

COVID-19: IMPLICATIONS AT NATIONAL AND GLOBAL LEVELS**Dragan Trivan**³⁷

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Abstract: The COVID-19 pandemic is in its third year and it has affected all continents, causing the biggest international crisis after the Second World War. Although the global vaccination process began in the beginning of 2021, continuous mutations and the emergence of new coronavirus strains have made it impossible to put the pandemic under control, leading to a wave of massive spread of the disease across the planet and causing the death of several millions of people. The very present anti-vaccine propaganda and the expressed resistance to vaccination have made the vaccination process of the population in many countries much slower and with less coverage than expected. Authorities in many countries have resorted to radical measures in the past period, including closing borders, rigorous surveillance, long-lasting and discriminatory restrictions on freedom of movement and assembly. The circumstances of the pandemic outbreak are not much clearer today than they were in the beginning, which is in favour of the widespread conspiracy theories, being promoted through social networks and internet portals. Economic consequences of the coronavirus are primarily linked to a significant decline in global GDP, reduced investment and the range of international trade, the rise in unemployment, the rise of fiscal and public debts, especially during the first year of the pandemic. At the same time, the most powerful corporations, primarily in the pharmaceutical industry, reached the point of making extra profits. The already existing inequalities in healthcare and economic positions within national countries, as well as the differences among countries and regions, increased during the COVID-19 pandemic. Despite the general trend of increasing state aid and subsidies, the consequence of the coronavirus affected more vulnerable social groups much more severely. With general negative consequences in the medium term, the pandemic could encourage the acceleration of technological innovations, further changes on the labour market and development of artificial intelligence in the long run. The world will not be the same in any case after the coronavirus, and along with other, things will change towards creating a safer society, with a higher level of healthcare and safety cultures.

Keywords: COVID-19 pandemic, conspiracy theories, vaccination, restrictive measures, consequences

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1. Discussions on the nature and origin of the COVID-19 virus

Ignoring the extreme claim that the coronavirus does not actually exist and that it is only a matter of manipulation aimed at establishing surveillance of the population, even after more than two years since the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, a generally accepted theory on the nature and origin of SARS-CoV-2 virus has not appeared (Bolsen et al., 2020: 575). In the meantime, different theories have occurred – starting from it being a virus that is not more deadly than the common flu, meaning that inappropriate and excessive measures of control, lockdowns and isolation have been imposed, and moving on to those claiming that it is an artificially produced virus that was accidentally released from a laboratory, or that it was deliberately allowed by the pharmaceutical mafia to circulate, and finally to a warning that it is just another type of a biological weapon.

The dominant thesis for now is that the outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic is related to the surroundings of city of Wuhan in south China, where SARS-CoV-2 virus was most likely transmitted from bats to humans through an indirect animal species (Singh, 2021: 518). In this regard, questions arose as to whether the Chinese authorities reacted promptly and adequately, and whether information was being covered in the initial phase, which in fact enabled the global spread of the virus. The possibility of accidental release of the coronavirus from one of the laboratories in Wuhan was also mentioned, considering that the Wuhan Institute of Virology is located there. This was followed by various conspiracy theories about the artificial origin of the virus designed as a Chinese biological weapon. A team of scientists sent to China after several months of negotiations by the World Health Organization concluded in late January 2021, based on insight into the incomplete and censored documentation and situation in the field, that the coronavirus most likely originated from a human being infected by some animal from a market in Wuhan, with an assessment that other possibilities of the pandemic origin are very small in reality (WHO Report, 2021: 118–120).

Scepticism was expressed in scientific circles in relation to the published results of the expert team investigation. In this regard, it was pointed out that the investigation, which occurred only after a year from the outbreak of the pandemic, was not independent or complete, because experts were constantly supervised during their stay in Wuhan. Due to the non-transparency and non-cooperation of the Chinese authorities, the assessment from the report that adequate safety protocols existed in that country was questioned, as was the claim that evidence of the virus originating from a laboratory were not found.

In May 2021, 18 renowned scientists from the United States unsuccessfully supported the continuation of a comprehensive international investigation into the origin of the COVID-19 pandemic. They pointed out in an open letter that there had not been sufficient evidence based on which it could be claimed reliably whether the coronavirus originated naturally or whether it was “leaked” from a laboratory (Bloom et al., 2021: 694). According to an assessment published in October 2021 by the Office of the Director of National Intelligence in USA, SARS-COV-2 is slightly more likely to be of natural origin than it being released into the environment after an incident in a laboratory, but it was certainly not designed as a biological weapon. (ODNI Assessment, 2021: 1). As time passes, there are increasing pessimistic estimates that the circumstances of the coronavirus pandemic outbreak would never be fully clarified.

2. The coronavirus pandemic and conspiracy theories

In the 1960s, an American historian Richard Hofstadter coined the expression “paranoid style”, describing the way of thinking shaped by “heated exaggeration, suspiciousness, and conspiratorial fantasy”. According to him, that style is one of the important features of the US politics and the public life of that country since its founding. Hofstadter also pointed out the international prevalence of this mentality, in which groups and individuals develop and offer intricate explanations and attribute external blame for the problems they face, often linking them to powerful entities and interests (usually of foreign origin) beyond their control (Hofstadter, 1964, 77–78). This author thought that “paranoid style” occurred on the whole spectrum of political ideology, distancing himself from the belief that certain religious traditions, social structures, national heritage, customs, historical catastrophes and frustrations can serve the release of such psychological energy in situations where it can be incorporated more easily into mass movements or political parties.

