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## **Absent Without Leave: The European Union in the Corona Pandemic**

**ABSTRACT** - How did the European Union respond to the Covid-19 pandemic? The first part of the paper analyzes the logic of the EU's multi-level politics as it relates to the relationship between national and supranational decision-making in an international emergency. Attempts on the part of the EU to increase its powers largely failed while member states were essentially left to their own devices, also due to the uncertainty of the situation and the diversity of local conditions and preferences. The second part deals with the apparent absence of the EU in the global politics of "biosecurity", which is largely dominated by the United States, its global pharma industry and, to an impressive extent, by the U.S. military establishment. In this context, the paper summarizes the present state of the international discussion on the origin of the new coronavirus and on the virological research conducted, among other places, at the Wuhan virological laboratory.

**KEYWORDS** - European Union, Covid-19, Multi-level Politics, Biosecurity, Virology, Wuhan Laboratory.

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EU-Europe was not ready for SARS-CoV-2, also known as Coronavirus, neither its central institutions nor its member states. Astonishing as it may appear, both treated the pandemic as European business as usual, to be dealt with by European politics as usual. Almost instinctively, EU-Commission and EU-Parliament saw the pandemic as an opportunity to grab power, i.e., to extend their jurisdiction over the member states. The latter, in turn, continued playing their old game of problem displacement and blame avoidance: shifting upwards responsibilities that they find difficult to handle, or creating at the European level mandates for themselves that they would not have received from their national electorates. None of the players worried about the big questions, in any case strictly avoided talking about them in public: where the virus came from, out of the blue of nature or from human activity; whether it was a one-time event or one of others waiting in the wings; how to prevent a repeat, by strengthening the “resilience” of European societies or by fighting future viruses at their source, wherever that might be.

As to organized — or disorganized — Europe’s immediate responses to the pandemic, it is anything but surprising that they fell far short. In operational, i.e., policy-making and policy-implementing terms, the EU was and remained dysfunctional while stereotypically insisting on “European solutions”. However, as much as national governments would have liked Europeanizing the virus, turning it over to Brussels, ultimately their constituents would not allow them to relieve themselves of the hot potato of a potentially intractable and politically explosive crisis. Even without a public debate on the dismal role of the EU in European public health, citizens insisted that their elected governments take responsibility for what they had been told was a matter of life and death. Given the wide variety of both the national manifestations of Covid-19 and the functioning of national health care systems, it seems more than reasonable that national publics demanded national rather than supranational policies, policies that they could publicly debate in their own language, in the hope to influence them. Indeed, it would have been strange had it been otherwise and European citizens would have allowed Covid-19 to be dealt with by a far-away central techno-bureaucracy whose representatives seem more excited about the Treaties’ “ever closer union of the European peoples” than about such

peoples' health, or in any case take interest in the latter primarily to the extent that this might promote the former.

As so often, popular preferences turned out to be realistic. Even with the hindsight of almost two years, there is no uniform pattern of infection in European countries to be found. Infection waves vary in intensity and duration, from country to country and region to region, without it being fully understood why, requiring, if nothing else, improvised and diverse local rather than pre-set and uniform central responses. European societies, apparently, are too different for a one-size-fits-all treatment. Climatic conditions diverge, also demographic structures, the general health condition of the population, local air quality, ways of family life and life in general, in particular of so-called "risk groups", as do religious and cultural traditions relating to health and the human body. Also relevant seems to be the extent to which people trust their government, which appears to account for some of the significant differences in national vaccination rates, for example between Germany and Denmark. Moreover, national societies have different 'values' giving rise to different political priorities — see Sweden, which throughout the pandemic kept its schools open, compared to Germany where educational policy was governed by teachers afraid, first of getting infected, and then of getting vaccinated. Not least, national economies differ, for example to the extent that their prosperity depends on international tourism, so they need to keep their borders as open as possible, while tourists' countries of origin may want to prevent their citizens from traveling, to avoid importing infections.

