

## **Vaccines: A serious warning to EU**

"It happens that we aren't sure what's happening." Ortega y Gasset's paradoxical axiom serves as a guide in this EU hour where the vaccination of the population, -a critical factor for success (and survival) in the face of the pandemic-, reveals the Union's poor performance. Accompanied by the disappointment and unrest of its blushing citizens who see that the rate of vaccination on the continent is far from the UK's rate of 40.5 vaccinated per 100 inhabitants or the United States' rate with 34.5 doses. At a great distance, the EU achieved a meager rate of 12 doses, just 4.1% of the population. The data is also frankly unfavorable if we measure ourselves with countries as heterogeneous as Chile, Morocco or Israel. Not to mention many other Asian-Pacific nations. This implies that not only at a Western but also at a global level, European action in this event has been, so far, manifestly improvable. And in order to understand the European fiasco, I think it is appropriate to highlight a number of root causes - some more visible than others - that have occurred and lay now bare before our eyes. Because it may very well be that what's happening is due to a peculiar pre-pandemic European disease, which involves the difficulty of thinking and acting in "state of alert" to an unprecedented world, which is holding back our attempts to overcome that other pathology that is Covid-19. As if we were having a hard time recognizing that we are our own enemy, clinging to yesterday's world that's gone and is not coming back .

For the past few years now, the world's trading center has inexorably moved from the Atlantic to the Pacific, bringing about a historic change. And thus, a new distribution of power that leaves the traditional world map that we still have in mind, with the Atlantic as the central ocean flanked by the European continent. Now Europe, whether we like it or not, lies at a far corner in this new perception and representation of the world that is already in place. Notwithstanding this, our European *imago mundi* remains naively immutable. Gravely, this is barely mentioned in European public discourse (in Spain not at all) as if cloistered in its political achievements it refused to assume the new mapping, mentally and behaviorally, with the Pacific as the main ocean. In such a displaced market, the auctioning and obtention of health supplies and bidding for vaccines is extraordinarily complicated with every nation ruthlessly struggling to obtain them. And more so if we go in with the old mentality, convinced that we are still a "main player" in this new scenario. In this new historical context that Covid-19 has only crudely brought to light, a large recent enigma is better understood: why the UK decided to leave the EU. And if there is one thing England preeminently possesses, it is precisely a highly developed sense to detect the winds of history, probably due to its maritime past. Its agility and effectiveness with vaccines in a global *selva selvaggia* situation where quick response, research and logistics are essential, does not seem coincidental. Suffice it to say that young Spaniards who are abroad due to studies or work are already being vaccinated on English soil.

In this reduction of the European role in the world despite its territorial enlargement, there is also the fact of the loss of technological competitiveness to our competitors. It is really significant that none of the Big Tech companies is European, as well as the 5 GAFAM (Google, Amazon, Facebook, Apple, Microsoft). And the same happens with the 10 largest corporations worldwide by market capitalization in 2020. In another well-symbolic technology sector such as the payment mediums , none of the 4 major credit cards worldwide (American Express, Mastercard, Visa and China's UnionPay) is European, nor is there any company of ours among the 20 largest internet firms , where 13 are American and 5 Chinese. But this gap in innovation is not well explained without resorting to another factor: the decline of European universities and the emergence for decades of new, highly competitive university centers in the "intelligence race" in Southeast Asia, located in until recently unthinkable countries such as Vietnam. The continent's ageing and demographic crisis only aggravates our difficulty in adapting sportingly to the new reality. It also stops us from adopting agile approaches as the current situation demands as if our own European atherosclerosis of an advanced age does is not merciful with it.

Whereof a first conclusion arises: whatever the EU has of influence and "soft power" still in the world, such as its ability to regulate *urbi et orbi* has ceased to exist in new technologies, research, and innovation. Brussels and its functional structure are not exactly Silicon Valley or Singapore. And this specialized hypertrophy of rule-making and procedures becomes ineffective- because it is inapplicable- in times of crisis as severe and changing as the current pandemic. It seems as if the hyperdeveloped regulatory european muscle lacked a muscular antagonist of agility, conforming, thus, a cruel paradox: that in our strength – i.e. global normative leadership – is at this critical hour our weakness.

In addition, there are two other concomitant factors that partly explain the fiasco of vaccination and the tensions between countries members for accessing new providers so far. One issue is the absence in EU governance of what we might call resigning pressure. No one knows on our continental soil what are the procedures for demanding- and executing - the cessation or resignation of rulers who have shown failure, serious mistakes, or poor performances. Nor is it clear to those who should resign given the physical and symbolic distance between citizenship and the already usual absence of accountability. We cannot even think of the possibility of such resignations: that, for example, Ursula von der Leyen as president of the Commission, or the Health Police Station, Stella Kyriakides or the Director-General, Sandra Gallina, would resign their positions on such a serious matter. Suffice the recent discovery of the nearly 30 million vaccines in Rome or the current chaos with Astra Zeneca. And this resigning gap which does not exist in democratic nations and companies, explains that efficiency and professionalism are not incentivized when they are most critical as is the case. And if we pull the thread of this fiasco, another question rises, unavoidable in democratic control, whether any of the three leaders mentioned above were appointed by their professional competence or by quotas resulting from equality policies or by political correctness. We have discovered, painfully, that the degree of professional suitability and effectiveness (or their lack) does not know about genders. And that the world, unlike we think, is very rough, especially when it comes to life and death matters. But we have already been warned by a European like Luther that if the world were not like this, it would no longer be the world.

Returning to Ortega y Gasset, it is urgent to know what is happening to us and where we are, to know exactly what to stick to. I believe that the experience of vaccination is being a blow of reality, a whole "moment of truth" for the EU. And that if we are loyal to their demands, we can extract valuable learnings from ourselves and the new world we are already in. Perhaps we must remind a Union "lost in thought" and amputee of England, that request addressed to others made by Ortega: "Europeans, back to things". In other words, the priority now is vaccination, and thereafter looking for our best place in a different, distant, unfamiliar, uncertain world map. But a real one.

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