

Pandemics on the Rise

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The beginning of the third decade of the still new millennium that the year 2020 brought around looked optimistic, enthusiastic and full of expectations. Relatively speaking, issues seemed to be well in order, if this is a phrase that one could ever afford to use it while commenting and discussing international affairs. We did take this comfort, though.

As it became obvious not less than two months later, things went horribly wrong. That horribly that it was, at least from the beginning, not possible to believe. Not only to believe, but also to comprehend and to accept them in their plain truth. As days passed by, the dimensions of the new corona virus (C - 19) that spread around the globe from China, where it was noticed for the first time, were accelerated with an immense speed. The initial surprise, the scale of speed as well as the scale of intensifying spread of the virus, resulted in rather slow reactions of governments and even slower accommodation of populations being neither prepared nor willing to believe.

First information about the virus came out into public in late December of 2019, while in mid-February of 2020 first measures pointing towards semi lock down started to take place. Already in the first week of March state borders across Europe were closing down. In the beginning of April lock down became phrase of the day and it still is now. Within less than a quarter of the year the whole world was brought to a slow down. One could guess that from the Moon it would have looked like a complete stop of the Earth. For the first time in recorded human history, life on the globe practically stopped, with immense consequences on each field of human activity.

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So, what would be our main observations after having a more careful, structural view upon the pandemics following the first few months of the year?

Firstly and most important for the high spread of the virus around the globe would be that it is due to the globalization that the pandemics hit with such strong avalanche of consequences in such short time. Commonly available air travel to each and every part of the world and production of mass gatherings like football matches have enabled the pandemics to become global shortly. But at the same time, the complete lock down of societies hit back also. At first glance it seemed that the pandemics has endangered globalization and will break its network, when for example a huge demise of international air, sea and continental transport of goods took place – while it practically stopped commuting of people, apart bringing them home from various locations, what looked like almost a war evacuation operations.

Secondly, Europe, the continent with the most developed international structures that makes it unique in global relations throughout recent political history, was hit first and hard. With closing of borders and almost all of international commuting it affected the very heart of its purpose: freedom of travel and the Schengen system with it practically collapsed. An unprecedented, unforeseeable and unbelievable turnaround that we still continue to face. With it solidarity as one of the main values of the European integration system was put to a severe test. A mantra that the European Union, as practically the most complicated structure in human history that is functioning for more than six decades already, was constructed to operate in normal times and not in those of crisis, was confirmed once again.

Thirdly, pandemics did accelerate heavily some of the current trends. Digitalization became notion of a day. World affairs moved from on line to off line and with them the whole spectrum of our lives. This fact intensified physical isolation that was condition sine qua non for slowing down the spread of the virus. We all moved to live digital, practically virtual as a matter of fact. This is tremendously influencing the way we live and we will live when the current pandemics is over. We are getting to know what does it mean to live digital, in unreal space and how to do it. Having in mind the revolutionary advancement of communication technology during the previous few decades, and media technology in particular, this is changing one of the basis

premises of human beings. In addition to this, going on line has many social, psychological, emotional and other consequences. We are discovering them on a daily basis.

One of them is a need that internet access has to be a common good with universal admittance as well as for free. Governments should take care that no citizen would be left without an on line connection. According to the technological advancement and general welfare this should be done fast, efficient and global. When it happens, it will have huge effect on further advancement of our lives. When we return to schools, offices, museums, galleries physically, it will still be important to access all the benefits of Homo sapiens from remote locations. To enjoy summer holidays somewhere in the Pacific or in Hindukush, while admiring and walking digital through Louvre or Tate Gallery.

Human beings are social animals, but we also love to go individual from time to time. Individualism enables us to be social. However, being forced overnight to individualism, although for our own health benefit, causes a variety of negative side effects. Already in these early times of pandemics there is a lot of evidence of increase in family violence, since families are not used anymore to live together day by day 24/7 for longer time. It's not only being capable of continuous living together: there's the case of parents working from home and children learning from home at the same time; in major cases in small apartments with only one or at best two laptops, when each person needs his/her own one and a room to be able to devote to his/her occupation. Individual trauma, stress and phobia increased as well due to the lock down. Although being deeply connected via social media for the last decade, people still need basically daily physical contact, socializing, and outdoor activities. Last but not least, love has already undergone significant changes during the last few decades of intensified globalization (on line dating, remote living from each other etc.). But it is for the first time that young people can not exercise sympathies, dating, love affairs and living together occasionally, but frequently, all this for the case of pandemics. This is further affecting the ability of living together, raising children, having families, and articulating sense of family notion, of tender, intimate closeness. Going individual on a long term basis is a direct consequence of lock down. This correlates with the increase of egoism, selfishness and similar changes of behaviour.

