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New Atlanticist November 9, 2021

Pfizer's Albert Bourla on how the pandemic ends

By Atlantic Council



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Online Event | Tue, November 9, 2021 • 9:00 am ET

A conversation with Pfizer Chairman and Chief Executive Officer Albert Bourla

AN #ACFRONTPAGE EVENT – Albert Bourla, Chairman and Chief Executive Officer of Pfizer, discusses the state of the pandemic and the remaining challenges ahead, vaccine development, as well as his personal story.

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Pfizer Chairman and CEO Albert Bourla joined the Atlantic Council to talk about his collaboration with BioNTech on the COVID-19 vaccine, his take on misinformation and politics in medicine, and his personal story. He, along with BioNTech co-founders **Uğur Şahin and Özlem Türeci**, will receive the Atlantic Council's **Distinguished Business Leadership Award** on Wednesday, November 10. Below, edited for length and clarity, is Bourla's conversation with Frederick Kempe, president and CEO of the Atlantic Council.

FREDERICK KEMPE: You're a Greek-born American. You've called yourself a Greek by birth and American by choice, the son of Holocaust survivors from Thessaloniki, Greece. As I understand it, there were fifty thousand Greek Jews before World War II in Thessaloniki and only two thousand survived, and you've written this upbringing has shaped you. I wonder if you could talk about what it is your parents went through in their childhood and how these origins and how this history has shaped who you are today.

ALBERT BOURLA: You are right. From fifty thousand Jews, only two thousand survived, that's a 96 percent extermination in the city of Thessaloniki in Greece, and among those two thousand were my father and mother. They met after the Holocaust. They decided to build a life together, and then they had me and my [sister]. And my parents talked to us a lot about their experiences, and that's not very common because a lot of Holocaust survivors avoided speaking to their kids about their experiences because it was very painful to remember those stories.

But our parents did, and the thing that they always did was that they never spoke to us about hate. They never spoke to us about revenge. They never [made us think] that we must pay back those that did that to us or to our family. Not at all. On the contrary, it was always a celebration of life. They were telling their stories, and then the moral of the stories was that nothing is impossible. We almost died and we survived, and look what we have now... our family.

I think this is what stamped my personality from the early days, this optimism, and this belief that it's never the end before it is really the end, and you can always do things to change your fate, and I'm grateful to them for that.

FREDERICK KEMPE: You also said that your Jewish upbringing in Greece, coming from a small country on the world stage, being of a religious minority from the country, taught you to fight for what you believe is right and never to give up. And were there elements of that in the vaccine fight as well?

ALBERT BOURLA: I believe so because the personality of someone is really built in the early days of his life, and then it follows in whatever they do. [We], living as a very, very small minority in Greece, we had to learn how to be able to thrive while we're very, very different than everybody else. And the same is as a Greek coming to America with a very thick accent. Trying to be able to prove yourself also requires that you fight for what you believe is right.

So that also followed me all the way to the COVID-19 vaccine. But the fundamental is that what really helped us and BioNTech and the teams that they worked very hard to develop in record time, such a success, were two things: One was that we really thought big. These teams really thought big. They didn't try to do the eight years, seven years of development. They tried to do the eight years [in] eight months of development.

And the second was that there was a very deep, instilled sense of purpose. We knew that what we were doing was not going to affect our lives. It's not going to affect our company's future. It's going to affect the lives of the future of the world. That gives you a tremendous drive and this is what everyone on this team, in Pfizer and in BioNTech, did during these eight marvelous months.

FREDERICK KEMPE: We all have particularly formative experiences in our lives. Could you share with us any particularly formative experience that you had before the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic?

ALBERT BOURLA: You know, I am a veterinarian by educational background, and after I graduated from the veterinary school... I did a PhD in the biotechnology of reproduction. My ambition was to have an academic career and I was really geared towards that... Pfizer Greece was recruiting at that time, and they reached out to me to offer me a very good position in their animal health group, which in the beginning I was very reluctant to take.