From its beginnings, the coronavirus pandemic has been the subject of politicization and various conspiracy theories, which have encouraged confusion within the public opinion and contributed to an atmosphere of insecurity and fear. Social networks have played a very important role in that (Lor et al., 2021).

The conspiracy theories surrounding the COVID-19 pandemic are essentially an updated version of a plot on conspiratorial action of a World Government or the New World Order, i.e. the globalist elites seeking to undermine the sovereignty and independence of free nations (Bieber, 2020). The joint conspiracy theory related to COVID-19 and 5G network that was popular in the beginning of the pandemic shows an illuminating example of this procedure in action. Namely, the unexpected and mysterious genesis of the virus, rapid cross-border spreading, extremely high contagiousness and a large number of deaths demanded a coordinated response from the governing systems and public health authorities, which stopped a significant part of social and economic activities on the national and regional levels. The long-lasting shock resulting from quarantine, lockdown and imposed social distancing led to international bodies responsible for managing epidemics being affected by conspiracy theories and exposed to suspicion. An additional impetus to these theories was the emergence of the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation as an entity linking the domains of global health initiatives, vaccines and 5G technology in discussions on pandemic management (Flaherty, 2022, 8–9).

According to current conspiracy scenarios, the global financial and political elite deliberately caused the COVID-19 pandemic in order for the disease to spread as much as possible. Along with the disease, they made vaccines, with the intention of distributing them at their own discretion once the population is sufficiently pacified. The vaccine would contain a microchip providing the hidden centres of power with monitoring and manipulation of the vaccinated and with further control at the individual level. Microchips are then activated and control is operationalized through electromagnetic waves generated by 5G network towers (Evstatieva, 2020).

Conspiracy theorists also point out the aim of hiding the activities of the globalist elite behind the authorities of the World Health Organization. They consider it indicative that the same behaviour is imposed on all countries, regardless of local experiences, knowledge

and cultural patterns, with national leaders sending almost identical messages, especially the ones that the people must get used to living with the coronavirus.

Expressed resistance to vaccination is an integral part of the conspiracy theories, although distrust in vaccines is not a contemporary phenomenon. The first anti-vaccine movement originated in the late 19th century in Leicester, England, when tens of thousands of people opposed the mandatory vaccination against smallpox, although it was the most common cause of death in Europe. The reasons provided by anti-vaxers were of a hygienic, religious and political nature. There was no organized anti-vaccination movement in Serbia until 2015, when the MMR vaccine was linked to autism, which resulted in an epidemic of measles – a disease that was virtually eradicated by immunization.

There are various reasons for the growing popularity of anti-vaccine attitudes – insufficient scientific and media literacy of the population, “betrayal trauma” that occurs when people or institutions we rely on undermine our trust, strengthening the ideology of individualism and promoting self-help culture, and various conspiracy theories (Pavlovic, 2022).

3. Anti-pandemic measures and human rights

According to the 2020 Freedom House Report, governments across the world have resorted to excessive surveillance as a response to the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic, discriminatory restrictions of freedom of the right of movement and assembly, arbitrary or violent enforcement of such restrictions by the police and parastatals. This document also points out that waves of false news and deceiving information, often deliberately generated by political authorities, have flooded the information networks of many countries, suppressing reliable data and endangering human lives. And a number of democratic countries have pursued clumsy or ill-conceived strategies, while dictators across the world, from Venezuela to Myanmar, have abused the crisis to end internal opposition and consolidate authoritarian power (Repucci and Slipowitz, 2020).

As an example of such action, the 2021 Freedom House Report states that the Communist Party of China, faced with the risk of its autocratic system of government being blamed for covering up the situation and worsening the pandemic, has actively worked to turn the danger into an opportunity to spread influence. This included providing medical devices to countries drastically affected by the virus, often presenting their sale as a donation, and organizing propaganda events with recipients of “aid” – economically dependent authoritarian and corrupt governments. Chinese authorities also intended to shift the blame for the outbreak of the pandemic to other countries, promoting its own undemocratic methods of controlling the infection (Repucci and Slipowitz, 2021, 4–5).

In a number of countries, such as Turkey, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain and Iran, after the outbreak of the pandemic, convicts were released from prison, but not political prisoners and human rights activists, who remained detained in dangerous and unhygienic conditions (Diamond, 2020). During the first year of the pandemic, elections were postponed in more than 70 countries, mainly explained that it was within the measures for the prevention of the spread of the disease. In certain countries, however, elections were postponed due to political calculations (Repucci and Slipowitz, 2020, 9–10).

The general global trend that after the onset of the coronavirus, freedom in all countries was collapsed. According to Freedom House, this fits into the context of the 15-year trend of the global decline of democracy and the renaissance of authoritarianism (Repucci and Slipowitz, 2021, 11–12). It is also characteristic that a couple of years before the pandemic, an explosive growth in the use of the digital media emerged (not always for positive purposes), strengthening transnational corruption and kleptocracy, and a growing decline in trust in democracy, with paradoxical expectations that such trends would lead to growth and stability (Csaky, 2021).