As to the EU, when the pandemic arrived it had for some time maintained an institution called European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control (ECDC), based in Stockholm, which employed 280 fulltime staff on an annual budget of 57 million euro. Hardly anyone had ever heard of it, except for virologists and epidemiologists from all over the world who had kept meeting there for international conferences. Little as we know about the Centre, it was certainly not helping the EU and its member states make meaningful preparation for something like Covid-19 — for example, urging countries to store enough facemasks, other protective equipment, and ventilators; telling them to have sufficient numbers of trained staff on hand; offering training courses for national public health professionals and regulators on hospital hygiene and disease prevention in nursing homes; organizing exercises for decision-makers in member states on what to do and how to cooperate in a Europe-wide pandemic; and generally warning the

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European public that living the global life can be deadly unless they and their national health care systems are prepared for it.

Very likely, one reason for this was that such warnings would have been in conflict with the stern recommendations, issued yearly under the EU's various austerity and fiscal coordination exercises required by the EMU's hard currency regime, to cut public spending in order to reduce public deficits and public debt. This included spending on health care. Between 2011 and 2018, the European Commission delivered 63 formal requests to member states to cut their public health care spending and privatize health care systems. When Covid-19 struck, austerity in the economically weaker deficit countries of the Union had brought down health care spending to 8.8 percent of GDP in Italy and 8.9 percent in Spain. Of these only 6.5 and 6.3 percent, respectively, were public spending, the rest paid out-of-pocket or through voluntary health insurance schemes. German health care spending, by comparison, was 11.2 percent, of which 9.5 percent were public. (For context, three percent of GDP – the difference between public spending on health care in Italy and Germany – are more than 2.3 times the German defense budget, now at 1.35 percent of GDP). Obviously, spending 9.5 percent on health care was considered excessive by the Commission, which as a consequence urged the German government, too, to spend less. Indeed in 2019 the German government was embarking on a campaign to shut down hospitals. When the pandemic arrived, this came to an abrupt end, and mentioning it is diligently avoided by all “pro-European” political forces.

Otherwise, the typical ping-pong game between ‘Europe’ and its nation-states, as made possible and in fact encouraged by the EU's institutional set-up, went on, with Brussels pretending to be a continental capital and the states either playing along or doing their own thing, depending on how their governments interpreted their interest or that of their nation.<sup>1</sup> An important example is the procurement of vaccines, which began in the spring of 2020 when it had become probable that several vaccines from different producers would be available in the fall and early winter. At national level, several ministers in charge of health care had formed a consortium for joint negotiations with potential suppliers, when Germany was due to

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<sup>1</sup> A valuable blow-by-blow account is now available in a book by L. VAN MIDDELAAR, *Pandemonium: Saving Europe*, Agenda Publishing, Newcastle upon Tyne, 2021. Van Middelaar's account differs in some points from the one presented here, and it follows the traditional narrative about “Europe” as a Phoenix from the ashes of an endless chain of successive crises. Most importantly, the book completely fails to mention the connection between “European” politics and policies and Europe's capitalist development during and beyond neoliberalism.

take over the rotating half-year Presidency of the EU. This would be the last time for Angela Merkel presiding. Preparing for it, she told her health minister to turn vaccine procurement over to the EU Commission. There are different theories on her reasons for this, given that the Commission had no experience in such matters and would have to negotiate on behalf of 27 sovereign countries, which were likely to have different ideas on how much they were willing to spend on what kind of vaccine. One explanation is that Merkel was afraid of Germany, rich from monetary union, getting to start vaccinating earlier than others, which would cause discord among member states during Merkel's presidency. As it turned out, negotiations dragged on over disagreement between the states and the Commission on volumes, prices, and delivery dates, also on production sites and the subsidization of production facilities. In the end states ended up paying more and had to wait longer for their vaccines than they might have. An additional factor apparently were French demands for room to be left in the European order for a French vaccine, to be produced by a French company, Sanofi. In early 2021, in the last minute, Sanofi had to admit that its development effort had led to nothing. That post-Brexit Britain had managed to start its vaccination campaign earlier while paying less became an embarrassment for EU leaders and resulted in occasional export bans for vaccines produced on the Continent for the United Kingdom.