But eventually, they convinced me to do it and it was always my idea that for me, it would be kind of a sabbatical. I will go to make a small break in the industry and then come back to what I really love doing, which was teaching and researching in academia.

But I didn't take into consideration that months after I joined Pfizer, I fell in love with the company and fell in love with what they are doing. I fell in love with the private sector because I saw how dynamic it is and how you can make a difference over there. I've stayed twenty-eight, so far, twenty-eight years with the company, and I stayed three of them in Greece. The other twenty-five years I spent internationally.

The job was in Athens, so to join Pfizer I did the first relocation, which I found very difficult to do, from Thessaloniki to Athens. I followed other eight relocations. Together with my wife, we lived in different cities in five different countries. That was an extremely interesting experience. In most of them our kids had to follow because they were born.

That's, I think, is the biggest gift I gave them, the fact that they were exposed to different cultures, to different civilizations, to understand that diversity is very important and to understand that the world is not how it looks in New York or in Texas or in Atlanta. The world is very different in every single corner of this Earth. I think that was very, very important.

And here we are. Everything can be done. A Greek from humble beginnings made it all the way to the top. Actually, when our board called me into the boardroom to announce to me that they elected me as the CEO, the comment that I made was “Only in America,” because, really, this is the place that you can really make it to the top irrelevant [of] what are your beginnings.

FREDERICK KEMPE: You’ve seen, in these twenty-seven, twenty-eight years at Pfizer, the company evolve. You’ve seen the science evolve. What were the most crucial factors that both prepared the science and Pfizer for this moment in history and this vaccine development?

ALBERT BOURLA: Yes. I think Pfizer had tremendous success in the 1990s and the beginning of 2000s with science, but then it was a period that was not that productive. When my predecessor took over approximately twelve years ago [at the end of] 2010 and beginning of 2011, he found a company that needed really to make serious changes in the way that research and development is conducted, and they did.

He drove significant changes. We focused our research. Before, we were spread thin in thirteen different therapeutic areas and, you know, when you are spread thin in thirteen therapeutic areas, usually you’re not very good in any. You are mediocre in all. We reduced that to six therapeutic areas, and we were able to become the best in each one of them.

We consolidated our research centers. We moved our research centers to places where science is happening. We did tremendous changes in the way that research and development was working, all of that under my predecessor. When I took over in 2019, I found an excellent infrastructure so that I could make radical changes to the company. It is because of the work of my predecessor that I did all of that. And I focused the company on the science with diversity, or to use a better word, we found way better homes for two of our three businesses and with that we created significant improvements in the research-and-development budget.

We increased the research-and-development budget dramatically. We increased dramatically the digital budget and also, we reduced the administrative budget in the company. All of that, basically, I took a serious bet in the science of the company and this I did, as I said, because I truly felt that we are at this time at the same point.

So all of that happened in 2019. We brought a very new culture that can foster innovation. We increased budgets. We brought digitally the way that we do discovery and development. When COVID-19 happened in 2020, I think a lot of this had advanced and we were able to utilize a lot of that plus a very significant shift in our culture to be able to do things that seemed to be impossible.

And this is exactly what happened. It was not luck. We were preparing for two years, and we found ourselves to be at the right set of mind, so that we could develop the breakthrough in a record period of time.

FREDERICK KEMPE: Give us a little bit of a feeling of when you saw that COVID-19 was going to be the challenge that it became and what did you move to take it on? And if I’m not mistaken, mRNA vaccines had never been used for clinical use before. I’d love for you to talk about what you spotted early on, how you moved things, but then the role that mRNA plays during this period of time.

ALBERT BOURLA: Yes. In January, [our entire discipline was] thinking that COVID-19 is an issue that mainly concerns China, and we were very concerned because of that, because we have significant operations in China. We had fifteen

thousand people at that time, we had four manufacturing sites, and we were worried about our people and how they would be able to maintain their jobs.