4. Specifics of the initial confrontation with the COVID-19 pandemic in the Western Balkans

After the announcement of the coronavirus pandemic in the spring of 2020, a state of emergency was imposed in Serbia on 15 March and it lasted until 6 May, from 25 March until 23 June in Albania, from 17 March until 29 March in the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina, and from 28 March until 21 May 2020 in the Republic of Srpska. The state of emergency in the self-proclaimed Kosovo entered into force on 16 March 2020.

During the period of lockdowns and imposed curfews, pressure on the media in the countries of the Western Balkans lead to the centralization of information, spreading of wrong information and cases of prosecution of dissidents, both professional journalists and citizens. At the same time, public media close to the authorities spread false news without any restraints. In some cases, authorities monopolized information so much that they tried to introduce laws that would declare all other information other than the official as illegal (Perkov et al., 2020, 9).

Albania was the first Balkan country to introduce restrictive measures for the control of the pandemic, including partial lockdown from 11 March 2020. Citizens of the country generally peacefully accepted the measures of lockdown and quarantine, as well as other restrictions on freedom and rights. It is characteristic that also in the period before that, Albania went through a turbulent period of crisis of institutions and political instability.

During the initial confusion, measures were being introduced and changed in a chaotic manner, without any announcements or clear explanations, including the duration of the curfew and the category of persons to whom such measure did not apply. The authorities also successively imposed new restrictive measures, such as the obligation to report by telephone or internet for the purpose of obtaining a temporary permit for movement for one household member for one hour per day (complete lockdown was introduced for senior citizens). The introduced measures were criticized both for the procedure of their adoption, as well as for disproportion and excessive restrictiveness. They were applied in such a manner for a relatively short period – until 24 March 2020, when the government, at the proposal of the Ministry of Defence, introduced a state of emergency in the country. Except for the subsequent acquisition of legitimacy, none of the introduced measures was changed (Dyrmishi, 2020, p. 6).

The pandemic did not significantly affect Albania's relations with other countries. This country was not in the focus of attention of China or Russia, which saw the created situation as a chance to achieve their geopolitical goals. A somewhat more active approach towards Albania in that period was manifested only by Turkey.

Due to its dysfunctional structure and internal divisions, Bosnia and Herzegovina did not have a unified strategy to counter the coronavirus pandemic, and in practice the entities – the Republic of Srpska, the Brcko District and ten cantons of the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina introduced uncoordinated measures. This also led to confusing situations, e.g. in the territory of Sarajevo, where different measures were often taken depending on which street belongs to which canton. In the first months of the pandemic, the people in Bosnia and Herzegovina were exposed to numerous disinformation, and the protection of personal data was threatened (lists of people who violated the order to self-isolate, plans to publicly announce identities of the infected). The decision of the Republic of Srpska to ban causing panic and riots by publishing allegedly false news had a particularly negative effect on human rights. After the reactions of the non-governmental sector and international actors, this harmful decision was abandoned, but, in the meantime, individuals were deprived of their liberty or fined based on this decision.

Bosnia and Herzegovina received emergency aid during the pandemic from various countries, starting from China, Turkey, Russia, and USA to EU institutions. Measures taken to counter the pandemic were affected by regional approaches (Croatia, Serbia, and North Macedonia) and even the Chinese model more than the procedures implemented in the European Union. The reasons may lie in the general belief that the health sector in EU Member States is far more developed, which is why those countries can afford to use milder restrictive measures (Zivanovic, 2020, p. 10).

After the President of the Republic declared a state of emergency on 18 March 2020, the Government of North Macedonia imposed one of the strictest regimes of lockdowns in Europe. Still, citizens mainly adhered to the measures. European Union and Turkey played a major role in providing international aid, while Russia, China and USA did not display a significant activity. Although much greater participation of China was expected in North Macedonia, which was strikingly present in the neighbouring Serbia, Chinese support was symbolic. US aid (a total of approximately 1.1 million USD) was not much more pronounced, while the share of Russia was almost invisible.

There were numerous cases of spreading false news during the emergency state in North Macedonia, due to which the Ministry of Interior submitted several reports to the office of the state prosecutor. On the other hand, the legal basis for conducting further proceedings of the prosecution based on such reports was challenged (Markovikj, 2020, p. 26).

In addition to the challenges posed by the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, the so-called Kosovo also went through a political vacuum due to a vote of no confidence for the government of Albin Kurti. This contributed to an atmosphere of general insecurity and distrust of citizens in institutions. As in most countries, the Kosovo authorities insisted that people wear masks and keep physical distance, with introduced measures on movement restriction. In this regard, the platform "Your 90 minutes" ("90 Minutëshiut") was developed, through which citizens could check when they were allowed to leave their homes. The effects of intimidation caused by arresting certain individuals for spreading false news were present during the crisis (Kabashi-Ramaj, 2020, 18).

On 17 March 2020, Montenegro was the last country in Europe to confirm the existence of coronavirus cases on its territory. Although the state of emergency was not formally introduced in that country, the adopted measures to counter the pandemic affected

civil and political rights, and especially the freedom of movement and public assembly. The National Coordination Body banned public assembly and presence of several people at religious ceremonies during that period (only the Serbian Orthodox Church and its believers violated this ban). Passenger transport was abandoned, and on 30 March curfew was introduced. Non-compliance with the measures was subject to criminal liability, but practice has shown that the government did not have the capacity to effectively supervise citizens. Military structures were not included in the control of measures prohibiting movement being implemented, but drones were used for that purpose.

