

PANDEMIC HALT-AN OPPORTUNITY FOR RESTRUCTURING, REVISION AND CREATIVITY

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Abstract: After the first wave of the fear of the unknown, we are given a chance to revise our collective behaviors, as well as change the detrimental patterns and habits we have adopted while chasing industrial advancement and business development. We might be able to save some of the damages made by returning to at least two crucial endeavors that we haphazardly abandoned when liberalism was challenged. The author considers these two topics to be interrelated and critically important to the options we will create for the next generations – respect and implementation of human rights and freedoms while we restore our environment and slow down the destruction of the planet we have accelerated to unbearable speed before Covid-19 made us stop and reminded us what pain and loss look like in the images we are willing to recognize and react to. The consequences are huge, but the article argues, necessary as a wakeup call to societies that grew to be unjust, materialistic and wasteful. That is of course, if we learn from the mistakes and we are willing to change behaviors.

Keywords: pandemic, restructuring, revision, opportunities, education, gender, disability human rights, environmental good governance

Introduction

The Covid-19 pandemic as an imposed crisis that can foster creative thinking and improved services

The article analyzes the mistakes that increased the vulnerabilities, the missed opportunities and lack of competence presented at highest levels, though the main focus is on the possibilities we have seen sprout from the pandemic: the characteristics of leaders/hip (that handled the first wave better than other styles), new job opportunities, new technologies to assist in maintaining education and work from home, all of which were connecting the people around the globe. Without in-depth dataset on ideas and how they came about, the author will endeavor to offer a screenshot of opportunities and ideas that were unlikely to develop if we did not enter such a severe state of restrictions and challenges to the way life was. It is not the first time we are dealing with global pandemic, but it is the first time we are handling it under these circumstances and the first time we had structure to handle it multilaterally. How did we do and could we have done better if we used our supranational structure better and more resourcefully?

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Another two areas will be streamlined throughout the text as they are of interest to the author – gender and inclusion of people with disabilities. It was often reported in the media that female leaders handled the crisis better and the author hopes to be able to look into this topic in more detail and make the connection between gender, policy direction and political orientation. Also, what do we do with and to people with disabilities when facing huge societal strokes? Did our societies become more inclusive under the stress caused by Covid-19 or the insufficient services became even scarcer? What future will societies offer and will they realize in hindsight that many of the services could have been offered even before had we planned better and with more care, solidarity and with genuine effort to be inclusive?

After the first wave and the fear of the unknown, we were given a chance to revise our collective behaviors, as well as change the detrimental patterns and habits we have adopted while chasing industrial advancement and business development. We might be able to save some of the damages made, by returning to at least two crucial endeavors that we haphazardly abandoned when liberalism was challenged. I consider these two components to be interrelated and critically important to the options we will create for the next generations – respect and implementation of human rights and freedoms while we restore our environment and slow down the destruction of the planet we have accelerated to unbearable speed, before Covid-19 made us stop and reminded us what pain and loss look like and what they feel like on our own skin, in our closest surrounding.

The pandemic and the changes it brought to our lifestyles are not something we requested. It is not a welcome change and it has brought loss of life, pain and insecurities on personal and institutional level. Additionally, the timeframe of the impact and the longevity of this crisis are still uncertain, but it looks like we are in perpetual rollercoaster going up and down, with no clear predictions and ability to identify what will the end look like and how to get there collectively. None of this is good news. It could have been a valuable time-freeze, a sobering call as we are given an extended period in which we can either focus on improving and practicing responsible governance, intensify cooperation and coordination, readjust, revise, review and restructure our societies, how we interact with each other and how we set our collective goals. There was work done along these lines, but there was also a lot of unpreparedness, improvisation and sacrificing reasonable actions for narrow-minded political goals, for entities or ideologies that can jeopardize someone's political life and whose voice is louder than the silent screams of many citizens.

