

EUROPEUM BRIEF ON COVID-19

National governments, not the EU, sleepwalked
into the corona crisis

Christian Kvorning Lassen

- On January 26, the EU's Centre for Disease Control (ECDC) [warned](#) Member States that Covid-19 infection spread in Europe would be probable and considerable. The EU offered [in January](#) to support Member States with purchasing of medical equipment, test kits, protective gear, and general support. [Member States refused the EU's help in January](#), stating that their health care systems were adequately prepared for the Virus.

As the novel Coronavirus rages across Europe, there has been no shortage of Czech politicians criticizing the EU as impotent, unhelpful and bureaucratic.

They could not be more wrong.

On January 26, the ECDC warned Member States that contagion within the EU was likely and that the danger was considerable. The [report](#) is unequivocal and unmistakable in its evaluation, of which these key points are of particular interest:

- The potential impact of 2019-nCoV outbreaks is high,
- Further global spread is likely,
- The impact of the late detection of an imported case in an EU/EEA country without the application of appropriate infection prevention and control measures would be high, therefore in such a scenario the risk of secondary transmission in the community setting is estimated to be very high.

Member States and their respective health authorities were warned in no uncertain terms by the EU that Coronavirus presented a considerable threat. Member States, not the EU, sleepwalked into this crisis.

A warning going unheeded can be understood, or perhaps even forgiven. However, Reuters published [proof](#) that **the EU offered Member States assistance with acquiring essential medical equipment, test kits, protective gear. Member States refused this offer by the EU**, reassuring the EU that their respective health care sectors were adequately prepared to handle a possible outbreak of Covid-19. Member States also reassured the EU that their test capacities were sufficient.

In light of this, the following quotes are outright damning:

"There is strong level of preparedness in member states, most have measures in place to detect and treat COVID-19", the official said, relaying comments from national envoys, according to minutes of the meeting.

"At a meeting on Jan. 31, delegates from national health ministries told the Commission they did not need help acquiring medical equipment", according to the minutes of the meeting.

Asked whether the documents seen by Reuters showed the European response had been too slow, a spokesman for the EU executive said: *"As from January, the Commission offered the possibility of support to member states."*

Public health is not the EU's domain; the competencies in this area rest solely with the Member States. The EU can offer assistance insofar its competencies allow, which the EU did timely, yet in vain. Had the Member States accepted the EU's offer of help and heeded the ECDC's warning and assessment, they would have had almost two months head start in procuring essential equipment that could benefit everyone. National governments, not the EU, sleepwalked into this crisis.

In light of this, the massive disinformation campaigns against the EU and its alleged inaction by both external actors, such as Russia and China, the latter whom [President Zeman](#) thanked in lieu of the EU and the thousands of brave Czechs risking their health to keep society running, as well as national governments and their representatives, such as [Prime Minister Babis](#), and [Minister of Foreign Affairs Petříček](#), must now be dispelled.

It should be abundantly clear in light of Covid-19 that global challenges – be it pandemics, climate change or others – can best be solved through international and supranational cooperation and coordination. It obliges national politicians to acknowledge and champion the supranational institutions and frameworks through which such

crises can be best managed, such as the EU. It obliges national politicians not to cater to the lowest common denominator. It obliges national politicians to propagate the timeless foundational idea of the EU; we in Europe have a shared fate. We are stronger together.

The EU is only as strong as the Member States want it to be. If politicians and citizens want a stronger, more proactive EU, they must not only give it stronger competencies, but also refrain from scapegoating it, lest warnings such as the ECDC's go unheeded due to fear of national political backlash.

It is hard to envision a more damning indictment of the nationalism permeating the majority of governments, nor a more tragic consequence of disinformation not just from external actors, but from national politicians, who maintain that the EU has let them down while washing their hands of responsibility for how the crisis escalated so much.

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