As seen by the EU, its most important response to the pandemic was what is called, in Eurojargon, the "Next Generation EU Recovery and Resilience Facility", in short NGEU, set up by the Council in July 2020, which was flagged out as an expression of "European solidarity" in hard times. Under NGEU, the Union will distribute 750bn euro in 2018 prices (now an adjusted 807bn) over seven years, from 2021 to 2027, to its member states, to help them recover from Corona and prepare their societies and economies better against future viruses. On closer inspection, however, the new facility has little to do with either Corona or European solidarity; more than anything else, it seized on Corona as an opportunity to realize an older, essentially French project for a "European fiscal capacity", originally conceived for the European Monetary Union only. NGEU is funded by the EU going into debt, in circumvention of the European treaties. For this, all 27 member states had to be brought on board, each being given a share in the fresh money, regardless of whether and how affected by the pandemic. A little more than half of the funds will be disbursed as grants, the rest as loans. Country allotments are specified almost to the last digit, according to a complex formula that is not easy to understand. Italy will receive the lion's

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share, 172.7 billion, 81.8 of which as grants; Spain follows with 140.4 (77.3) billion. Interestingly Poland, with a very low Covid incidence, is third, with 63.8 and 37.7 billion, respectively. France is to get 38.8 billion euro, and rich Germany a token 28.8 billion, both as grants. (For perspective, Germany was borrowing a total of 219 billion in 2020 alone.) Repayment, as of now out of the regular EU budget, is to begin in 2028 and end 30 years later. There is hope that by the end of the 2020s the EU will have been conceded independent sources of revenue or, more likely, will be allowed by its member states to finance its debt service with new debt, on the model of the ne-liberal debt state.

NGEU money must be spent within the seven years of the program's lifetime. Countries must submit program budgets to the Commission for approval, allocating their recovery and resilience funds to basically three purposes: repairing the damage done by Corona and making their countries more "resilient"; "greening" their national industries and ways of life, in line with the EU's so-called Green Deal; and "digitization", whatever this may be (apart from a bonanza for Silicon Valley). In addition, Parliament and Commission want to make disbursement to individual member states conditional on them de-nationalizing their legal systems and extending LGBTQ+ rights. In the fall of 2021, disbursement had begun to some countries while the spending plans of several others were still awaiting Commission approval. Generally, as was to be expected, it turned out that to spend the recovery and resilience money requires expert planning, competent public administration, and industrial capacities that may not everywhere be available on short notice. Moreover, health care systems, just as public administration, and educational institutions, in order to recover from the damage done to them by EU austerity and the pandemic, are unlikely to be rebuilt and upgraded by a one-time injection of funds and need to be better funded on a current basis. Ultimately this requires that the fundamental economic disparities between the member states caused by Monetary Union are addressed.

Finally, the European Union is almost completely absent in the global politics of Corona, as are European nation-states and the European public. Occasionally regret was expressed about Europeans refusing to share vaccines with the global South, especially when there were no vaccines yet. In late 2021 Europeans and North Americans were urged by the World Health Organization not to use left-over doses of vaccines for third, so-called booster shots for their already vaccinated citizens, and instead donate them to poor countries with low immunization rates. Whether this is more than

rhetorical grandstanding one cannot know without, for example, knowing the capacities of such countries to deliver donated vaccine to their citizens. What was heard about are efforts of the EU and some member states to get East European countries like Hungary to not buy the cheaper Russian and Chinese vaccines and instead “buy West”. There is no information on the extent to which this was successful, or on what it cost to make East Europeans not buy East.

A brief moment in which the global politics of Corona surfaced was a public controversy between European countries and the United States over patent rights for the newly developed so-called mRNA vaccines allegedly best suited for fighting the coronavirus. To the surprise of the Europeans, the new, supposedly Europhile American President, Biden, urged them to renounce their intellectual property rights and allow poor countries to produce the new SARS-2 vaccines without having to pay licensing fees. Surprising this was because the United States, with the world’s largest research establishment, are otherwise staunchest promoters of patent protection. Europeans, generally considered soft on intellectual property, immediately objected, pointing out among other things that being allowed to produce something doesn’t mean that one can actually produce it as long as there are no functioning production capacities. The hatchet was buried shortly thereafter, leaving observers puzzling over what might have been behind it. Possibly the controversy reflected the fact that major patents in the field are held by European firms, like the German BioNTech. While European producers, knowing the ways of the globalized world, early on sought cooperation with big American pharma firms — like BioNTech with Pfizer — they may not have shared their patents with them. In any case, Germany still prefers vaccine sharing by charitable donation. Meanwhile vaccine-producing companies have turned into money-printing machines, tiny BioNTech now being one of the highest-capitalized firms in Europe, worth 88 billion euro, more than half of giants like Mercedes and Volkswagen, while their owners, now worth 14 billion, have made it onto the list of the ten richest Germans.