The pandemic showed the depth of political divisions in Montenegro. Thus, one of the first decisions of the European Commission in the crisis – restricting the sale of medical equipment that put the Western Balkan in the same group as the rest of the world – was used by Euro-sceptic forces to challenge the country's accession to European integrations. When EU corrected its initial approach to aid in the region, by donating three million euros to Montenegro for emergency healthcare and 50 million euros for long term programmes in this area, affirmative reactions to the state authorities followed. In contrast, the opposition pro-Russian Democratic Front demanded that the country rely as much as possible on the help of Russia and China, calling Serbia to help (Milacic, 2020, p. 22).

The introduction of the state of emergency in Serbia led to the imposition of some disproportionate and irrational measures. Authorities tried to strictly centralize reporting on the pandemic by making a decision that only information provided by official representatives was considered reliable. This led to situations where journalists, civil society activists, and even citizens who publicly raised issues, such as lack of medical equipment or gasoline shortages, were accused of spreading panic, and there were several cases of arrest.

In circumstances of high demand for medical equipment and international aid, Serbia continued to balance between those with declarative commitments to join the European Union and the historical ties with Russia and increasingly intensive economic ties with China. During the state of emergency, in an almost fan-like manner, the highest ranked representatives of the government publicly collected, commented and compared aid received from different countries, praising and emphasizing certain ones (especially China), and putting the donations received from EU and other foreign actors in the background. After the initial stagnation, Russia relatively quickly managed to regain its position in public discourse after the official announcement of support for Serbia (Tepavac and Brankovic, 2020, p. 31).

The COVID-19 pandemic can be seen to have exposed more deeply common problems and weaknesses in many sectors of all Western Balkans countries – including the poor condition of the health systems, fragile democratic institutions, judicial problems and foreign-aid dependent national economies.

4.1. COVID-19 pandemic in the second year of the pandemic: example of Serbia

On 25 December 2020, the first vaccines against the coronavirus arrived in Serbia, and at the beginning of January 2021, the Institute of Public Health announced an operational immunization plan in three phases, which would cover around 1.75 million citizens. The first phase implied the vaccination of workers in healthcare institutions, with

the highest risk of infection, as well as employees in nursing homes and other social protection institutions. Vaccination of the elderly population was generally planned during this phase.

On 16 January 2021, a cargo of one million doses of the Chinese Sinopharm vaccine arrived in Serbia, welcomed at the airport by a state delegation, led by the President of the Republic, Aleksandar Vucic. Two days later, the vaccine was certified by the Medicines and Medical Devices Agency of Serbia.

As of 26 January 2021, more than half a million people in Serbia were vaccinated by one of the three vaccines then available. At that moment, mostly Chinese vaccines, around 1.5 million doses, were available, and immunization was also carried out with the Russian vaccine Sputnik and the American Pfizer, of which there was the least. Serbia was then the second country in Europe after Great Britain in terms of the number of vaccinated people per million inhabitants.

On 26 February 2021, "weekend measures" were adopted in Serbia meaning that the hospitality facilities could work until 2 PM on weekends, after which only food delivery was allowed. Controversy arose in the public, regarding whether to be vaccinated, and the number of citizens opposing vaccination was increasingly growing. According to official data, just over 1,060,000 citizens registered for vaccination by 20 February.

Considering the increase in the number of infected persons, and according to the decision of the Government, all cafés, restaurants, bars, shopping centres, shops, except grocery stores, cinemas, museums, galleries, beauty and hair salons, betting shops, casinos, playrooms for children were closed as of 16 March 2021.

Epidemiological measures were relaxed on 7 May 2021 in Serbia. Cafés were allowed to receive guests indoors until 10 pm, respecting the measures (up to 50 per cent of used space). All shops, betting shops, playrooms, gyms could work until 10 pm every day.

On 20 July 2021, due to the global spread of the delta strain of the coronavirus from India, the Expert Committee for Immunization recommended to the COVID-19 Crisis Response Team to administer the third vaccine dose at least six months after the second dose, with the third dose being the RNA vaccine. In August, more than 90 per cent of patients in Serbia were infected with the new, delta coronavirus strain, and the number of the infected became a four-digit number on a daily basis again. According to the official data, 50.2% adult citizens were vaccinated by then (Ćurčić, 2021).

From September 2021, there was a sharp increase in the number of the infected and the dead in Serbia (dozens per day). In such circumstances, on 8 October 2021, several hundreds of citizens in Belgrade and Nis protested against the decision of the Crisis Response Team to introduce the COVID pass for hospitality facilities, betting shops and casinos.

In December 2021, the first case of the new SARS-COV-2 virus strain named Omicron was confirmed in Serbia. It is a strain with around 60 mutations (the Delta virus strain had a total of 30 mutations). A larger number of mutations in practice means that Omicron is more easily transmitted and/or better at avoiding immune protection. In this regard, it was estimated that the vaccination rate of the population in Serbia (58%) was insufficient for effective control of the SARS-COV-2 virus, which will continue to circulate and mutate. Data from 29 April 2022 indicate that 2,005,832 cases of the coronavirus were registered in Serbia, with 15,984 registered deaths (Worldometer, 2022).

