The COVID-19 Chronicles: Western Europe

Western Europe (we’ll define as France, Germany, Spain, Belgium, Portugal, and Austria) shows how regions of the world with existing socioeconomic problems have seen Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) simply amplify them while in other regions where fundamentals have been stronger (China and ASEAN), have simply been temporarily setback.

Even within nations, this is also the case, where sectors and industries performing well have merely been set back while others already struggling long before COVID-19 showed up have been dealt a severe blow.

Health Impact

Just looking at the reported number of cases and the reported number of deaths tells us that even deep in the heart of the European Union there is some disparity, whether it is via how testing is done, statistics are gathered and reported, the state of healthcare in each respective nation or some sort of demographic factor being responsible.

Germany and France, for example, had nearly the same number of reported COVID-19 cases, yet France had many, many more reported deaths.

France: 182,942 cases, 28,432 deaths Germany: 180,789 cases, 8,428 deaths Spain: 282,480 cases, 26,837 deaths Belgium: 57,342 cases, 9,312 deaths Portugal: 30,788 cases, 1,330 deaths Austria: 16,539 cases, 641 deaths

Fears of overburdened healthcare infrastructure stemmed from predictions and models of a pathogen that would spread faster and have a greater impact on public health than COVID-19 actually did.

As testing continues to expand, the number of infected appears to have been vastly larger than previously reported meaning that the mortality rate of COVID-19 is thus much lower.

Measures

Western Europe quickly enacted restrictions on movement both within their borders and beyond them. Non-essential activity was restricted, public venues closed including sporting events and schools, regulations regarding the use of masks when out in public put into place and even local elections becoming a subject of debate on whether they’d move forward or not.

In France, municipal elections were held despite the outbreak. They were completed just before widespread public restrictions were put into place.

Much like the rest of the world, the damage done in Western Europe stems from the measures put in place, grinding business to a halt, and the socioeconomic impact it had rather than on any damage caused by the pathogen itself upon the public.

Socioeconomic Impact

The European Union has already seen its fair share of socioeconomic chaos brought on by the 2008-2009 economic crisis it was just barely recovering from before COVID-19 hit, and a series of other events marking Western Europe’s decline upon the global stage.

With restrictions grinding to a halt what economic activity was taking place across Europe, nations now face recessions.
Germany, according to the Guardian, is now in recession, marked by two consecutive quarters of losses on economic growth. Interestingly enough however, is that the first quarter of downturn occurred before the impact of COVID-19. Thus the pathogen and the region's response to it only helped compound economic troubles.

France is suffering from similar economic woes, both before and now certainly after COVID-19.

France24 in an article titled, "Covid-19: French economic activity down 33 percent, Insee says," would note:

> Economic activity in France picked up slightly over the last two weeks as the country prepares to emerge from a coronavirus lockdown, but it remains a third below normal levels, the INSEE official statistics agency said on Thursday.

The article also noted the impact on unemployment and measures the French government has attempted to take in order to address it:

> The government has rolled out a 110 billion euro ($118.9 billion) package of crisis measures to see companies through the lockdown and heavily subsidise furloughs for more than one out of two private sector workers to avoid a wave of permanent layoffs.

> Even with massive use of the furlough scheme, the French economy shed 453,800 workers in the first quarter as companies did not renew temporary workers contracts en masse, INSEE said on Thursday.

It is a scenario playing out all across Europe.

Nations already suffering because of weak economic fundamentals are going to find it exceptionally difficult to recover from the impact of measures put in place during the COVID-19 outbreak.

Nations like France engaged in military adventurism overseas in aid of US hegemony, will find themselves needing to explain to the public now more than ever why money can still be found to fund aggression overseas but not on building up the nation at home.

Other nations in Western Europe still paying into NATO and its growing militaristic posture versus Russia will have to explain why the funding to do so isn't being redirected toward more essential, domestic concerns.

Governments tempted to favor expensive shale oil from the United States over cheaper gas from Russia will have to explain why political motivations are winning out over socioeconomic reconstruction post-COVID-19.

While the Western media likes to talk about the "new normal" that will emerge in the wake of COVID-19 it appears there are few rays of hope for Western Europe. What this "new normal" will most likely mean is that in the future (perhaps for COVID-20 or COVID-21) any street protests or growing discontent that develops as Western Europe continues to sink economically can be swept off the streets with "lockdowns" and "quarantines" while many Europeans will find themselves more dependent on government programs, as independent employment becomes more difficult to find.

Some Western European leaders may be tempted to follow America's lead in scapegoating COVID-19 to explain national and regional ills, or even shift the blame to China, but the truth is Western Europe was already suffering before COVID-19, suffered more during COVID-19 and will continue suffering until Western Europe's economic fundamentals themselves are addressed rather than covered up or explained away.

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