There was and there will be a bit of both and it will depend on which corner of the world we are analyzing, what was the societal pre-Covid snapshot, political system, level of trust in communal efforts and emergency responses etc. But we saw political changes that were in direct correlation with bad crisis management, where the demos punished the elites for their response to the pandemic and for the loss of human life. As it happens, this pandemic was not an exception in the sense that crises reveal what has been invisible and hidden under the surface. Many societies looked into their tissues and the ruptures on the exterior they were witnessing every day prior to the crisis were suddenly magnified. In many countries/states, it became obvious that those symptoms were just a keyhole through which the citizens saw the world of incompetence, corruption, lack of protocols, shortsightedness and the results of many mistakes that were done in the last few decades. The lack of funding in scientific research, public health, insurance plans, politicizing the employment in hospitals and schools, neglect of environment and mismanagement of public space that has

been abandoned instead of adapted for sports, outdoor events and beautified, all of these deficiencies blew in our faces when we realized we have no funds for research that will lead to vaccine, when we faced the fact that the quality of teachers, education materials and technological literacy were worse than assumed and when we had limited spaces to enjoy without being in crowds, or if people left the cities very little has been done on local level to offer attractive, educational or creative content locally. Additionally, there were leaders who did not plan well how to support the small and medium businesses that had very little reserves and could not endure the length of this crisis.

On the other hand, we were given a chance to revise our collective behaviors. We can choose to use these unfortunate times as a wakeup call to societies, political parties, decentralized units of local governance and any other community within which we interact with other humans. The pandemic might be our blessing in disguise to reset our cities, countries and our planet that grew to be unjust, materialistic and wasteful. This might be a call for solidarity, empathy and increased care for the other, a call for healing from power struggles, domination and prevailing over others.

There were two dichotomies that provided for a variety of responses and often for unstable approaches that were moving within a very wide range of possibilities.

First, we witnessed a clash between respect and implementation of **human rights** and freedoms, especially the international set of commitments and wishful thinking on one side and the **restrictions** needed to secure public health, as the spread, prevention and containment of the virus required severe and/or strict measures, inspections, information sharing and providing timely and accurate, often private information. Dictatorial regimes welcomed the digital tracking, in order to restrict many freedoms of their constituencies. On the other side of the isle some human rights activists demanded freedom to choose how they will behave in light of the pandemic, whether they will wear mask, be vaccinated or not.

In designing and implementing measures in response to the challenges due to COVID-19, States Parties were invited by the CoE to “take due account of all social rights-holders, according special attention and appropriate priority to the most socially vulnerable groups and individuals. States Parties must ensure that measures taken in response to the crisis, including economic and social policy measures, do not result in discrimination in terms of social rights enjoyment, whether direct or indirect”.

However, in the spring of 2020 protests expressing frustration over the financial impact of the restrictions and limitation of rights and freedoms snowballed in Austria, Britain, Finland, Romania, Switzerland, Poland, France, Bulgaria, Serbia, the Netherlands and Romania. Interestingly, both far-right and far-left groups were quick to seize on that public frustration.

The other dichotomy revived the centuries-long rivalry between **science** and **religion**, between public health, microbiology, research, vaccines on one side and ideology, fake news, profiteering, social media impact in creating opinions, and populism. We saw scientists being silenced by know-it-all leaders with authoritarian tendencies. We witnessed governments relaxing restrictions in order to accommodate religious leaders threatening to go rogue if believers are not allowed to gather in religious objects over certain holidays, where social distancing was not practiced.

⁴ Council of Europe, Statement by the European Committee of Social Rights: <https://www.coe.int/en/web/human-rights-rule-of-law/-/covid-19-and-social-rights-statement-by-the-european-committee-of-social-rights>

The inconsistent measures led to unnecessary increases of numbers. South East Europe additionally copes with lack of medical personnel in the last decades due to drain brain especially among the medical workers, most of whom left the country when the blue card and simplified procedures for diploma recognition were introduced by Germany and other EU countries who wanted to fill in the gaps in their labor markets. Not much was done to prevent this practice and the C19 crisis just made this badly managed process obvious. One can argue it is up to everyone to look for better opportunities and employment, but the problem is much deeper than just an individual aspiration and search for a better tomorrow. Being part of a society comes with rights and responsibilities and those are both on the side of the state and the individual.