5. The pandemic and the pharmaceutical lobby

The supply of countries with vaccines against the coronavirus in the first year of the pandemic was significantly artificially slowed down due to the protection of intellectual property and monopoly of pharmaceutical corporations, i.e. their aspirations for extra profit. Approved vaccine manufacturers, Pfizer/BioNTech, Moderna and AstraZeneca planned to produce enough doses in 2021 to be able to vaccinate approximately a third of the world population. However, since developed countries had already purchased a large number of vaccine doses until the end of 2020, the actual percentage of the covered population around the globe was much smaller in reality. Although AstraZeneca delivered most of its vaccine doses to poorer countries, Pfizer/BioNTech and Moderna sold most of their products to richer countries.

Three largest pharmaceutical corporations in the world producing vaccines at market value are GlaxoSmithKline (GSK), Merck and Sanofi, which have committed only to produce 225 million doses in 2021. In the meantime, GSK announced that it would cooperate with CureVac to develop vaccines for controlling new COVID-19 virus strains during 2022. Sanofi Corporation subsequently announced an agreement to help produce 125 million Pfizer/BioNTech vaccine doses, but after a year of the pandemic, it was a drop in the ocean in relation to the needs and members of the European Union mostly benefited from that. Merck, the second largest world company in the field of vaccines, built its capacity to produce hundreds of millions of doses of its potential vaccines against COVID-19. However, that corporation announced at the beginning of 2021 that it would stop their development due to poor test results. GSK, Merck and Sanofi have received more than 2 billion USD in subsidies from the US government as part of Operation Warp Speed to support vaccine production (Kuchler and Abboud, 2021).

The global distribution of the coronavirus vaccines is still very unequal, in a situation with 510 million patients and more than 6 million dead. Approximately a billion doses on the global level are produced monthly, but nearly two billion people in the world have not yet had the opportunity to be vaccinated with the first dose. At the same time, due to the action of anti-vaccine movements in a number of countries, the produced vaccines are being destroyed because of the expiry dates.

More than 11.6 billion vaccine doses were administered worldwide until May 2022, and 4.57 billion people were fully vaccinated at least once (58% of the population). A significantly lower rate of vaccination is in undeveloped countries, especially in African countries (in some it is less than 1%). The situation in developing countries differs only in India, where more than 60% of the population is fully vaccinated. In addition, the Serum Institute of India has been producing hundreds of millions of doses of COVID-19 vaccine on behalf of AstraZeneca and Novovax since the end of 2020, with the development of its own vaccines, considering that there are at least 20 other vaccine manufacturers (The Peoples' Vaccine Alliance, 2021).

The public-private partnership among pharmaceutical companies and countries functioned in a twisted way during the pandemic. The research of pharmaceutical companies was, thus, financed with public money, while countries were buying huge amounts of vaccines in advance, even before they were approved and produced. In such a situation, corporations did not have any financial risks, and they became the sole owners of the invented vaccines, for which they protected patents and acquired the right to appropriate the profit from their sale in the next 20 days.

Examples of such corporations are Johnson & Johnson, which received 450 million USD, and then 1 billion USD for 100 million vaccine doses, and Pfizer/BioNTech, which received 2.5 billion USD for financing clinical trials and for 100 million doses which the country bought from that company in advance. In this way, 80% of the price for one Pfizer vaccine dose represents pure profit for the producer. In the first trimester of 2021, the profit of Pfizer/BioNTech was 3.5 billion USD, and 5.5 billion USD in the second trimester (Robbins and Goodman, 2021).

Similarly, the European Union invested more than two billion euros for vaccine producer's laboratory research (Pfizer/BioNTech, AstraZeneca, Moderna, Johnson & Johnson, etc.) through purchase orders signed prior to issuing market authorisations and vaccine production. Some other developed countries, such as Canada, Israel, Great Britain, also concluded similar contracts and they invested in pharmaceutical groups.

There were cases when pharmaceutical groups did not have to pay back the money received from the state although they declared giving up on research. A multinational corporation Sanofi is an example of this, with headquarters in France, which paid a record amount of almost 4 billion euros of dividends to its shareholders at the end of April 2020. After the protests of the workers' union, French President Emmanuel Macron visited the Sanofi headquarters on 16 June 2020 and he announced that the corporation would invest 610 million euros in a new factory for the production of vaccines and drugs, with 200 million euros in state subsidiaries. Only a few days later, the Sanofi Group disclosed a prepared savings plan that included closing the diabetes and cardiovascular research departments and cutting 1,700 jobs. Despite that, France continued to exempt Sanofi from taxes amounting to around 150 million euros annually, and to subsidize them for research (Bezaf, 2020). An interesting detail is the fact that Serge Winberg, the chairman of the Board of Directors of Sanofi, is a friend of the President Macron, whom he recommended as his protégé in 2008 for employment in the Rothschild Bank. Macron is not the only such example, since biographies of many European Commission members, members of European states governments and senior officials in state administrations state that they have spent certain time in large corporations from which they were transferred to be state officials and then returned to corporations, usually top management.

Additional revaccinations, primarily due to the emergence of new coronavirus strains, open up the perspective of colossal profits for vaccine producers. With regard to this, different initiatives were launched according to the World Health Organization, in order to mitigate the application of the "intellectual property rights" principle in this area. The activation of the provision from the founding act of the World Trade Organization was also mentioned, allowing states not to adhere to the rules of intellectual property in "extreme emergency". However, in that regard, there is a warning that in the past, states invoking this provision soon found themselves under pressure from the countries that own the patents, especially the United States.

