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The EU's Vaccination Lag

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The advanced industrial countries are now inoculating their populations with the Covid-19 vaccines. A Vaccine Tracker provided by Bloomberg indicates that of the following three countries, the UK's rollout has been the most effective (36.03 doses per 100 people), followed by the US at 28.83 doses per 100 people (as one would expect, the US's individual state variation is considerable—extending from North Dakota (36.84) to Georgia at 13.4), while the EU is far behind at 10.64 doses per 100 people.

The EU's figure seems surprising. For example, Chile (32.92), Morocco (15.6), and Turkey (13.07) have done better.

The EU's poor performance has been most visible on 2 fronts: (production and acquisition); and (2) distribution and roll-out.

Achieving co-ordination between the 27 EU member countries was going to be somewhat cumbersome from the start, despite a huge €1.8tn/$2.15tn pandemic recovery budget. The European Commission had to devise a bureaucratic framework for 27 countries, which resulted in a more unwieldy authorization-process before the vaccines could be administered. In addition, some countries had their own demanding regulations and paperwork to negotiate, while poor planning in others added to the delay.

While the UK signed its purchasing contracts with vaccine manufacturers quickly, for example, the EU's slower-paced movement towards the authorizations required at member-nation and European Commission levels meant it was always going to acquire vaccines at a slower rate— it stood to reason that profit-minded manufacturers would begin working on the orders of those non-EU countries (not just the UK but also the US and others) which signed their purchasing contracts ahead of the EU.

Hence AstraZeneca told the EU that of its initial contracted batch of 80 million vaccines, only 31 million would materialize immediately. This was in addition to a glitch in the deliveries of Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine– after Pfizer announced a temporary supply reduction, Italy reduced its daily administering of about 80,000 doses to fewer than 30,000.

Both AstraZeneca and Pfizer said at that time that operational issues at their plants were delaying production.

While Pfizer-BioNTech had initial operating problems, its vaccine had the most successful roll-out. The European Commission, under pressure from France which was desperate to succeed with its own vaccine prototype (it turned out to be a dud), "played safe" bureaucratically and divided its bets between several companies: Pfizer-BioNTech, AstraZeneca, Moderna, and Johnson and Johnson (as of last week). Johnson and Johnson's first shipments will start in the second half of April, and the company has committed to delivering at least 200 million doses to the EU in 2021.

Dividing bets in this way then had to confront the problem that there are differing storage requirements for different vaccines– the AstraZeneca vaccine is less complicated in this regard, while the Pfizer-BioNtech vaccine requires more complex ultracold storage.

In the end, however, those countries which went with Pfizer-BioNTech from the beginning were better served in launching their respective vaccination programmes.

The EU roll-out was also hampered because the European Medicines Agency (EMA) was slower than the US or UK regulators to authorize use of its first vaccine.

The primary consideration here for the EMA was the need for the 27 EU member-nations to avoid liability in case problems arose, and in order to give people in very disparate national cultures greater confidence that the deployed vaccines were safe.

Faced with these difficulties and impediments, several EU countries used a clause in the EMA rule book that permitted EU countries to purchase vaccines from manufacturers outside the EMA's remit, such as Russia and China.

Countries on the EU's periphery, from the former Soviet bloc, believe they have been left behind by Brussels.

Serbia has received 1 million doses of Chinese vaccines. Hungary is already doing so by ordering the Russian Sputnik V vaccine, and Italy has just signed a deal with Russia to produce 10 million doses of the Sputnik V vaccine in Italy this year.

Perceptions of vaccine production and distribution in the EU are blurred by its contribution to the United Nations-sponsored COVAX roll-out. Intended, laudably, to provide vaccines for poorer countries, the EU exported 34 million doses last month under the auspices of the UN's COVAX programme.

However, while subscribing to the COVAX programme can be seen as a gesture of international solidarity, the EU has also exported vaccines to rich countries, such as the UK and US, that have been much more successful than the EU in providing vaccines for their citizens.

The following countries have so far received vaccine shipments from the EU:

Argentina, Australia, Bahrain, Brazil, Canada, Chile, China, Colombia, Costa Rica, Dominican Republic, Ecuador, Hong Kong, Japan, Kuwait, Macao, Malaysia, Mexico, New Zealand, Oman, Panama, Peru, Qatar, Republic of Korea, Saudi Arabia, Singapore, South Africa, Turkey, United Arab Emirates, United Kingdom, United States, and Uruguay.

As "vaccine nationalism" takes root, critics argue that while exporting vaccines to relatively impoverished Ecuador and Colombia (say) can be justified, exporting them to Australia and the UK while the EU has lagged in providing vaccines for its own citizens is harder to explain.

The vaccine manufacturers with production facilities in the EU argue that they were under contract to produce vaccines for countries outside the EU (e.g., AstraZeneca for the UK), and that any attempt by Brussels to curb such exports would place them in breach of contract.

The EU has no alternative but to find other ways to get more vaccines for its members—this coming at a time when a third wave of the pandemic, associated with the spread of new variants of the Covid virus, is proceeding across much of Europe.

The infection rate in the EU is now at its highest level since the beginning of last month, with Italy, France, Germany and Poland seeing a surge in infection rates, and with Hungary and the Czech Republic also reporting high infection rates and fatalities from the virus (health authorities in these two countries are warning the current figures are likely to get worse in the next few weeks).

The story of the pandemic is clearly not over for the EU.

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