No role at all Europe seems to be playing in the emerging confrontation between the United States and China on global “health security”, formerly referred to as “biosecurity”. The tip of the iceberg is the controversy over the origin of SARS-CoV-2, and at the center of that controversy is a virological laboratory in the Chinese city of Wuhan.<sup>2</sup> The Wuhan lab seems

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<sup>2</sup> On the following see, among others, N. WADE, *The Origin of COVID? Did People or Nature Open Pandora’s Box at Wuhan?*, *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, May 5, 2021,

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to be one of the world's most advanced research centers on Corona viruses, and it was in Wuhan that SARS-CoV-2 seems to have first infected humans, presumably at the end of 2019. Given this coincidence, very soon the question came up if the new virus might have escaped from the lab, either by accident or helped by sabotage. The Chinese government, but also a large part of the international virological community, strongly deny both theories and insist that the new virus was a cross-over from a wild animal, most likely a bat, and the place where this happened was probably a market for wild animals – a “wet market” – also located in Wuhan. Attempts to settle the question, undertaken by the WHO, failed several times, allegedly because of a lack of cooperation on the part of the Chinese government.

Why is this important? Is this not just spilt milk, snow of yesteryear? Apart from a possible need to improve safety procedures at virological labs or, as the case may be, regulate or suppress trade with certain animals, the issue became immediately politicized, and as the story unfolded, it took a number of turns that are nothing short of astonishing. The then President of the United States, Donald Trump, poured oil into the fire by referring to SARS-CoV-2 as “the Chinese virus”, causing China to retort by suggesting that the virus might have escaped from an American military facility, Fort Detrick, in the course of research for or on biological warfare.<sup>3</sup> Two research expeditions of eminent virologists to Wuhan, under the auspices of the WHO, found the natural origin hypothesis more plausible but would not rule out a Wuhan lab accident either, partly on the ground that they had not been allowed sufficient access to the lab. Currently participants in the second expedition are demanding another inquiry, with little hope, due to deterioration of evidence with time. Trump's successor, Biden, seemed at first to try letting the issue wither away, but then turned around and asked the American secret services for an assessment. Apparently, a majority of the agencies voted for a natural origin, but at least one found the lab accident theory more convincing.

On the sidelines some strange connections surfaced. As reported in part by journalistic bloggers, it turned out that the Wuhan lab was a hotspot on international virological research, operated by US-educated Chinese

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<https://thebulletin.org/2021/05/the-origin-of-covid-did-people-or-nature-open-pandoras-box-at-wuhan/>, last accessed September 21, 2021. More recently, offering an updated account, K. STACEY and I. KAMINSKA, *Genetic engineering: why some fear the next pandemic could be lab-made*, in *Financial Times*, November 17, 2021.

<sup>3</sup> On Fort Detrick don't fail to look at the respective entry in the English Wikipedia: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fort\\_Detrick](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fort_Detrick).

scientists and funded in part indirectly by grants from the National Institutes of Health, an American government institution, and directly by private American firms and foundations. Some of the funding was apparently channeled through a New York-based research center whose director, one Peter Daszak, maintained a close relationship with the Wuhan lab; he later served as a member on the two WHO Wuhan investigation teams. He also was one of the co-signatories, probably even the initiator, of an open letter, published in *The Lancet*, a leading journal in medical research, a few days after CoVid-19 had appeared, in which a group of world-renowned virologists categorically denied that the virus could have emerged from the Wuhan lab, calling this hypothesis a “conspiracy theory”.<sup>4</sup>

Use of that term in this context should have been of interest to investigative journalists. Why not speak of a “lab accident theory” when what was to be denied was what was then believed by some to have been an accident, nobody having mentioned a conspiracy? It may be relevant in this context that the term, conspiracy theory, has long played a prominent part in a series of international exercises, which apparently began in the 1980s, to prepare for the outbreak of a pandemic in the course of international war or, later, of a terrorist attack.<sup>5</sup> Organized by the United States, exercises brought together governments, international organizations like the WHO — not, however, the EU, or so it seems —, multinational pharma firms, foundations, military and intelligence services, public relations firms and the mass media. One issue was how to communicate with the public during a pandemic in order to make people do what was believed they had to do for infections to be stopped, for example observing quarantine rules, get vaccinated, trust their leaders, and believe in their competence and announcements. In this context, it was also discussed how to deal with “conspiracy theories” at odds with truthful or, for that matter, strategic information issued by governments.