So we set up a task force that was really following very closely what was happening in China and we were trying to make sure that we do the right things. In February, it started becoming clear to me that this might go outside of China, and then in the second half of February, I was in Europe to attend an Economic Forum meeting and I went there and then two days before, and then the forum was canceled because of COVID-19. That was, for me, an important alarm went off. I realized that things are serious.

That was the first time that a conference like that was canceled. I took a plane [back], and on the plane, I wrote down the priorities that I felt that a company like ours should have, and the first was that we need to make sure that we protect the safety of our people. The second was we need to make sure that we maintain the supply of critical medicines to people. I had seen in China that hospitals were overwhelmed, and we are one of the biggest suppliers of hospital products in the world.

So I was thinking how we could maintain a surge in demand that could be 20, 30, 40, or 50 percent higher for some products than we had before, while our plants had to operate under COVID-19 restrictions. Very challenging. I asked that that would be a number two priority. And then number three was that we need to develop a vaccine and a treatment.

And we came back, and I asked our team to develop a vaccine, then bring me plans. They brought me plans that they wanted to use the mRNA technology. I was puzzled when they told me. I was very familiar with mRNA technology because we had hired people back in 2015 [who] specialized in mRNA.

But the most pivotal thing that we did was we had an agreement with BioNTech, a collaboration agreement, that was signed in 2018 to develop a flu vaccine by using this technology. I knew that there was not a single product mRNA out there. I challenged my team and I [asked] them, are you sure that you want to go with mRNA? [I told] them that if that's going to be successful, that will be not just the first COVID-19 vaccine, that will be the first vaccine ever with mRNA. And that this work that they were doing with BioNTech, the last almost two years, 2018 and 2019, was giving them a high level of comfort that the technology is mature and that, more importantly, the partner is the right one.

So in this meeting they convinced me to take that risk and go with mRNA. But then I said I need to talk to their CEO, and I called Uğur and that was the first time that we spoke on the phone. It was, I think, love at first sight and it was the beginning of a tremendous relationship, collaboration, between the two companies and me and him, particularly, in person. Later, I met also Özlem, his wonderful wife, who is a pivotal member of the research team over there. And I never ever regretted that we made this highly risky decision and I'm happy that we did.

FREDERICK KEMPE: Can you explain to us how the mRNA works differently and why was it ready at this point if it hadn't been ready for clinical use before?

ALBERT BOURLA: Yeah. Most of the vaccines, the principle is that you're introducing a part of the virus, let's say, into your body so that your body will create antibodies. It will recognize the virus as an enemy and will create antibodies.

Now, you put a piece of the virus so that you will not get the disease, or you put the dead virus, or you put the modified virus, or there are new technologies, but this is the fundamental [part of most vaccines], that you're putting a piece of the virus so that your body will develop an immune response. When the real virus comes your body is ready with antibodies so you can win easily the battle, or easier the battle.

The mRNA technology is trying to reverse this challenge. What they are doing, instead of introducing, let's say, a piece of the virus... you are sending a message to yourself through a messenger RNA so that your cells will produce a similar protein like the protein of the virus.

Once you do that, then your body will recognize this protein that something is not normal that it should be here so it will develop antibodies against this protein, and then you will be protected when the real virus comes.

So as you can see now, you don't even put a piece of the virus. You don't put any foreign protein in you. You are putting a very small piece, a message, of RNA that will stay a few days in your body and then [disappear]. But those will send the signal to yourself to produce this protein. It is a very revolutionary idea that really was discovered twenty years ago, and it was studied for all these two decades with the last five years way more intensively, and BioNTech was one of the pioneers in doing these studies. Moderna was another one, and eventually, the first success that we're able to do was this product that we developed jointly with BioNTech, the COVID-19 vaccine.

FREDERICK KEMPE: What other doors might this mRNA vaccine open for you and for science in general?

ALBERT BOURLA: I think cancer was the first thing that we try to tackle with the mRNA technology, and I know that BioNTech worked very intensively to do that. The idea is that you are training your body to attack the proteins of your tumors. You identify the tumor and then you send a message through the messenger RNA to yourself, start attacking this tumor. It is a very big field that is studied very intensively right now.

