

# The EU's vaccination disaster as viewed from abroad

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## **Von der Leyen Under Pressure**

The EU Commission and its president Ursula von der Leyen are coming under growing pressure over their disastrous Covid-19 vaccine procurement blunders. Von der Leyen's predecessor Jean-Claude Juncker voiced massive criticism, declaring that the contract negotiations with the vaccine producers proceeded much too slowly. This pertains to the current AstraZeneca production delay, for example.

Juncker, who has received several German orders of merit and is not particularly known for criticising top German officials, has voiced principled criticism of the vaccine export controls, introduced by the EU under pressure from Berlin. Germany's Minister of Health Jens Spahn, in particular, demanded that, the approval of vaccine exports at EU level be required. The Commission under von der Leyen complied.

At a virtual event organized by the German state of Baden-Württemberg, Juncker declared that he is very much opposed to the fact that, with the export controls, the European

Union is now giving the impression that we are taking care of ourselves and that the suffering of other people, especially in poorer countries and on poorer continents, does not affect us.

## **Export controls with repercussions**

Juncker also reminded that, we actually have not had good experiences with export restrictions in Europe. He was referring to the fact that, at the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic, the German government initially imposed a national export ban on medical protective equipment. This particularly shocked Italy, which, at the time, was most severely affected by the pandemic and needed help.

It also shattered the EU's reputation. Even though Berlin relented shortly thereafter and lifted its export ban, the experience of being abandoned by the EU in a dire emergency had already made its mark on Italy. Since Brussels simultaneously imposed its own export ban, protest was also raised in southeast European non-EU countries, such as Serbia, who found themselves cut off from supplies of protective equipment.

Juncker's warning that new restrictions would again cause harm has already been confirmed. Taro Kono, Japan's former Foreign and Defence Minister, who is currently in charge of organising the vaccine campaign (delayed in his country also), pointed out that Japan's planned vaccine purchase from EU countries risks being further delayed or even stopped altogether by the new EU export controls. Tokyo is protecting itself by creating its own national vaccine production with a vaccine license from AstraZeneca.

## **Disappointment in southeast Europe**

The consequences of the EU's blunders in the procurement of vaccines are now becoming evident, not least of all in southeast Europe particularly in Serbia, which had already been refused aid in the spring of 2020. When the EU imposed a ban on exporting protective medical gear to Serbia, Belgrade turned to China and promptly received extensive supplies.

Brussels reacted by accusing Beijing of engaging in reprehensible mask diplomacy. Later after the EU had resumed its own deliveries to southeast Europe it demanded of those countries official proclamations of gratitude. The May 6, 2020 final declaration of the EU's West Balkan Summit stipulated that the EU's support and cooperation goes far

country belong, and initially excluded the possibility of negotiating with the Russians and the Chinese, one official from North Macedonia was quoted as saying. However, given the current uncertainty as to when and even whether vaccine deliveries can be expected, this can no longer be maintained even if someone could say that in times of hardships it is China and Russia that help, while the western governments are failing.

The harm they [the EU] are doing to themselves is incredible, observes an expert at the European Stability Initiative (ESI) in Berlin.

In the meantime, Hungary has become the EU's first member nation to have ordered Chinese and Russian vaccines. Both have been nationally approved for use. An initial delivery of Sputnik V (40,000 doses) arrived in Budapest earlier this month. Hungary has also ordered 5 million doses from Sinopharm

### **The Russian vaccines are coming**

In light of the persisting vaccine shortages, Berlin and Brussels find themselves in a situation where they can no longer forbid the large-scale use of Russian and Chinese vaccines.

have been denigrating non-western vaccines across-the-board, and waging negative campaigns against them. It almost came as a shock to many when renowned medical journal reported that the protection rate for Sputnik V is at a remarkable 91.6 percent.

Given that the continued delays in the EU's vaccination campaigns are causing not only persisting high death rates and growing unrest among the populations, but also that the

continuation of the necessary lockdowns is costing the economy billions, Germany's Minister of Health Jens Spahn signalled his receptiveness to using Chinese and Russian vaccines at the end of January. Now Chancellor Angela Merkel has also declared that, in the EU, every vaccine is warmly welcomed. According to reports, EU Commission President Ursula von der Leyen does not want to stand in the way of using vaccines from Russia and China. Moscow has applied for the acceptance of Sputnik V for use within the EU. The production of the vaccine at IDT Biologika in Dessau (Saxony-Anhalt) is in discussion.

## **Profits over Lives**

In spite of its blunders in procuring the vaccines, the EU still upholds its principle of refusing the release of vaccine patents, even for the duration of the pandemic.

A patent release would enable the use of all production capacities throughout the world in order to vaccinate as soon as possible not only those in prosperous countries, but also those in poverty-stricken countries. The EU's refusal delays a global recovery from the pandemic.

It does however ensure lush profits for pharmaceutical companies. Pfizer, for example, recently announced that this year it is expecting an increase in its turnover solely for its Covid-19 vaccine of around US \$15 billion. The company, whose gross profits will be shared with BioNTech, estimates its profit margin before taxes to be at 30 percent. The pandemic is, therefore, worth billions for both companies.

AstraZeneca has demonstrated that it can also be done otherwise. According to its own information, the British-Swedish company produces and sells its vaccines at manufacturing price, at least until the end of the pandemic (which AstraZeneca, of course, determines). This is at the demand of Oxford University, which developed the vaccine. The

result is that a dose of the BioNTech/Pfizer vaccine (Germany/USA) costs around 12, whereas AstraZeneca's only 1.78.