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Minorities and COVID-19

#1 Minorities, territorial governance and inter-state relations in pandemic times

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The Covid-19 pandemic has a clear impact on minority communities, on dynamics between centres and peripheries, and on inter-state relations. The immediate reactions to the pandemic included a "war rhetoric" with an explicit or tacit requirement of loyalty and obedience, closure of borders, and centralization from the territories to the centre and from parliaments to executives. The pandemic shows time and again that there is no one-size-fit-all solution for cultural and territorial governance.

Sia Spiliopoulou Åkermark, Åland Islands Peace Institute

The pandemic that in spring 2020 turned the world upside down took many by surprise – in spite of the fact that the risk for global pandemics has been highlighted again and again by the United Nations, the World Health Organization and other experts, including during the last two decades of debates on human and biological security. The immediate reaction to the pandemic was the use of a bellicose language referring to the 'war' against Covid-19.

The reference to this 'war' by local, national and global leaders is joined by an explicit or tacit requirement of loyalty and obedience. It raises the questions: Who is the enemy in the present situation? Is it the virus – not even a living thing with own intention? Is the enemy to be found in those countries, regions or groups where the virus was first found? Or in those countries that at some point failed to prevent the spread of the disease and were put on the 'black list' of the unwilling or unable? And who is to be considered as the defeated in this alleged war? Is it the hundreds of thousands of dead across the continents? Is it those who live in refugee camps or crammed apartments with no chance to follow the recommendations for hygiene and distancing? The effects of the pandemic hit all societies around the globe, but its starkest consequences are unevenly distributed.

The mentality of war and its demands for loyalty and obedience, exhibits a high degree of initial centralisation. In spring 2020, the general expectation was that decisions and programmes to meet the challenge of the pandemic should be found at the level of central governments. Regional governments were taken aback, requesting differentiation and making their own adapted plans several weeks later. This applies also to autonomous regions with legislative competence in fields such as health and education. The centralising effect of the pandemic can also be observed in the relations between governments and parliamentary assemblies, both national and regional.

The initial "mental" state of emergency was followed in most countries by legal states of emergency that entailed a wide acceptance of measures which – if prolonged unnecessarily or if lacking a clear, legitimate and proportionate aim – can be considered to have violated human right obligations, such as the freedom of movement. The dynamics between centres and peripheries have thereby been highly affected by the pandemic in multiple ways and it will take time for politicians, citizens and scholars to grasp the long-term consequences of these processes.

Francesco Palermo, Institute for Comparative Federalism, Eurac Research

Covid-19 has been an extraordinary accelerator of societal processes. It has not changed societies per se, but it has made ongoing processes much faster, more visible and above all more extreme. Where social cohesion was strong enough, it has been further strengthened, as shown by the numerous examples of solidarity during the crisis. Where cohesion was weak, cleavages became deeper. While initially some contended that the virus is "democratic", a big equalizer that af-

fects all persons irrespective of their position in society, it turned out to be exactly the opposite: inequalities have been exacerbated and marginalized groups have been more severely affected. The impact on minorities has thus been proportional to the degree of their marginalization.

Another trend that has been accelerated is solidarity among "like-minded", and especially "like-skinned", "like-looking", "like-social status". The most visible consequence has been a rise in nationalism, even racism, against those that "don't belong": closure of borders, war language, calls for loyalty have accelerated the already ongoing trend of segmentation, a rhetoric (and often practice) of "we against the others". Mounting nationalism (including minority nationalism, where existing) is detrimental to minorities and overall to the integration of societies. It is fair to say that the virus accelerated two existing trends: marginalization and nationalism. The more they converge, the stronger minorities are impacted.

It is against this background that the impact on (minority) self-governance can be understood. In all countries, centralization has been the immediate and cheap reaction to the pandemic: centralization from territories to the centre and from parliaments to executives, in an overall limitation of pluralism. But like groups, also territories are impacted differently and different rules are necessary. Uniformity, formal equality and states of emergency are in principle detrimental to minorities and to all nuances in society. A more rational approach would call for differentiation, substantial equality and preservation of constitutional guarantees in order to protect societies and their differences against fear, which produces marginalization, nationalism and centralization: all existing processes that the pandemic has accelerated.

Sergiu Constantin, Institute for Minority Rights, Eurac Research

In the first episode of the Eurac Research webinar series on Minorities and Covid-19, Prof. Joseph Marko made an interesting point: every pandemic acts as an X-ray of states and societies, highlighting both their strengths and weaknesses. I would add that this X-ray provides not only the big picture but allows us to identify certain critical areas where our societal tissue is particularly affected by the ongoing pandemic. The impact of the pandemic on minority communities, majority-minority relations as well as inter-state relations across Europe is clearly visible when one zooms in and out, from the European level to states, regions and local communities. All across Europe there are unresolved minority-related problems such as the discrimination of Roma, the treatment of refugees and migrants or the access to information in minority languages that have been clearly exacerbated by the ongoing crisis while nationalism and populism are on the rise. In Western Europe, the territorial politics of the response to the Covid-19 pandemic strained the relationship between central governments and autonomous regions with distinct (linguistic and cultural) identity. In Central and Southeastern Europe, the Covid-19 crisis amplified some already existing inter-ethnic disputes and inter-state tensions. Let us remember that 2020 marks the centenary of Trianon Treaty and the 25th commemoration of the Srebrenica genocide. This pandemic shows time and again that there is no one-size-fit-all solution for cultural and territorial governance. We need to address this crisis at multiple levels, taking into consideration local and regional contexts, enhancing coordination between national and sub-national authorities, developing cross-border cooperation and building a Europe-wide response mechanism. Arguably, the Covid-19 pandemic is one of the so-called moments of rupture in history which bring great challenges but also create the conditions for advancements, for new approaches. It is time to update and upgrade our minority protection standards and mechanisms. Finally, it is worth noting that the EU has the opportunity to start developing its own basic toolbox to handle minority-related issues within its borders. Two ongoing European Citizen Initiatives call for a proactive approach in this area. One proposes a "Minority SafePack" to strengthen cultural and linguistic diversity, while the other focuses on the support for "national regions" and "regional cultures".