The home self-isolation measures introduced to slow the spread of the new coronavirus have led to some unfortunate negative side effects, such as an increase in domestic and gender-based violence cases.⁵

The aftermath so far is over 6 million of dead people due to the Corona virus and more than 450 million confirmed cases in the world. These numbers tell us that we handled the crises badly, inadequately and that our national and international structures need urgent and systemic repair. Another crucial lesson from this unfortunate episode is that when global crises happen, we cannot handle them individually or partially. In the words of John Donne, who ironically wrote his Meditation XVII when he was recovering from a nearly fatal illness: "the bell that rings to a sermon, calls not upon the preacher only, but upon the congregation to come" and he continues "No man is an island, entire of itself: every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main; if a clod be washed away by the sea, Europe is the less, as well as if a promontory were, as well as if a manor of thy friend's or of thine own were; any man's death diminishes me because I am involved in mankind, and therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls; it tolls for thee." We all remember this to be the epitaph of Hemingway's book that was published after the Spanish Civil War, the dress rehearsal for the WWII, another disaster in which around 75 million lives were lost. Since then, we have developed multilateral systems for conflict prevention, early warning and prevention and the question now is: Are we capable and willing to use them properly? We have no better alternatives, therefore if they proved to be insufficient, we have to identify the deficiencies, the weaknesses and rebuild the vulnerable parts. However, we should not be naïve and think that instead of creative and constructive thoughts, there will be authoritarian leaders who will use this period to restructure the current order and as they have been already undermining the liberal institutional structures that have been created as a response to the atrocities of the WWII, they will strengthen the networks of like-minded autocrats. It is the weakness of the multilateral structure and its incapacity to stand up for its purpose, to defend its values and to not accept indecent compromises and short-fixes in order to satisfy rouge leaders and retrograde patterns of behavior that might empower imperialist dreamers to use the mayhem for stalling the dialogue and even abandon the common platforms and organizations while creating new ones and instead of cooperation and solidarity offer a new outlook – competition and violence.

And while many wise healthcare experts remind us that this is not the end of the pandemic, even though societies with higher vaccination rate behave as if it is, and they call

⁵ UNDP Responses to C19: <https://www.mk.undp.org/content/north-macedonia/en/home/search.html?q=UNDP+Response+to+C19>, April 2021

this halt an 'interpandemic period' we can see through the rough times we endured and see some positive things that are here to stay.

New job opportunities and new jobs. We showed that we do not have to be in the office and swipe that card to prove we are productive. We will be able to carry these lessons into maternity and introduce hybrid working for new parents, for parents with children with developmental challenges, for anyone who needs to do it differently. There were also many new jobs that were created and our imagination created fascinating and efficient services. Hopefully this will force us to readjust, learn many new things to fit in the new market demands. How we do things, who are the essential workers should definitely change the budget negotiations and prioritization when it comes to paying the essential workforce decent salary in order not have unfair and discriminatory capital distribution. We can digitalize the data, compare and aspire.

New technologies to assist in maintaining education and work from home. The electronic interconnectedness we developed due to the restricted movements and socializing is an amazing facet we can maintain and use in various situations in order to reduce travel, budget and unnecessary logistics. New technologies also help conveying messages faster, clearer and provide for better visualization. We can change the way we teach, train and evaluate knowledge.

