



March 11th, 2020

Covid-19 Outbreak

Coronavirus cases in Italy surpass 10,000 as country enters lockdown

The number of people infected by Coronavirus in Italy continues to skyrocket by the day, affecting every region of the country and causing 631 deaths. The Italian government has responded with draconian measures in an attempt to stop the spread, initially placing travel restrictions and a ban on public gatherings on the most affected regions before expanding them to the whole country. Schools and universities have been closed until April, football matches cancelled, and workers told to work from home until further notice, whilst the government has announced fiscal measures worth €10bn to help struggling families and businesses.

[*La Repubblica*, March 10, 2020]

EU tries to retake control of coronavirus response

EU leaders have pledged to coordinate action in order to contain the virus and stabilise the economy in an extraordinary videoconference. The new measures include plans for a fast injection of €7.5bn, which will rise to €25bn, in assistance to health care systems, small businesses and other hard-hit sectors of the economy. The EU will also waive fiscal rules and regulations so that individual countries are able to spend more to prop up their economies, whilst the European Central Bank is expected to act to protect liquidity in the block.

[*Politico*, March 11, 2020]

Coronavirus pandemic risks tipping Europe into recession

Already struggling European economies face steep recessions unless the spread of coronavirus is halted, as Deutsche Bank estimates euro-area GDP growth could fall by 4% in the second quarter. The impact was already being seen before the virus reached Europe, as exports to China fell and manufacturers' supply chains were affected. The drastic reduction in tourism to affected areas and quarantining of large segments of the population is expected to worsen the impact significantly as economic activity slows down, whilst any rebound is predicated on states getting the outbreak back under control.

[*The Economist*, March 5, 2020]

Airlines cancel thousands of flights

A slump in demand for air travel has led to thousands of flight cancellations as airlines attempt to mitigate the impact of coronavirus. British Airways, Ryanair and Easyjet have all announced the cancelling of all flights to and from Italy, whilst airlines across the world reduce their number of flights significantly and make cuts to staff numbers. Struggling regional airline Flybe has already declared bankruptcy, and the long-term effects on the wider industry will largely be determined by how long the virus continues to spread.

[*BBC News*, March 10, 2020]

Foreign Affairs

EUROPE – US

EU-US take slow, small steps towards "mini" trade deal

European Trade Commissioner Phil Hogan will travel to Washington this month with the hope of reaching a "mini deal" with the US which has threatened to impose car tariffs on the EU if no trade accord is reached. Hogan, who was promoted from the role of EU farm chief in November, has made resetting strained EU-US economic relations a top priority. His trip will also include a speech at Georgetown University where he will discuss ideas to reform the much-beleaguered World Trade Organisation.

[*Reuters*, March 6, 2020]

EUROPE – RUSSIA

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskiy gives Russia one year to strike peace deal

Negotiations between Ukraine and Russia regarding a lasting peace agreement between the two sides should not drag on indefinitely, according to Ukrainian President Zelenskiy. The two sides have signed various agreements including the Minsk agreement five years ago and prisoner swaps more recently, but have yet to sign an agreement ending the conflict. President Zelenskiy also called on Angela Merkel and Emmanuel Macron, the other two leaders in the "Normandy four" to put more pressure on Putin, rather than attempt to repair relations with Moscow.

[*The Guardian*, March 6, 2020]

EUROPE – MIDDLE EAST

EU welcomes Syria ceasefire but urges cautious

The EU has welcomed the Syrian ceasefire deal reached between Russia and Turkey, stressing the need to achieve better relations with both of its vital neighbouring countries. The deal comes after Turkish forces clashed with Assad, backed by Russia, over the latter's offensive into the last rebel-held stronghold of Idlib. The EU hopes the ceasefire deal will reduce tensions on the Turkey-Greece border, given that Turkey's decision to declare its borders open was at least in part motivated by the escalating violence in Syria.

[*Politico*, March 5, 2020]

Turkey opens border with Greece to refugees

Turkey has lifted its border restriction to around 3.6 million refugees seeking to reach Europe, in a move designed to pressure the EU into supporting its military actions in Idlib. The move was met with consternation by Greece which has reacted by forcibly turning back thousands of migrants, leaving many in limbo between the two countries. European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen has pledged €700m in emergency assistance to Greece in addition to further resources from Frontex, the EU's border agency.

