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OPINION | REVIEW & OUTLOOK

Europe's Self-Defeating Vaccine Fight

The EU blows its rollout and blames a pharmaceutical firm.

By [The Editorial Board](#)

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AstraZeneca Covid-19 vaccine.

PHOTO: FRANK HOERMANN/SVEN SIMON/ZUMA PRESS



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As the European Union fumbles its vaccine rollout, officials in Brussels are looking for villains. They think they've found one in vaccine-maker AstraZeneca.

Rather than letting countries negotiate their own vaccine contracts, the European Commission handled procurement for the entire bloc in the name of solidarity. Brussels botched the process, and now the union's members are lagging together.

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Europe, the U.S. and U.K. have orders or options for roughly the same number of doses per capita. But the U.S. and U.K. moved faster to secure contracts, which made it easier for pharmaceutical companies to prepare. Washington and London also spent about seven times as much on development, production and procurement per person, according to the British analytics firm Airfinity. Some U.S. states face distribution challenges like many European countries, but American and British regulators approved vaccines faster than their EU counterparts.

The results are already clear. By our deadline Thursday, the U.K. had administered doses to more than 11% of residents, while the U.S. was approaching 8%. Denmark was a European success story at 3.7%, while France and Sweden languished around 2%.

This hasn't inspired much reflection in Brussels. EU mandarins spent this week admonishing AstraZeneca after the firm announced that issues with production at a European factory meant it would deliver tens of millions of doses fewer than expected this quarter. The European Commission ordered a raid on AstraZeneca's production site in Belgium on Wednesday.

“Europe at the time wanted to be supplied more or less at the same time as the U.K., even though the contract was signed three months later,” AstraZeneca chief Pascal Soriot told an Italian newspaper this week. “So we said, ‘OK, we’re going to do our best, we’re going to try, but we cannot commit contractually because we are three months behind the U.K.’”

EU health commissioner Stella Kyriakides said the contract requires that vaccines be diverted from U.K. factories to Europe. The company should publish the agreement and

let the public judge who is telling the truth. But this ugly episode is a good advertisement for Brexit.

By the way, London gave its go-ahead for the AstraZeneca vaccine in December. German officials ruled Thursday that the vaccine shouldn't be given to those over age 64, and an EU decision isn't expected until Friday.

Brussels soon will give national governments the power to block millions of vaccine doses from being exported from Europe. Such restrictions will certainly backfire, as other countries retaliate against Europe and complex supply chains fall apart.

Brussels is demonstrating its unique knack for self-foot-shooting by transforming its crisis of vaccine incompetence into deeper economic harm. The EU's paramount challenge after the pandemic ebbs will be to revive economic growth despite decades of policy mismanagement. Yet nothing says "closed for business" like harassing companies that provide life-saving medical treatments.

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