5.1. Corporate power, profit and pandemic

Corporate power has in several ways made it difficult to overcome the economic consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic. On the one hand, the most powerful companies increased the vulnerability of business entities, employees and national economies to the threatening effects of the pandemic in the period from 2020 to 2022, by forcing

disproportionate payments to shareholders. Even in this period, they gave precedence to profit over occupational safety, shifting risks and expenses to employees and suppliers, not hesitating to influence policy makers (MacMillan et al., 2021).

The decade prior to the pandemic was the most successful in history for multinational companies. So, corporations on the Global Fortune 500 list increased their profits by 156% in the period from 2009 to 2019, significantly exceeding the increase of GDP on the global level, meaning they were taking an increasingly bigger part of the world economic pie. In addition, corporation profit was distributed within a narrow circle of large shareholders, while ignoring the need to invest in safer job positions or ecologically sustainable technology (Dayen, 2020).

Corporations did not abandon this approach even after the outbreak of the pandemic. Thus, Microsoft and Google paid 21 billion and 15 billion USD, respectively, in the first half of 2020. Despite the reduced demand for its products, Toyota paid more than 200% of its profits to shareholders in the first six months of 2020. In the same period, the chemical concern BASF distributed more than 400% of profits, and the American pharmaceutical company AbbVie distributed 184% of the net profit to shareholders.

Only companies that operated at a profit did not adopt such practice. Thus, the largest oil corporations in the world, such as Exxon Mobil, Total, Shell, Petrobras, Chevron and BP, which had total net loss of 61.7 billion USD in the first six months of 2020, paid to shareholders 31 billion USD. The largest Nigerian oil company Seplat Petroleum did the same, by paying to investors 132% profits, although Nigeria was facing economic meltdown.

It is a fact that multinational companies continued to make profit smoothly during this period, but they are quite on the side-lines when it comes to supporting the efforts of national authorities to counter the challenges brought about by the global spread of the coronavirus (Gneiting et al., 2020, 5). In 2020, 32 of the most successful corporations in the United States, Europe, Japan, South Korea, Australia, Brazil, India, Nigeria and South Africa earned together 109 billion USD more than the average from the previous four years. It is indicative that 25 of the richest billionaires in the world enlarged their wealth by 255 billion USD only in the period from March to May in 2020. Attempts to justify this by paid taxes and philanthropic donations are denied by facts that the US government lost around 135 billion USD in revenue in 2017 due to corporate tax evasion, while at the same time the total amounts of philanthropic shares of corporations were less than 20 billion USD. The case was similar in India, where total annual allocations for corporate social responsibility of about 6 billion USD are modest compared to the estimated losses of 47 billion USD of budget revenues due to profit tax evasion.

In global terms, philanthropic activities of the largest multinational companies in the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic averaged around 0.32% of operating income in 2019, which is a disproportionately small contribution. Therefore, the extra profit taxation or large corporations seems to be justified. If only 32 multinational companies that made the largest profits during COVID-19 were considered, it is estimated that as much as 104 billion USD could be raised annually to solve the pandemic problem – to cover the costs of COVID-19 testing and vaccinating the entire world population, and additional 33 billion USD to invest in improving healthcare in the 21st century.

On the other hand, the implementation of rigorous anti-pandemic measures has put a large number of business entities in a position where they cannot meet their contractual obligations. There has also been a large increase in insurance claims, which led to various

disputes, including whether the losses were really insured losses and whether the pandemic was the direct cause. In addition, there is an evident growth trend related to the claims of individuals, especially passengers and tourists who demanded refunds from air transport companies, hotels, ship transport companies and travel agencies (Drabu and Barbone, 2020).

6. Consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic

Pandemics such as COVID-19 have certain similarities with the capitalism crises, bearing in mind that they occur at certain intervals with greater or lesser intensity. However, when such crises occur, the majority of the population acts as if they are completely unexpected phenomena. The sentence that history repeats itself first as a tragedy and then as a farce is present in the works of Karl Marx. In these cases, history always seems to repeat itself as a tragedy, and each of these crises is something that is completely new and unexpected. Still, it could be argued that there is a certain pattern of regular catastrophes, or predictability that is ignored as a rule by both political elites and the civil sector, so that nations are always unprepared when such events occur. Without proactive action, the authorities express surprise and instead of preventive measures, they respond reactively when the crisis occurs with all its might (Vieraab, 2020, 429).

The confusion caused by the SARS-CoV-2 virus occurred in the middle of the growing social and economic inequality and general degradation of the environment, and due to the transition from one crisis to another, living in constant fear and anxiety are becoming important characteristics of human existence.

Disorders of normal human life that have occurred during more than two years of the COVID-19 pandemic pose a serious threat to mental health and the well-being of the general population. Panic and fear of illness, along with lockdown and physical distancing, affect social isolation, loneliness, inactivity, limited access to basic services, increased intake of food and alcohol, as well as reduced family and social support, especially for the elderly and vulnerable groups, all related to long-term decline of mental health (Safije, 2021).

The changes accelerated by the pandemic have brought many societies, regardless of their internal organization, development and demographic factors, into a state of political instability, with deepening racial, ethnic and gender inequalities and increasing general vulnerability and insecurity. The public health crisis also caused a profound economic crisis and recession. Within it, marginalized social groups bear disproportionate burden of the coronavirus consequences, leading to increasing inequalities and consequential risks (Repucci and Slipowitz, 2021).