[*The Economist*, March 5, 2020]

EUROPE – ISRAEL

Israeli election result inconclusive as EU awaits formation of government

Israel's third election within 12 months has yet again failed to produce a conclusive majority for incumbent Prime Minister Netanyahu or his main challenger, former IDF chief of staff Benny Gantz. The EU is at odds with the current Israeli government over the recent US peace plan and the new High Representative Josep Borrell has until now put off visiting Israel on the premise that he is waiting for a new government to be formed after the elections.

[*Brussels Times*, March 3, 2020]

Israel forces all international travellers to self-isolate for two weeks

Israel has dramatically expanded travel restrictions into the country by requiring all travellers to self-isolate for at least two weeks, effectively suspending tourism into the country. The move comes after Israel had already barred entry to almost all non-residents coming from France, Germany, Spain, Austria, Switzerland, Andorra, San Marino and the Netherlands in addition to anyone who has been in any of those countries over the past 14 days. The move comes as the number of confirmed cases in Israel reached 76 whilst the outbreak in Europe continues to deteriorate.

[*Financial Times*, March 9, 2020]

Internal Affairs

EU POLITICS

EU budget summit fails to secure agreement

Disagreements on how to fill the €60bn-€75b funding gap created by Brexit has stalled progress in the EU's ongoing budget negotiations. The so-called frugal states—Sweden, the Netherlands, Denmark and Austria—have so far resisted the current proposals which they claim would leave them facing an unacceptable increase in their contributions, whilst poorer countries in central and eastern Europe are loath to see their regional aid funds cut.

[*Financial Times*, February 21, 2020]

First round of future EU-UK relations talks open in Brussels

Talks between the EU and the UK over the future relationship between the two actors have formally opened, with just nine months left in order to meet the UK's self-imposed deadline. The most contentious issues which will need to be thrashed out include regulatory alignment, access to British fisheries, financial-services regulation, data protection, and dispute settlement. The two sides have so far failed to find common ground on these issues which the political declaration in the withdrawal agreement had suggested should be agreed by the end of June.

[*The Economist*, March 5, 2020]

DOMESTIC POLITICS

Hanau commemorates victims of racist attack

German leaders gathered for a memorial service to honour the victims of the far-right attack which killed nine. Two shisha bars in the western German city of Hanau were targeted by a far-right terrorist in an attack against immigrant communities in the city. The perpetrator was subsequently found dead in his home alongside his mother where it is suspected he committed suicide. The incident comes amidst rising concern over far-right extremism in Germany and follows similar attacks in Rot am See and Halle.

[*Deutsche Welle*, March 04, 2020]

Igor Matovič wins Slovakia elections

The Ordinary People and Independent Personalities (OLaNO) and its leader Matovič's electoral win has ended almost twelve years of rule by Smer in Slovakia. OLaNO, a vaguely centre-right outfit that vows to clean up politics, won 25% of the popular vote, 6% above Smer, and will now seek to form a coalition with smaller parties. OLaNO's electoral message to fight corruption resonated in a country where the murder of a journalist, Jan Kuciak, in 2018 probing links between politicians, oligarchs and organised crime led to widespread protests that forced the resignation of the Smer prime minister Robert Fico.

[*The Economist*, March 5, 2020]

Ireland coalition talks continue following inconclusive election

Ireland's February's election result has left all three of Ireland's major parties—Fianna Fáil, Sinn Féin, Fine Gael—far short of a majority in parliament, to the extent that even a coalition between two of them would not have enough seats to command a majority in parliament. The surge of the left-wing Sinn Féin, formerly the political wing of the IRA, has complicated coalition talks significantly as many parties refuse to go into government with it over its links to terrorism. The failure of each party to secure enough backing for a majority in parliament raises the possibility of a return to the polls later in the year.

[*BBC News*, March 5, 2020]

JEWISH COMMUNITIES

Belgium carnival caricatures Orthodox Jews as insects

The Belgium city of Aalst has defended its overtly antisemitic caricature of Jews as "just fun". The costumes depict Orthodox Jewish men wearing huge fur hats, long fake noses and insect costumes. The city's carnival had already been dropped from Unesco's cultural heritage list last December following similar antisemitic incidents in previous years, and was heavily criticised by Israel, Jewish groups and Belgium's Jewish Prime Minister Sophie Wilmès.

[*BBC News*, February 24, 2020]

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