Electoral changes. We saw we can vote online. I did and it worked. We need to work on election fraud and systems crashing for 24 hours the day after elections (as was the case in North Macedonia in 2021), but we can get used to a different outreach to potential voters. More will be demanded by those who want that one vote. No campaign slogans will be enough in a world in which you can find specifications for any product and service online. People got used to being informed online and they want a more substantial add, including a CV, achievements, programmes and timeframes. The old-school speeches will no longer suffice. This will lead to expecting and providing **new features and characteristics of leaders/hip.**

Education is a field that had to adapt as soon as lockdown started. Some countries did better than others obviously and some countries had the infrastructure for distance learning already. Skype, zoom and many **learning management systems** (LMSs) were available to all the education institutions, but their lack of knowledge, skills and willingness to embrace the reality delayed the transfer to digital classroom. There is no doubt that in-person schooling is necessary for the well-being of the students, but a lot can be done to complement that with content made available differently due to technology and pre-prepared lectures. A world in which most of our tasks have moved to online options, where the attention span of our students is challenged by longer Facebook posts as they are used to tweeter and Instagram, it is really retro to expect that the teachers will read pages and pages of Plato in class. These changes, one would hope, should have been happening with all the other changes in society. But they were not. Not with the same speed at least.

Despite UNESCO's efforts, education is primarily seen as a topic dealt by internally. There are some Conferences and some exchange, but decisions about how we educate our children and adults are primarily handled within institutions, political parties in power and without public debates decided upon by directors of Institutes and various Bureaus. The necessary coordination among national institutions and supranational structures, even between States and Federal level (like in the USA) showed its cracks and the problems that educators have been suffering long before the pandemic. The need for multilayered and

adaptive planning was well described by the Czech Deputy Minister of Education who pointed out the importance of ensuring the continuation of the interventions that were necessary in the beginning, but making sure they are upgraded. She said that within the framework of the National Recovery Plan, which has already been approved by the European Commission it will not be only about staffing in terms of tutoring and the like, but also to renew the “digital school park”.⁶

New possibilities for gendered approaches. It was often reported in the media that female leaders handled the crisis better and this topic deserves a thorough analysis in order to make the connection between gender, policy direction and political orientation. What we have realized so far is that many of the services could have been offered even before, had we planned better and with more care to provide genuine inclusion and creative education with focus on life skills and functionality. Even though it could have happened without a crisis, the pandemic statistics might be very useful if we decide to look into our societies through numbers and generate gender focused data in order to rethink the role of women in politics, workforce, equal pay and unpaid household work sharing.

Losing sight of the international while fixing the national

It is not the first time we are dealing with global pandemic, but it is the first time we are handling it under these circumstances and the first time we had a structure to handle it multilaterally. How did we do and could we have done better if we used our supranational structure better and more resourcefully?

“Perhaps the corona virus – as devastating as it is – will be a chance to reboot the international system. To put aside recent disagreements. To address the real issues that affect security today: like pandemics, migration, and climate change. To act more respectfully towards each other. And to take joint actions to address common threats and challenges.”⁷

So, after states closed their borders, it was crucial to assess and employ the state capacities for handling the situation. It was important to know that the systems are functioning, that the structure is stable and the citizens feel protected and taken care of. A lot of pressure was on governments and we witnessed how the crises affected many segments of society – from frontline and essential workforce to whole industries and jobs that became redundant. The switch and adaptability depended on how strong the base was. The textile industry, predominantly employing women suffered lack of demand, therefore increased job losses. The agricultural produce needed placement on new markets when export was impossible. That required a whole new plan for depending on local resources and produce. Governments needed to cooperate more with various businesses to make sure there is regular flow of essentials. However, often the creativity came from the businesses and their urge to adapt and survive. Having said this, it is fair to also mention that the business community does not have the public interest as its guiding force in how they do their job, therefore the

⁶ Hlidaci Pes, Interview with the Czech Deputy Minister of Education, Pavla Katzova: <https://hlidaci-pes.org/skolstvi-uz-nikdy-nebude-jako-pred-covidem-to-vsak-neni-jen-spatne-tvrdi-namestkyně-ministra/>

⁷ Walter Kemp, Cooperation and Corona: <https://vienna.fes.de/e/cooperation-and-corona-by-walter-kemp>

cooperation between those elected to secure the wellbeing of the citizens and those who provide services or goods for their own profit was more crucial than ever.