6.1. Economic consequences of the coronavirus

The model of occurrence of the economic crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic has the following features (Čavrak, 2020, pp. 9–10): initial – health shock leading to supply shock because local and global production chains are disrupted due to anti-pandemic measures. After a certain time, stocks are used up, and there is a meltdown in supply. As the pandemic takes the lives of many people, fear, panic and uncertainty arise, leading to a drop in demand in investment. In order to avoid the risk of bankruptcy, companies shield themselves by dismissing employees, which in turn causes the rise in unemployment. The consequences

include the reduced income for households and a decline in their purchasing power, as well as further drop in demand. Finally, increasing uncertainty and fear leads to a new, deeper circle of crisis and recession (Fornaro, Wolf, 2020, pp. 8–9).

Countries affected the most heavily by the economic crisis are the ones relying on the hospitality sector, especially tourism (ILO, 2021, p. 23). Due to the lack of liquid potential and stocks, small and medium-size companies are more severely affected than great corporations, and lower-paid jobs are particularly threatened in the labour market (World Bank, 2021, p. 8).

The losses caused by the pandemic primarily affect direct expenses, such as the loss of work time and growth of medical expenses, but also the costs related to the total response of included actors to the growing health risks, in the form of social distancing (König, Winkler, 2020, p. 133).

Countries hit by the coronavirus applied various policies in solving the consequences of the pandemic (Hale et al. 2020, p. 4). Unlike the global financial crisis in 2008, the banking sector has become a part of the solution during the COVID-19 pandemic, as regulatory and institutional measures had the task to facilitate activities for business entities. The solution to the situation is not seen in the conventional monetary policy, primarily because of the liquidity trap, but in the fiscal policy, with an emphasis on initiating new public investments (Baldwin, 2020). The prospects for recovery are better for high-tech industries than the classic ones, because of both the technological development and robotics that marked the earlier period and the increased need for these activities during the crisis.

7. “The Great Reset”

The World Economic Forum in Davos, which sponsored the book “COVID-19: the Great Reset” in the summer of 2020, has a significant place in conspiracy theories about the coronavirus pandemic. Its authors Klaus Schwab and Thierry Malleret advocate the viewpoint that the “Great Reset” should occur after the pandemic, the first aim of which could be to break the existing dominant Western economic structure. That goal is followed by the plans to change the roles of the state appearing in the pandemic crisis situations as the crucial factor in people’s lives. Implementation of the imposed rigorous measures during the coronavirus actually trains such a role of the state and it implies the installation of its supremacy over citizens and society. The tendency to make key decisions non-transparently in such a narrow circle is also evident. In that sense, it is considered that after the end of the pandemic, the focus of the “Great Reset” will also be directed to the renewal of the aggressive campaign related to climate changes and environmental protection (Schwab and Malleret, 2020, p. 100).

According to the “Great Reset”, history has shown that epidemics and pandemics were ultimately the driving forces of economy and renewal of social structures of countries. This differentiates them from wars which have an opposite effect: they destroy capital, and pandemics do not – wars cause larger actual interest rates, implying greater economic activity, while pandemics initiate lower actual rates, implying slow economic activity. In addition, consumers tend to react to shock by increasing their savings, whether because of precautionary concerns, or simply to replace the wealth lost during the epidemic. Recession caused by the pandemic is expected to trigger a sudden rise in the growth of living labour, meaning that physical labour will be replaced by robots and “intelligent” machines, which

in turn will increase permanent and structural changes in the labour market (Schwab and Malleret, 2020, p. 26).

The social upheaval triggered by COVID-19 will last for years, and maybe generations. The immediate and visible impact is that many governments will be the subject of criticism, directed towards those policy makers and political figures that seemed inadequately or badly prepared in the sense of their response to facing the pandemic. This will be especially true of some rich countries with sophisticated health systems and strong potential for research, science and innovation, where citizens will wonder why their authorities fared so badly in comparison to others. In undeveloped countries, the pandemic will make the existing social problems worse – especially poverty, inequality and corruption. This could, in some cases, lead to extreme outcomes, such as social and societal disintegration (Schwab and Malleret, 2020, p. 38).

According to the “Great Reset”, the post-pandemic era will initiate a period of mass redistribution of wealth, from the rich to the poor and from capital to labour. COVID-19 is likely to inflict a serious blow to neoliberalism, a corpus of ideas and policies that could freely be defined as favouring competition over solidarity, creative destruction over government intervention, and economic growth over social protection (Schwab and Malleret, 2020, p. 36).

The pandemic will have profound and diverse consequences for each individual, and the question is whether it will lead to a better world, in which people will be more compassionate toward their neighbours and their community. However, historical parallels indicate that natural disasters, such as hurricanes and earthquakes, bring people together, while pandemics do the opposite: they separate people. Namely, when faced with a sudden, violent and often short-lasting natural disaster, the population connects and tends to recover relatively quickly. In contrast, pandemics are longer-lasting events that often cause a permanent feeling of distrust (towards others) rooted in the primal fear of death (Schwab and Malleret, 2020, p. 86).

Schwab and Malleret consider resetting to be an extremely ambitious task, but without an alternative. It is about making the world less divided, polluted and destructive, and more comprehensive and righteous than in the era before the pandemic. Not doing anything, or doing too little, means walking in the direction of increasing social inequality, economic imbalance, injustice and environmental degradation (Schwab and Malleret, 2020, p. 100).

8. COVID-19 pandemic end scenarios

With the decline of the number of infected by the coronavirus, as well as the number of deaths, many countries have decided to relax measures since the start of 2022 and to gradually open state borders, although there are significant differences among continents and regions.