Another field is the field of infectious diseases. We saw the first vaccine ever, which was the COVID-19 vaccine, with mRNA technology. Ourselves, we are working on a flu vaccine, as I said, since 2018, and that could be next-generation flu vaccines with mRNA. But also we are working on multiple other targets, creating vaccines for other infectious diseases.

There is a third application, which is for people that they are born with a mistake in their DNA code, and there are a lot of rare diseases; they are happening to people because somewhere in one gene there is one small mistake in their DNA, and those people, they have to live without until the end of their lives and many times their life doesn't last very long because of this mistake in their genes.

There are a lot of technologies that are trying to use gene editing, so that they are trying to use the same technology to be able to change, or repair, the mistake of your DNA so that you can cure, basically, those people.

These are just three of the very hot cutting-edge technological fronts that right now we are working on.

FREDERICK KEMPE: And what's most promising among those? Are we closer now to something regarding cancer and mRNA? Or where do you see those three the most promise over the short to medium term?

ALBERT BOURLA: I hope so. I hope so. We don't have success yet over there as we didn't have a success in vaccines before COVID-19. I hope so. But which one is the most promising? I would say that [for] infectious diseases, now we have a very good proof of concept that this works to attack foreign invaders, viruses, or other microbials. I think that's the most likely to bring fruits faster.

FREDERICK KEMPE: So now let's talk about the period of time from March 20, 2020, to today. It must have just been an incredible moment of intensity for you. But as you went through this period, what has struck you most positively and negatively? What do you feel that you've learned through this very, very intensive period, which by the way, is still ongoing?

ALBERT BOURLA: I would say two things. The first one, it is, clearly, the one that stands out for me. It is that when it comes to leadership, people don't know what they can and cannot do and, if anything, they have a severe tendency to underestimate what they can achieve. And if people are given the resources and they are given a very big goal, if you force them to think big, they will surprise you with what type of solutions to any single problem they will bring.

So, for me, that was a leadership lesson that was very important, and I will never forget. On the leadership again, if there is something that I regret, for example, you know, we went through a lot of pressure, and I had to put a lot of

pressure [on] my people. I don't regret that I did that because I know that without that, we wouldn't be here, and I know that my people don't mind that I put a lot of pressure [on] them because they knew that this is what was needed.

But at certain times, it's not that I put pressure, I lost my temper, and that I regret. The lesson for me is that the leader needs to do whatever he or she can not to come in a position that will stress the people. You can put a lot of pressure, but you should never lose your temper and make people feel unhappy and uncomfortable. So that's another good lesson that I learned, and I try to do less of it, let's say.

FREDERICK KEMPE: Obviously, you're not a politician. You weren't elected as a politician. But you've had to deal with a lot of politics in the last eighteen months. What have you learned about geopolitics and major-power politics? What have you learned about domestic politics? You've been through two quite different American presidents. You've also learned a little bit about fake news during this period of time as well. So talk to me about what you've learned about geopolitics, domestic politics, and fake news.

ALBERT BOURLA: Well, clearly, it was a crash course for me, and I think that I learned enough to have a PhD in political sciences right now but, unfortunately, the hard way. I tried to protect the company from being involved in the politics. In the United States, it was impossible to do that because there was so much animation and polarization, and... COVID-19 was at the epicenter of the debate. The development of a vaccine became the essence of the debate, which it shouldn't be. It shouldn't be discussed in political terms. Only scientists should have to discuss it.

Every day we tried to navigate the political mindset and the way that I saw it was that I had to create pressure [to] our people but also, I had to protect our people from internal bureaucracy, from external bureaucracy, and give them the resources so that they can work.

I had, somehow, to be the seal that will absorb the pressure, the political pressures, rather than having the pressures going all the way down to our people. They should feel that they have to worry only about the lab and their patients. And I tried to do that, and it was not always easy...

