

Brexit in the time of Covid-19

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Brexit in the time of Covid-19 is a peculiar phenomenon. Everybody knows it's, at least for now, no longer the most important game in town, yet it's still there, lurking in the background, insinuating its malign presence into even the most desperate of situations and sapping the effectiveness and unity of a common response.

To be clear, I'm still talking about Brexit, not the virus itself.

It's early days yet, things are bound to get far worse on the Corona front, we're being told, but Brexit has already lived up to its reputation for divisiveness, even in this crisis. The clearest example was Donald Trump's overtly political decision to ban flights from Schengen countries but not from the UK and Ireland.

That lasted all of a week and as of today, at least for the US, the Anglosphere is once again divided and the isles off Europe's Western coast remain firmly on the other side of the Atlantic.

Geography has won out, even in this modern era of connectedness, an ominous warning to Brexiteers who are still pretending that proximity hardly matters. Maybe it's helpful for them to imagine relations between nations in terms of the new social distancing rules: The virus occurs most commonly in family clusters, among those that are in close contact, so you also distance in family clusters.

Keeping an ocean between you and one part of a family makes no sense if you still meet face to face with other family members. Here's the bad news, also called reality, for Brexiteers: Europe is in close contact, like a family.

Of course the rest of Europe shouldn't crow over such British setbacks as being included in the US travel ban; the crisis affects us

all and no country has been effective in coming to grips with it and neither has the EU as an institution.

While we should avoid political point scoring with a nasty health crisis, that's exactly what Nigel Farage did, who whooped with delight at the initial Trump announcement. "The UK is now treated as an independent country," he tweeted in a reaction. Well, be careful of what you wish for, some others who have looked at the Corona crisis through a Brexit lens, might say.

Regulations spring to mind. Even as the world was cranking up its response to the virus, this UK government thought it necessary to assert the country's so-called independence by announcing its intention to withdraw from the EU's airline safety regulation authority, against all the advice from industry and experts.

Let's skip the commendable optimism implied in the announcement that assumes there will still be an airline industry post-Corona. It was at least badly timed as it coincided with a rumble of opinions that pointed at the expected delays the UK was going to have in accessing a working Corona vaccine because of its withdrawal from the European Medicines Agency.

While there are all kinds of solutions to this, none seem to be in line with the government's interpretation of what it means to be an "independent country". Being outside the common European procurement system that can be activated in times of crisis, the UK could well also end up paying more for treatments and vaccines once these become available.

This is not to say that the EU response has been exemplary, far from it. A coordinated response should have been able to prevent the WHO now calling Europe the centre of the pandemic.

Only now are most European countries, except the UK falling into line with each other, taking similar measures, also to avoid the problems moving from one country to the other, as was the case when bars and restaurants were closed in Belgium but not in the Netherlands and revellers would simply step across the border to avoid social distancing.

A situation that still exists at the UK's only land border, with Ireland. But the UK has already gone to great lengths in this Brexit process to show that it doesn't care about the Irish, whether North or South of the border.

One take-away from the Covid-19 crisis is that it's easier for a highly centralised system, such as China's, to mobilise enough resources and implement and coordinate nationwide measures that will bring down the rate of infection. On the other hand, it's very likely that China's authoritarian system that underpins its centralised rule is responsible for having allowed the virus to take hold in the population in the first place by ignoring and suppressing initial reports of its emergence.

Without being like China, the best hope of managing this virus is coordination and cooperation, particularly with your close neighbours and partners. The same goes for most other challenges, from climate change to mass migration.

At the same time, this crisis shows that when needed, even individual members of the EU can take measures, such as closing borders, suspending flights and closing down regions, that go to the core of sovereignty, of being an "independent country".

It shows both that Brexit was not necessary and that it is most likely counterproductive.