It may well be that it was because of fear of being branded conspiracy theorists, with consequences such as exclusion from official government information, that journalists abstained from independent reporting, or indeed all reporting, on the global backstage of the politics of the present pandemic. What that backstage consists of is a vast web of organizations, international and national, public, and private, devoted to dealing with the threat of, and

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<sup>4</sup> *The Lancet*, Vol. 395, March 7, 2020.

<sup>5</sup> The best source I found is unfortunately only in German: P. SCHREYER, *Chronik einer angekündigten Krise: Wie ein Virus die Welt verändern konnte* [Chronicle of an announced crisis: how a virus could change the world], Westend, Frankfurt am Main, 2020.

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indeed preparing for, biological warfare — a scientific-military-industrial complex around biosecurity, intertwined with the medical-industrial complex (a relationship that has recently led to the replacement of the term, biosecurity, with a less suspicious concept, health security). Very little is known about this complex, except that is US-led, with heavy involvement of the US intelligence establishment, and that it includes among others the money-starved WHO and money-stuffed Big Pharma. What one does know is that the network has in the past two decades held several meetings where international and public-private cooperation was rehearsed for future emergencies. With hindsight the most remarkable such event was one at the Hotel Pierre in New York on October 18, 2019, named “Event 201”, practicing how to respond to a global pandemic caused by a SARS-type Corona virus, after previous exercises had dealt with pox, pestilence, anthrax, and SARS-CoV-1. Only a few weeks later, SARS-CoV-2 saw the light of day.

Nobody in his or her right mind has suggested that the appearance of the new virus at the end of 2019 — if then it was, and not already a few weeks earlier; this, too, is contested — was something like a live experiment conducted on the peoples of the world by the global establishment in the wake of the Pierre conference. What the sequence of events does show, however, is that SARS-CoV-2 arrived not unexpected. Its basic structures were already well-known when it showed up, extensive high-powered scientific research having preceded it. (This, incidentally, may explain why the new type of vaccine, mRNA, apparently almost custom-made for the new type of virus, was available in record time once it was needed.) Even more interesting, however, is the way virological research, conducted also at the Wuhan laboratory, among others led by a former doctoral student of the said Peter Daszak, seems to be linked to international preparations both against and, in a specific sense, for biological warfare, a linkage that seems quite comparable to that of nuclear physics during the Cold War to preparations both for and against nuclear war. Given the risks involved in biosecurity research — which are certainly not lower than the risks associated with nuclear weapons — it seems essential that the public understand better the global political dimension of SARS-CoV-2, something that is almost never discussed in Europe.

In short, the global biosecurity network that appears to be sponsoring a good deal of today’s advanced virological research seems to have originated in an international convention on biological weapons, passed by the UN Assembly in 1971, which outlaws not just biological warfare but also

research in preparation of it.<sup>6</sup> It does, however, allow research on how to defend against biological weapons – which, it seems to be understood, requires knowledge on the properties of such weapons. Only specialists can know what possibilities this opens for research on bioweapons, and how this in turn relates to virological research for medical purposes – more than one “dual use” problem here, it would seem. There is no doubt that the United States in particular maintain huge biosecurity research centers under military control, for example at the above-mentioned Fort Detrick, where since SARS-CoV-1, which caused the so-called bird flu, corona viruses seem to be at the top of the research agenda. How important the United States consider a defense against viruses of this kind, of natural or laboratory origin, may be seen from the fact that the October 2019 wargame exercise – the assumed enemy being a new kind of virus of uncertain origin – at the Hotel Pierre (the most expensive among the most expensive hotels in the City of New York) was led by the former U.S. Secretary of State, Madeleine Albright, impersonating none less than POTUS himself. Also, in attendance was, among many others, one Avril Haynes, who had been Deputy Director of the CIA and Deputy National Security Adviser under Obama. At the time of the Pierre exercise she was working for a Washington lobby firm that sells contacts with the Pentagon and the secret services. Shortly after Event 201 President Biden appointed her Director of National Intelligence, the highest post in the US’s intelligence establishment, in charge of overseeing and coordinating the vast number of United States intelligence services.