The other thing that I learned, because that gave me the opportunity to speak with a lot of leaders... You realize that they are human beings. You realize that they are people that have the same worry about their people, that they try to do the best for their country, and when you interact a lot with them you realize, also, they have family, and they have kids, and they have their own concerns.

It was a very humbling experience to be able to do that and, literally, meet families of many leaders in the world because, you know, we had calls evenings and nights trying to find solutions to their problems, and that was also a very humbling experience.

FREDERICK KEMPE: And you've shared a little bit in the past about direct phone calls from the president of the United States, direct communication. How do you in a position like your own deal with that? Because, obviously, there's a lot of pressure on them as well, as you said, as human beings.

ALBERT BOURLA: Yes. At the time, it was President Trump, and I had met President Trump before the pandemic and we had discussed... health policy, mainly. But, of course, the pandemic and the vaccine were very high on his agenda. He would reach out to me to ask about how we are doing and if there's anything he can do to help us accelerate, et cetera, et cetera, which I told him that there is nothing.

We [were] moving full speed anyway ourselves and I just [needed] to let my people work without worrying about politics, and eventually we did it. We brought it very early. I know President Trump [would have liked] to see it before the elections. It came after the elections. It has nothing to do with politics. That was the speed of science.

FREDERICK KEMPE: Tomorrow evening when you receive the award, before you receive yours President of the European Commission Ursula von der Leyen will receive our Distinguished International Leadership Award, but she'll also introduce you for your award. So that shows the sort of respect that can be shared between a political leader and a business leader.

ALBERT BOURLA: Well, I can tell you that President von der Leyen [is] one of the most knowledgeable leaders. She knew details about the disease, and she knew details about the technology, and I was very impressed. A lot of our discussions were going really, really to the bottom of what is happening and what would be the best way to address them. And because there were, again... so much stress that creates a bonding experience for both leaders, me from a small company, her the president of a big company, Pfizer, but compared to what she is doing, the president of European Commission, clearly, she has way bigger responsibilities. But that created a bonding with her as well...

FREDERICK KEMPE: There was some fake news during this period of time about the vaccines, you know, all sorts of conspiracy theories. How did you deal with that and how did you navigate that and where do you feel the primary source of this sort of fake news was? How damaging was this to us?

ALBERT BOURLA: I'm afraid it [caused] quite a lot of damage and particularly with us, we were targeted by a lot of, let's say, dark organizations that you don't really know [who owns them]. You suspect that there are some countries behind. We were getting a lot of briefings from CIA, from FBI, about cyberattacks that may happen to us, but also about the spread of misinformation.

You know, there are two groups of people: There are the people that they are vaccinated. There are people that are skeptical about the vaccination, and both of them are afraid. Those that are getting the vaccine, they are afraid of the disease, and they believe that because people are not getting vaccinated, they are increasing the risk to them. They are increasing the exposure. So they are mad with them that they don't get the vaccine. Those that don't get the vaccine, they're afraid of the vaccine and they are mad with the people that are pressing them to get it.

Those I understand. They are very good people. They are decent people. But they had a fear, and I understand it, and they don't want to take chances. But there is a very small part of professionals [who] circulate, on purpose, misinformation so that they will mislead those that they have concerns [with the vaccine]. Those people are criminals. They're not bad people. They are criminals because they literally cost millions of lives.

FREDERICK KEMPE: You've also come to see close up the inequities in the global health care system, which also has influence on recovering from COVID-19. Have you learned anything during this period of time about whether and how one can overcome them and how did you have to work within them to navigate this period?

ALBERT BOURLA: Oh. That was a very, very big issue from day one for me, and I realized that if we have this polarization within the country, for example, I could only imagine what will be between countries when the vaccine would become available if we don't have available for all.

So to make sure that the vaccine is available for all, there were two things that we had to do. The first was to have a price that would not become an obstacle to any country, and that was easy to resolve. We set up a price, that it is the cost of a takeaway meal in the developed world. But when we are moving to middle-income countries, not in the high, we charge half of this price almost. And when we went to the low-income countries, we gave them a... price at cost. So that was easy.

