

EU summit: Trade war instead of protection from coronavirus

Peter Schwarz
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Thursday's European Union summit demonstrated once again that the EU is neither able nor willing to offer its citizens even the most minimal protection against the coronavirus pandemic.

As the 27 EU leaders met for their video conference on March 25, the infection and death toll across Europe was once again soaring dramatically. Nearly 900,000 people have now died from the pandemic, nearly 40 million have been infected, and around 250,000 new infections are being added every day.

The seven-day incidence (the weekly number of infections per 100,000 inhabitants) is over 500 in five European countries, with Estonia leading the way with 708, followed by Hungary (658), the Czech Republic (527), Montenegro (517) and Serbia (503). In Poland, it is 444, in France 362.

In France, the number of new infections rose above 45,000 on Wednesday, the highest since November last year. In the region around Paris, intensive care units already stand on the brink of exceeding their capacity. In Germany, the head of the Roland Koch Institute, Lothar Wieler, warns that the number of new daily infections will rise to 100,000 if the current trend is not halted.

Nevertheless, European governments and the EU strictly refuse to impose a lockdown, as would be necessary to contain the pandemic. In particular, they categorically refuse to close non-essential production facilities, schools and day-care centres, even though it has now been proven beyond doubt that schools are among the most important vectors for spreading the pandemic and that pupils and parents are far more susceptible to the new variants of the virus than the original one. The interests of big business and corporate profits take precedence over the health and lives of working people in every respect.

This also applies to the procurement of vaccines, which was at the centre of the EU summit. Here, too, the focus is

not on human lives but profit interests and geopolitical goals.

So far, only 62 million of the EU's 450 million inhabitants have been vaccinated once and 18 million of them twice. The EU has failed to provide the necessary production capacity. So far, pharmaceutical companies have delivered only 88 million vaccine doses to the EU. By the end of March—i.e., in the first three months of the year—it should be 100 million. This means that just 10 percent of the population can be fully immunised against the virus.

At the summit, Commission President Ursula von der Leyen announced that three times more vaccine would be available in the second quarter than in the first. But even if this were to be the case, which, based on past experience, is anything but certain, the quantity would not even be enough to vaccinate half of the 70 percent needed to stop the further spread of the virus by the middle of the year. At the same time, new strains are constantly developing against which the vaccines are less effective.

Throughout Europe, outrage and resistance to the governments' reckless coronavirus policies are growing. The ruling class everywhere is responding by fuelling nationalism.

In the days leading up to the summit, there had already been a fierce exchange of blows between Brussels and London. Von der Leyen accused Britain of importing 21 million vaccine doses from the EU without delivering a single one to the EU. She accused Boris Johnson's government of withholding vaccine supplies from AstraZeneca, which has so far delivered only about a quarter of the agreed 120 million doses to the EU. London hit back, invoking existing treaties and threatening the EU with retaliation.

The day before the summit, the EU Commission tightened up the rules for vaccine exports. In future, exports are to be stopped if a recipient country already has

much more vaccine than the EU or if it obtains vaccine and does not allow exports itself. Until now, an export ban had only been possible if a company had not fulfilled its delivery obligation to the EU. In practice, such a ban had only occurred once, when Italy banned the export of 250,000 AstraZeneca vaccine doses to Australia.

After several telephone calls between Johnson and European heads of government, the waves were somewhat calmed at the summit. The Netherlands in particular, and to some extent Germany, which have intensive trade relations with Britain, tried to play it cool. There were also fears that a trade conflict over vaccines could disrupt the supply of components needed for their production from other countries.

But the conflict is by no means resolved. France, for example, is taking a much tougher stance, and the German media are also promoting a trade war. The *Süddeutsche Zeitung* commented that tightening export rules was not enough: “In fact, the European Union should not merely restrict the export of vaccines under certain conditions but ban them in general.” The *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* also wrote: “As long as vaccine doses are a scarce commodity, the EU cannot export unconditionally all over the world. Exports should depend on how others behave.”

There are also fierce national tensions within the EU, which were vented at the summit. Poorer states, such as Latvia, Bulgaria and Croatia, are far behind on vaccinations because they had relied on the cheaper AstraZeneca vaccine, which has seen the biggest supply shortfalls. Others, like Hungary, have ordered vaccines from Russia and China, which the EU strongly opposes because it undermines its confrontational course against these countries. In Slovakia, Prime Minister Igor Matović’s decision to order 2 million doses of the Russian vaccine even triggered a government crisis.

German Chancellor Angela Merkel and Austrian head of government Sebastian Kurz, both Christian Democrats, clashed violently at the summit because Kurz threatened to veto the decision to give poorer countries—but not Austria—some extra doses of the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine.

The fierce national conflicts further undermine the inadequate measures against the pandemic. The virus, which knows no national borders, can only be defeated through coordinated international action. But the capitalist governments are organically incapable of doing this. While their profit-before-life policies have now claimed 2.8 million lives worldwide, they use the vaccine as a means of enrichment and as a weapon in the geostrategic

struggle against their international rivals.

China, where only 90,000 have been infected with the virus and 4,600 have died from it thanks to a consistent lockdown and vaccination policy, is encountering growing hostility. In the evening, US President John Biden spoke to the EU summit participants via video link to convince them of his confrontational course against China and Russia. His words fell on receptive ears, as the European powers increasingly view China, a rising economic power, as a rival in the export of high-value industrial goods and influence over Central Asia, Africa, and other regions of the world.

However, the aggressive action of the US against China puts Europe, and especially Germany, “between a rock and a hard place,” as the pro-government German think tank DGAP wrote in an English-language article. China is the largest and fastest-growing market for many German companies.

“The EU may well consider China a strategic rival and an economic competitor. And Berlin may find much to criticize about China’s economic policies and an uneven level playfield. But no-one can wish away the fact that China is of major economic importance to Germany. Meanwhile, the US remains Germany’s largest export market, the most important destination of foreign direct investment and a crucial provider of advanced, including foundational and emerging technology. The intensification of China-US competition will create many losers. Germany is going to be one of them.”

Germany and the EU are responding to this “predicament” with a massive military buildup to pursue their own imperialist interests in the escalating geostrategic conflicts. The business-oriented Institut für deutsche Wirtschaft (IW) recently calculated how much Germany will have to increase arms spending in the coming years to keep its commitments to NATO: An additional €86 billion by 2024, almost twice as much as the current annual defence budget.



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