Conclusion

What does all this mean for the ways our countries relate and communicate?

First of all, meetings have been reduced, and issues that were political and operational priorities became less important than the crisis at hand. In those months when the numbers allowed increased interaction, some meetings were held either in person or hybrid, but this way of operating did not allow for spontaneity and “corridor work”. The corridors were empty and the zoom meetings had a list of participants and a fixed agenda. There were arguments that some of the multilateral fora that do not deal with health issues are better off just waiting for the crisis to pass and come back to life once our lives are back to normal. But this health crisis had an impact on economic and social issues and we cannot afford to have a hibernating supranational structure while these fundamental segments of our societies are being reinvented. It is to be expected that the economic and financial losses will affect alliances, security and good-neighborly relations. But, how can we expect the bureaucracies that were criticized for being inefficient and slow in less critical times to suddenly and under increased pressure perform better? Afterall, the multilateral innovations were always invented after big conflicts or in anticipation of big changes or challenges. Walter Kemp said that “it is also a crisis of multilateralism. If governments don’t work effectively through the United Nations, the World Health Organization, the G20, the European Union or others, public trust in these organizations will be eroded even further”.⁸

The difference between now and 2020 is that we have available vaccines and we had windows of reopening international travel. So, there will be more than just the essential travel and more diplomatic interaction. And that is a sneak preview of what is ahead of us, but we cannot predict for how much longer and what will the next cycles look like. “The vaccines will help us keep the pandemic under control, but we need to continue to live with the virus, just as we live with other infectious diseases,” said Minister of Health and Care Services Bent Høie of Norway. “It is impossible to fully eradicate the risk.”. His country is top ranked in the Bloomberg’s Covid Resilience ranking.

I want to believe that the last three years of isolation and lockdown will bring a change in prioritization, attitudes and foreign policies. I want to believe that nationalist and authoritarian behaviors do not correlate with bad management of the C19 crisis. I expect us, collectively, to analyze how we can do much better than six million deaths, but in order to go beyond just expressing hope we have to create responsible governance, participatory democracies (beyond a voting ballot once in 4-5 years), merit based evaluation of elected officials and a more sophisticated electoral system and appointment procedures for the managerial positions that constitute the societal foundations – education, labor market, economy, healthcare, good governance, development, international cooperation and other

⁸ Walter Kemp, Cooperation and Corona: <https://vienna.fes.de/e/cooperation-and-corona-by-walter-kemp>

fields, but most of all, we have to maintain the systems by effective and efficient coordination and cooperation.

At the end there is one security- threat factor I want to mention before I conclude and send out to the world as a word of caution from my small and yet very complex country now called North Macedonia. In a recent op-ed for the PIN network, where I discuss the dangers of the Bulgarian veto for the future of the European Union, I conclude with a proposal for the EU to: "discourage politicizing of historiography, as Europe cannot afford discussions on historical "truths" and should promote the recipe that holds the nations of the Union together, i.e., mutual respect for different historical "perspectives."⁹ The successful outcome of this process would be to have constructive dialogue under the EU auspices and, instead of causing division in the EU institutions, to have a process that will heal the old wounds and will focus on current possibilities for fruitful cooperation. The member states can collectively remind Bulgaria that this is a time for renewing the vows for updated solidarity and generosity." Allow me to end by sharing my firm belief that managing diversity, empathy, non-discrimination and solidarity will be the chose of mature democracies and instead of going back in Byzantine mode and clashes of imagined empires, we will embrace the opportunity to grow stronger together and support each other as victims of a vicious virus, as every person's death diminishes us as humanity.

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