Then the second thing that we needed to have it is we need to have enough vaccines for all. It is clear that when you start from scratch, in the first month you will have fewer doses than the month after. We went to all the countries, and we asked to place orders, and I saw the orders that were coming and most of them were coming from high-income countries.

The European Union placed orders. The United States placed orders. The United Kingdom placed orders. Japan placed orders. Small and, let's say, low- and middle-income countries, they weren't placing orders. I sent letters into heads of states of these countries urging them to change their position and place orders because the quantities will be allocated. They didn't do it, most of them, and they didn't do it because they placed orders either with other vaccines from China, from Russia, some other solution, maybe from AstraZeneca.

When eventually our vaccine became very successful and we started producing enough quantities and maybe some others that have problems to deliver the quantities that they promised, then they all came back to us, and they asked that we want those. The problem was that in the first few months the doses were already allocated to countries that placed orders. I couldn't just tell them I'm not giving it to you anymore.

So the solution was to build more so that everybody can get it, and this is where we invested dramatically, and from 1.3 billion doses that we were expecting to produce towards the end of 2020, in 2021 pretty soon in the first quarter, we raised that to three billion instead of 1.3 billion.

I'm very happy to tell you that by the end of this year, which is in one month and a half, we will have produced three billion doses, and from there... approximately 40 percent, 1.2 billion [doses]... will go to low- and middle-income countries and in the quarters that follow I think everybody will have enough doses because we are producing four billion for next year and just from one company that will be enough for, basically, everyone who wants can have access.

FREDERICK KEMPE: And part of this was an agreement with, I believe, the Biden administration and the US government, in which you provided at cost, and they are providing to certain countries at no cost. Is that right?

ALBERT BOURLA: It's absolutely right. This is the biggest agreement that we made with them. It is one billion doses. The US government is buying those doses from us at cost and then they are giving those doses free of charge, completely free of charge, to other countries. They donate them.

The agreement with the US government is that they can give them to whoever they want as long as they belong to the list of the ninety-two, approximately, poorest countries in the world. They cannot give it to middle-income countries. They need to give them for free to the poorest countries of the world and this is what they want to do, and this is what they are doing. No strings attached from anything that I know, and I can see. They are just giving the doses without asking anything in return.

FREDERICK KEMPE: Where do we stand today? Masks, jabs, testing kits—are these going to become a more permanent part of our lives, or is there an end to what we're going through as we see different variants rise up here and there and new need for a response?

ALBERT BOURLA: No, I believe we will see an end. I think we believe that life will go back to the way that we knew before. Of course, there will be changes because of things we learn. I think we'll be changing the way that people work now that we know that this works that well.

But I think we will reach the normal waves of social life that you can go to the cinema, that you can go to restaurants, that we don't have to wear a mask. That will end. To do that, we need to vaccinate with a full series of doses the vast majority of the people, and if we do that, we will have herd immunity and then we will reduce the virus all over the world.

The only thing that stands between the new way of life and the current way of life, frankly, is the hesitancy to get vaccinated, the people that are afraid to get the vaccines, and they create issues not only for them. Unfortunately, they are going to affect the lives of others and, frankly, the lives of the people that they love the most because they are putting at risk the people that they hug, they kiss, [and] they socialize with.

For God's sake, it is such a big mistake and it was such a big disservice to society to politicize something like that, to become a political statement if you want to mask or not. If you were, you're a Democrat. If you're not, you are a hardcore Republican. That's ridiculous. It should not be like that, and it was a very bad service to humanity.

FREDERICK KEMPE: And is there going to be an annual vaccine for COVID-19? Is a booster shot enough right now? Can you see into the future well enough to tell us what you think that looks like?

ALBERT BOURLA: I think the booster shot, the third dose, is the one that gives very, very high level of protection, higher than the originally achieved levels of protection, which was 95 percent with the two doses. The question is how long will it last? We know that we saw a waning of immunity six months after the second dose. We need to follow up for six, seven, eight, nine months after the booster dose.

