Do not go at it alone: Tackling the pandemic in Hungary and Europe

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Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic poses a huge challenge to all countries on Earth. It did not only change our everyday lives and routines, but the economic recession resulting from the pandemic has destroyed millions of jobs worldwide. The signs of a social crisis are also reflected in the general frustration felt due to the lockdowns that became a hallmark of keeping the pandemic in check. This is further exacerbated by conspiracy theories that emerged almost simultaneously with the pandemic and by vaccine skepticism that became more prevalent in the later phases of the crisis. More than a year after the outbreak of the pandemic in Europe, EU member states are carrying out their vaccination campaigns, which is expected to achieve large-scale immunization in the bloc by the second half of 2021. Nevertheless, due to the global spread of the coronavirus, several restrictive measures are expected to remain in place for a long time. This review assesses the main Hungarian and European responses to the coronavirus pandemic, the ensuing political and public health crisis, and the accompanying waves of disinformation, concluding with the most important domestic and European lessons of the crisis.

Lockdown Politics

Following the appearance of the novel coronavirus in the EU in January-February 2020, the Orbán government and other European countries all tried to prevent the spread of the virus. Three weeks after the first Hungarian case was confirmed, Hungary introduced nationwide lockdowns, and the second wave of the pandemic made it crystal clear that lockdown measures were necessary for the effective management of the pandemic. Such measures placed a significant burden on the country's economy, while the often-inconsistent measures of the Hungarian government have added to the growing frustration in society. Most of the government's public health measures were reactive and in line with measures introduced by most EU member states throughout the pandemic. Similarly to member states, the European institutional system was slow to respond to the challenges posed by the pandemic, and the initial lack of European solidarity led to a crisis of confidence in the future of the common European project.

Lessons Learned

Pandemic-related measures have been introduced in most EU countries along similar paradigms, although with different methods based on the healthcare competencies of individual member states. The latter has in many cases caused problems for the EU, further exacerbated by the challenges the EU's institutional system faced, especially in the early stages of the epidemic.

In terms of health security, lockdowns proved to be the most effective measures, but their nature remains controversial. While the number of coronavirus-related deaths had already reached 2.7 million worldwide by March 2021, the scientific consensus insists not only on the

need for a lockdown policy, but also on the fact that a timely introduction of lockdowns could have saved thousands of lives in countries[1] where these measures have not been taken.

Different national responses, however, increased doubts and insecurities regarding the pandemic and relevant measures. There was no common European solution, as the European Union is not empowered to act in healthcare matters instead of Member States.

One of the key lessons of the first wave of the pandemic is that member states did not show sufficient solidarity with Italy, which was strongly affected by the coronavirus at the time. Instead, EU states all focused on providing adequate protection for their own populations – a rational response to the pandemic; nevertheless, it disregarded the core principle of solidarity within the EU.

This has also caused a major headache for the European Commission that has sought to demonstrate the EU's readiness and commitment through the joint procurement of protective equipment. The unexpectedly weak solidarity demonstrated by member states has also provided an opportunity for authoritarian powers like China and Russia to increase their influence in the bloc via their "mask diplomacy" and later "vaccine diplomacy" efforts. Nevertheless, in the later phases of the pandemic, solidarity between member states improved significantly.

Due to the pandemic, however, the concept of the European Health Union[2] is receiving greater attention, and while healthcare competencies will not be transferred from the nation-state level to EU institutions, the plan could significantly improve the quality and effectiveness of future crisis management at the EU level.

European Vaccination Management: success or failure?

The pace of joint vaccines procurement in the European Union has indeed fallen short of expectations, but this is due to a number of factors and some of them fall outside the remit

and influence of the European Commission responsible for the procurement. For instance, the European Commission contracted large companies that ultimately failed to develop the vaccine as fast as other companies did. The most obvious example of this is the French Sanofi-GSK[3], the failure of which had political consequences in France. At the same time, because of the joint vaccine procurement, member states have not been forced to compete with each other, while such a scenario would have potentially adversely affected member states with less lobbying and economic power.

Notably, the most significant criticism of the joint European vaccine procurement comes from the Hungarian government, but its criticism is only partially justified: the Commission has only

[1] https://www.the-scientist.com/features/counting-the-lives-saved-by-lockdownsand-lost-to-slow-action-67689
[2] https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_21_1084
[3] https://www.ft.com/content/657b123a-78ba-4fba-b18e-23c07e313331

reached a preliminary agreement with member states setting general conditions for joint vaccine procurement. Any member could have chosen not to cooperate and the order contracts were concluded individually by the member states with the manufacturing companies[4].

The European Commission has also raised nearly €10 billion[5], and the United States has provided an additional $4.5 billion to support the development, manufacturing, and distribution of vaccines from Moderna, Pfizer, AstraZeneca and Johnson & Johnson. Undoubtedly, the European Union played an important role in developing safe and effective vaccines within a year following the detection of the first coronavirus case.

From an EU perspective, it was both an important and historic moment when member states agreed for the first time to tackle economic challenges in the framework of a long-term strategy through the recovery fund called Next Generation EU[6] with a joint borrowing and economic rescue package.

Infodemia

The spread of the coronavirus was followed by a wave of disinformation of unparalleled magnitude and nature worldwide. Parallelly to the three waves of the pandemic, various waves of disinformation affected society. During the first wave, it was spread mainly by alternative news portals, while during the second and third waves, pseudo-experts contesting best practices or even the existence of the pandemic were the main sources of disinformation, exacerbating challenges posed by vaccine skepticism.

One of the most prominent disinformation narratives in the information space is that some political and economic – typically Western – interest groups are directly involved in the spread of the virus, hoping to benefit financially or geopolitically from the protracted pandemic. By

the end of 2020, "anti-lockdown" or "lockdown-sceptic" attitudes have become dominant in Hungary, fuelled by social frustration from restriction measures, business closures, unemployment, and the fact that different countries have given different responses to the spread of the pandemic in several cases.

By the third wave of the pandemic, besides anti-lockdown conspiracy theories, vaccine disinformation messages have become persistent and are expected to dominate the coronavirus debate for the rest of the year. This will pose long-term challenges to some countries, their vaccination programs and healthcare systems.

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[4] https://www.portfolio.hu/gazdasag/20210321/magyar-vakcinas-hirre-reagalt-az-europai-bizottsag-475068
[5] https://qubit.hu/2021/01/11/hogy-sikerult-csodat-muvelni-es-kevesebb-mint-egy-ev-alatt-kifejleszteni-a-vakcinat-a-koronavirus-ellen
[6] https://www.consilium.europa.eu/hu/policies/eu-recovery-plan/

In addition to health disinformation, geopolitically charged, often anti-EU pandemic narratives have also appeared. The need to act against misinformation and disinformation was recognized too late by the Orbán government, and it was often used for its own political purposes. In many cases, organizations responsible for informing the public about news and developments relating to the pandemic often acted in a politically motivated manner. The fight against health misinformation and false information aimed at undermining confidence in vaccination will be a priority for the EU in the future, for which effective cooperation with and regulation of global social media platforms is essential.