Politics around international treaties on arms control can breed strange bedfellows, and this seems to be also the case with respect to biological warfare. Knowing what one knows about the paradoxical world of mutual deterrence, where you let your opponent know part of what you know while hiding the decisive rest, and where international law coexists with divergent national law, potentially outlawing something in one country but not in another, it seems not at all inconceivable that potentially hostile powers cooperate in scientific research, simultaneously observing and cheating on each other. One field that might offer itself for this in virology might be so-called “gain of function” research, to learn how to modify a

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<sup>6</sup> The full title is “Convention on the Prohibition of the Development, Production and Stockpiling of Bacteriological (Biological) and Toxin Weapons and on Their Destruction”. The United States had in 1969, after a number of incidents that became public, outlawed research on biological weapons on their territory, to the extent that such research could cause harm to civilians.

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virus genetically so as to make it more infectious and deadlier. To defend against biological attacks, it might be legitimate to want to know how gain-of-function technology can, as it were, upgrade a virus. If gain-of-function research on viruses was illegal in your country but not in another, your military might want to have the research done there, provided the results were shared. Obviously, there is an opportunity for all sorts of James Bond-like shenanigans here, and who would rule out that there could be forces in both the United States and China, in science as well as in defense, eager to cooperate in this way?

In this context, it is interesting to see that immediately after the results of the genetic sequencing of SARS-CoV-2 had been published, a number of prominent virologists, most of them retired, let it be known that in their view, the new coronavirus could not possibly have evolved on its own and could not be anything other than a product of biotechnological engineering. Even more interesting perhaps is the nervous reaction to this on the part of the virological establishment, with its rich use of the concept of “conspiracy theory”. Again and again, the public was told that SARS-CoV-2 was indisputably a result of natural evolution, implying that neither the Chinese scientists nor their American colleagues and sponsors had violated the bio-weapons convention. Among the most vocal advocates of this position was the chief virologist of the German government, Christian Drosten, a self-declared frequent visitor to Wuhan, to both the lab and the “wet market”. To refute the gain-of-function conjecture, Drosten argued that the new virus was more complex than would have been needed to make it more dangerous for humans, which according to him was proof that the modification in question must have been a product of natural evolution rather than of human manipulation. Not without apparent professional pride, Drosten went as far as to suggest to an interviewer that had he had to modify the virus, he would have known a much simpler and more elegant way.<sup>7</sup>

Seen from here, it seems understandable why the, at first glance, somewhat peripheral question of the origin of the virus and the role of the Wuhan lab remains so tenaciously alive. In parallel with efforts to silence the debate, the question of where SARS-CoV-2 came from, a bat cave or a petri dish, has become the object of several, regularly frustrated, international investigations which, given the explosive nature of the issue, may well have been set up so that they will remain inconclusive. (Or why else should the

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<sup>7</sup> *Herr Drosten, woher kam dieses Virus?*, in *Republik*, June 5, 2021, <https://www.republik.ch/2021/06/05/herr-drosten-woher-kam-dieses-virus>, last accessed on September 21, 2021.

mentioned Peter Daszak, of all people, have been invited to serve on the WHO investigation committees?) If nothing else, this cries for a vigorous public debate on how the great powers of the world, above all the greatest of such powers, the United States, are readying themselves, with or without European participation, for both biological warfare and the defense against it, the two being potentially equally dangerous while difficult to keep apart, and how medical and military biological research are related in frontline virology. The public needs to know what kind of protection the powers-that-be have in mind for it, and how destructive such protection may be. "Biosecurity" must no longer be a secret affair, and if European countries are in fact to become more "resilient" against new coronaviruses, preparations for and against biological warfare should be a major issue on their agenda.