Fourthly, the case of international affairs has been the main frame of visible changes. Hence, let us have a look at geopolitics, logistics and at the relation global – local.

The virus C – 19 appeared for the first time in public in China. The fact by itself immediately contributed to the intensification of already heavily tense relations between the USA and China during last years. Mistrust, skepticism, along with conspicuous theories heated the global rivalry. Along with the spread of the pandemics also the Russian Federation, Brazil, India and some other big powers found themselves in this global theatre, not making the relations cluster a bit simpler. With their different attitude towards the World Health Organization (from a severe criticism to a mora advocating views), the UN Security Council reacting slowly as if the pandemics would not have been the biggest immediate threat to global peace and security, and Europeans discussing the necessity of establishing their own Health Body, the policy cacophony is at climax. In addition, in the USA and in Brazil both Presidents exercise strong misbelief in pandemics and similar management of the crisis. The case of European countries, in particular the EU, was already tackled. We can follow a huge variety of approaches to the most dangerous global disease ever on the rise that threatens humanity, which is not reacting unanimously and primarily focused oriented.

Along with this goes not only the claim, but also the evidence that countries with public health systems, like Germany, Finland, Iceland, New Zealand, Denmark and some others, have been quite successful in facing pandemics at this stage (it is noticeable as well that primarily women are prime ministers the case of these countries). This finding is of utmost importance, since elderly and vulnerable parts of populations are mainly exposed to the virus. Another set of evidence shows that cutting down some of basic liberties, like freedom of gathering, for the sake of better responding to the pandemics, influences temptations for concentrating power in the executive branch.

Temporary standstill in global traffic uncovered some logistical aspects that were previously neglected, overlooked or perhaps simply treated as not worth taking them into consideration. This has been mostly visible with the EU's dependence on production of variety of goods in China.

During the first decade of this millennium a trend appeared in Europe of transferring production of goods to China for significantly lower cost of labour force. No policy advice against such practice was listened to and logistics consequently blossomed from this point of view. However, with the course of time, as evidenced in major cases, low quality of that production brought companies to think over such practice. Additionally, when the EU started to strengthen environmental aspects of production with higher taxes it was uncovered that China, being among the biggest polluters in the globe, does not take into account that part of production, and its miscare for the environment. Finally, findings on massive child labour practice started to lower the trend, though not stopping it. When the pandemics broke out it became definitely clear that moving production was above all a kind of free willing step towards higher dependence on China. Europe found itself in a position in which it simply did not have certain production on its territory, being thus forced to import a variety of goods from China (and some other countries, though on a much lower scale). It became clear that production has to be arranged in closer vicinity, within a few days of road transportation. It was only the severe global crisis that pushed for this policy change, not the acceptance of advice. The whole issue could have developed serious political, security and economic consequences.

The think global – act local phrase has been a mantra since mid of the previous century. It was a reflection of enthusiasm while discovering the growing connectivity of global affairs, society and relations. Media and transport technology with its constant and huge advancement was only confirming the fact. The current lock down forced societies to go literary local. Closing of national borders that was soon followed by the closure of regional and municipality borders as well raised the importance of local, in particular since global ceased to be reachable physically, yet only digital. However, due to an unexpected rise of going digital, this dimension brought global again to the forefront, this time only virtually. Closure of borders and huge decrease of travel pointed out that local exists primarily physically and global virtually. It has been for the first time in our history that such high level of complementarity between local and global appeared. The world as a global village received another notion. The level of interdependency as well as of mutual influence between global and local gained on momentum, but with different aspects. Digitalization is becoming one of the winners of pandemics. One could speculate that the global search for a vaccine

will use digitalization as a means of connecting expert teams around the globe to work together without being physically close till the vaccine is discovered and produces mass scale results.

To conclude, one could claim, that pandemics did not endanger globalization, as it might have seemed so at first glance, but has accelerated some of its trends. Among them, digitalization of daily life and public services stands out. But it has also pointed out the psychological aspects of lock downs, like stress, trauma and also intrapersonal violence that have all been on the rise.

We have as well learned once again that globalization is a context and a tool for human and social activities. It does not have substance, content by itself, but it is a useful frame, which forwards, transfers and progressively transmits topics of choice. This is the way globalization influences and changes. And it is up to those who use it for described purposes to choose what kind of substance and messages would be in place.

Finally, one could not avoid an impression that the European Union might be viewed upon as a kind of structural result of globalization. This very fact additionally confirms it as a unique historical project that rests on production of values as its major achievement from the past sixty decades. A broad and huge web of structures that support the EU's activities should keep this in mind for the benefit of us all.