If I can take a prediction, because we have seen these type of vaccination curves multiple times and the immunogenicity curves, it looks like that it will last for a year. It looks like there is a chance that this will become an annual revaccination. However, I have been surprised many times in my life with things that in science, we expect things, and they don't come exactly like that. We need to wait and see. But the likely scenario is annual revaccination.

FREDERICK KEMPE: What keeps you up at night and then what gives you the most hope, looking into the future?

ALBERT BOURLA: The future of the life-science sector is brilliant. There is going to be a huge need for good medicines. People are getting older, and not only they live longer but this means that new diseases that were not important before start emerging. And also, people are moving from rural places to urban places. A hundred fifty million people in the world are moving to cities every year.

This means in health care, from zero access almost to medicines to access to medicines. The demand will be huge. I think science is at the cusp to be able to provide solutions for this. The offer also will be there. And this is happening because biology, combined with digital technologies, right now is unlocking tremendous, tremendous opportunities for new medical treatment.

All of that, I think, is going to be very good. Clearly, there will be an issue, which is the cost, and I think that's the biggest issue that we are going to face. It is not the cost of medicines. It is the cost to society of people living longer, which means more health care costs, more pensions, more everything.

Medicines will be part of the solution, not part of the problem. The medicines, the good medicines, will reduce hospitalizations, will reduce other medical interventions, and, as a result, will bring savings to the health care system rather than an additional cost and, of course, will make the lives of humans longer and better, and I'm very optimistic that this will happen in the next decades.

FREDERICK KEMPE: Talk about [your collaboration with BioNTech] and why this one has worked. Why is it you've been able to produce something of quite historic nature when many corporate collaborations among CEOs and founders of companies don't work in quite the same way?

ALBERT BOURLA: I think it was because both companies had developed very similar cultures. They were both really very purpose-driven... One was very big, the other was very small compared to the big one. The leaders [behind the vaccine]: One was a Turkish Muslim that immigrated to Germany. The other one was a Greek Jew that immigrated to the United States. From a first glance, we could be the exact opposite.

But I felt the thing that connected us was that we had a common purpose. The first thing that we discussed with Uğur was... the principles under which we are going to operate, and we said, it doesn't matter who does what. [Nothing else] matters [other] than bringing the vaccine, as our number-one priority...

And, if anything, I think the fact that we have both a little bit of Mediterranean heritage created [an] even stronger bond and trust... The fact that we had such a big trust in one another cascaded down and our teams trusted each other too, and that was why this thing happened so well.

Watch the full event



Further reading



Mon, Nov 8, 2021

If the pandemic hit a year earlier, 'we might not have been in the position to respond this fast,' say BioNTech co-founders. Here's why.

New Atlanticist By Atlantic Council

BioNTech co-founders Uğur Şahin and Özlem Türeci joined the Atlantic Council to talk about their pursuit to develop mRNA vaccines, including the COVID-19 vaccine, and how they work on common passions as a couple.

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Thu, Oct 28, 2021

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AfricaSource By Hippolyte Fofack

If the G20 enhances the impact of IMF Special Drawing Rights by sending them on to low-income countries, it could add up to a synchronized global recovery.

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Wed, Sep 22, 2021

Chilean President Sebastián Piñera: COVID-19 solidarity offers hope for tackling climate change

New Atlanticist By Nick Fouriezos

The Chilean leader joined other political, business, and health leaders at the annual conference hosted by the Atlantic Council's Adrienne Arsht Latin America Center alongside the United Nations General Assembly.

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Related Experts: **Frederick Kempe**

Image: Pfizer CEO Albert Bourla talks during a press conference with European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen after a visit to oversee the production of the Pfizer-BioNtech COVID-19 vaccine at the factory of US pharmaceutical company Pfizer in Puurs, Belgium on April 23, 2021. Photo via John Thys/REUTERS.