One example is Australia, where the strictest measures, including complete closure of borders, were in force for a long while. Still, all those who were fully vaccinated against COVID-19 can enter Australia since February 2022. New Zealand has done similarly. Since the beginning of the pandemic, that country opted for isolation and occasionally for “zero corona tolerance”. Since February 2022, New Zealanders and foreign experts and students have been

allowed to enter the country, and foreign tourists have been allowed to enter since May 2022 (Rychter and Kwai, 2022).

Israel has made the greatest step forward in terms of foreigners. As of 1 March 2022, non-vaccinated tourists may enter the country. Only two PCR tests are required – one just before the flight and another after landing in Israel. Closed state borders in the Republic of South Africa were also a political issue: after becoming known that the omicron strain appeared in that country, the United States and European countries, among others, introduced an entry ban for its citizens since the end of 2021. This caused great objections in the Republic of South Africa, with many believing that Africa had been punished again. After the COVID-19 omicron strain being officially declared over, all restrictions were lifted, with the exception of obligation to wear masks.

As of March 2022, a large number of European countries have lifted all restrictive measures for foreigners to enter the country: United Kingdom, Ireland, Sweden, Finland, Denmark, Poland, Hungary, Romania, and Slovenia. Large steps towards opening have been made in Austria. As of 5 March 2022, almost all measures have been cancelled, meaning that restaurants, hotels and gyms can be visited again, without the proof of testing, vaccination or past illness. Most restrictions related to the coronavirus have been abolished in Germany since 20 March 2022, except the obligation to wear masks indoor, in buses and trains, as well as testing (Limb, 2022).

The situation in East and Southeast Asia is somewhat different. Due to the increase of the number of infected persons in April 2022 in the People's Republic of China, Shanghai and 44 cities with more than 370 million of residents (26% of the population) were affected by radical measures of lockdowns, which is the result of zero COVID-19 tolerance of the Chinese authorities. In areas affected by the lockdown, movement of citizens is restricted, while public transport has been suspended. In this regard, there is growing concern that such extreme measures will negatively affect the national economy and global supply chains.

According to British scientists from the Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies (SAGE), there are four possible scenarios for the end of the COVID-19 pandemic in the near future: optimistic, moderately optimistic, moderately pessimistic and pessimistic, while some other options cannot be completely ruled out. Common to these scenarios is that the coronavirus will continue to circulate among the population and that there will certainly be new strains and variants. (Simmons, 2022).

The best option is that the coronavirus will have a seasonal character, with less intense symptoms. The new strains will occur but they will not cause more severe consequences than e.g. the delta strain, and vaccines against them will be very effective.

A somewhat less optimistic scenario predicts that the coronavirus will get a seasonal character during cold days, though better years or less favourable years could occur as well. During the worse ones, the virus could act as it did during the delta strain period. Still, severe cases and deaths would be limited to the most vulnerable categories. Vaccines would be administered to vulnerable population groups, and some countries could introduce mandatory mask wearing during the "bad years".

According to the moderately pessimistic scenario, a new COVID-19 strain is possible in the next 12 to 18 months, which would cause a greater wave of infection, potentially even after the autumn/winter period. Still, severe cases and deaths would be "limited" to the oldest and most vulnerable categories. This scenario predicts the occurrence of new strains

in the following years during the “bad years”, which could be as dangerous as the delta strain. Vaccines would be “refreshed” every year and there would be no repeated infection waves, but some countries could introduce mandatory face mask wearing.

According to the worst scenarios, large waves with numerous severe cases would continue to repeat in the following 12 to 18 months. New strains would appear, some of which would very successfully reduce the vaccine effects. This would automatically lead to an increase in mortality, and especially the increase known as the long covid.

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Military activities in Ukraine, which began on 24 February 2022, almost instantly pushed the COVID-19 pandemic from the top of the list of the most important global topics and, at the same time, worsened the multiplied global problems expected after the end of the pandemic, primarily in the economic area.

9. The post-covid world

In the period after COVID-19, it will undoubtedly be necessary to redefine certain national strategic documents and supporting protocols. Namely, in most existing national security strategies, the risks of pandemics were paid almost negligible attention, and the planned levels of response were based on previous experience. In the future, it will be necessary to establish more reliable mechanisms for information exchange and detection of infectious diseases, primarily creating a more efficient “Early Alert” system, whereby the detection and control of the pandemic causes will need to be raised to the level of control applied for proliferation of weapons for mass destruction (Burrows and Engelke, 2020, p. 27). Especially having in mind the risks of bioterrorism and that, for instance, we have not had an expert for this area in Crisis Response Teams during this pandemic.

Response to future pandemic challenges should be based on the principles of the so-called “Military medical response”, including military experts for the protection from bioterrorism, mass mobilization of men and all national capacities. Strategic and doctrinal documents will have to pay more attention to identifying threats and responses that may be imposed by an artificial or natural pandemic, primarily in terms of ensuring critical supply and protection of national interests.

In the post-covid world, the role of mechanisms within the World Health Organization will undoubtedly change, as will introducing new multilateral mechanisms for countering infectious diseases. The COVID-19 experiences show that WHO has failed in its basic task – the timely exchange of information, knowledge and experience. A desirable scenario would be for global changes to move towards creating a safer society, above all dominated by a democratic approach and availability of information.

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