitude. The EU demonstrates that international cooperation and mutual support are not lofty values for good weather only.

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