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#2 Covid-19 and Religious Minorities

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As a result of the Covid-19 pandemic and its containment measures, particularly 'physical distancing', many religious minorities experience limitations in different aspects of their religious practices. In this brief, we will discuss the specific problems, obstacles, and limitations that religious minorities face compared to majority religious groups and mainstream faiths, and explore measures to prevent discrimination and prejudices against religious minorities.

Roberta Medda-Windischer: **Which religious minorities or religious groups are particularly affected by the Covid-19 emergency and which aspects connected to freedom of religion and belief of minority groups are particularly targeted?**

Kyriaki Topidi: The pandemic has created a fertile ground for prejudice against minority groups in general by amplifying existing patterns of exclusion. For religious minorities, there is evidence that several groups across the globe have experienced discrimination, for instance Muslims in India (e.g. Tablighi Jamaat group incident), Uighurs in China, the members of the Shincheonji Church of Jesus in South Korea, the Rohingya in Malaysia, Christians and Ahmadis in Pakistan or Shia Muslims in Saudi Arabia and Bahrain. In Scandinavia, Somali communities appear to have been affected 7-10 times more by Covid-19 than other groups due to lack of access to information about the pandemic.

Kerstin Wonisch: Covid-19 affected particularly the collective dimension of freedom of religion. All across the globe, governments closed places of worship and prohibited religious gatherings, pilgrimages and important collective rites such as the Haj, the celebration of Easter or the Jewish Pesach. The pandemic can serve as an excuse for states to use rhetoric that scapegoats certain minorities, exacerbates tensions between religious groups and justifies further suppressions of already marginalized communities. For instance, religious groups deviating from mainstream Sunni Islam in certain countries in the MENA region are still denied any sort of formal (legal) recognition but are faced with discriminatory practices almost on a daily basis and are even blamed for spreading the virus. Also in the European context, where religion has been a central element for othering and discriminating minority communities for centuries, a rise of anti-Semitic and Islamophobic trends partially fueled by the pandemic, endanger not only Jewish or Muslim communities but society as a whole.
For more details, see e.g. https://freedomhouse.org/article/state-sponsored-religious-discrimination-rises-pandemic or https://www.un.org/press/en/2020/sgsm20214.doc.htm.

Detlev Rein: All Abrahamic religions have an inner and an outer religious sphere. The inner sphere -- that is the belief itself and the prayers in solitude – is not affected by the Covid-19 emergency or the measures against it. But the outer sphere, which involves the communal practice of religious services in dedicated places, is intensively touched and changed by restricted admission to services and hygiene rules. The regular religious service is perhaps the most important gathering of believers, but we must also consider the effects on individual events and ceremonies accompanying members of religious communities from birth to death.

Roberta Medda-Windischer: **Do you see a difference in the way Covid-19 and the containment measures have affected religious minority groups, in terms of their religious practices or discrimination or hate speech, in comparison to mainstream religious groups?**

Kyriaki Topidi: As previously mentioned, religious minority groups have been affected primarily in the collective aspects of the exercise of their religious freedom. The banning of public gatherings, including religious services, is to some extent in line with instructions of the WHO but it is not always clear how governments are using such bans to clamp dissent and religious freedoms. Three aspects within the collective exercise of religious freedom can be mentioned: congregation, with limitations to congregate being viewed at times as limitations to freedom of religion and belief; the practice of religious rites and pastoral care, which social distancing has made harder to adopt (e.g. mourning rites, burials, spiritual support and guidance to the sick); and charitable work, as the lack thereof has placed beneficiaries in danger especially when related to childcare and hunger relief.

Kerstin Wonisch: The pandemic sheds light on how the concept of minorities is framed in a certain socio-geographical context and how it relates to historical developments in a given region. Moreover, constantly changing power-relations in connection with a politicization of religion serve as a pretext for Covid-19-related policies to target religious minorities. Frictions and divisions within and between religious communities serve as an additional excuse for states to limit rights of minority communities, discriminating against, and ultimately persecuting, groups deviating from mainstream religion. Thus, Covid-19 highlights blind spots neglected by policy makers and legislators concerning the meaningful protection of rights of religious minority communities.

Detlev Rein: In all the cases of limits placed on religious practices, the burdens are nearly the same for both members of the majority population and minorities. All religious organisations and believers should jointly ensure that the measures adopted in respect of Corona do not exceed the necessary level of restrictions. However, I see a big difference in the way some right-wing extremists and conspiracy theorists react to the spreading of the virus: while they do not focus on Christian religions, Judaism in particular is accused of trying to achieve world domination through a "global Jewish Conspiracy", which is a crude figment of imagination and deliberate disinformation. This dangerous nonsense appears both in social media as well as in demonstrations.

Roberta Medda-Windischer: **Looking toward the future: What role could supra-national organizations, such as the CoE, UN, OSCE and the UN, as well as civil society, activists and watchdog organisations, have to address the rise of discrimination and prejudices against religious groups?**

Kyriaki Topidi: Any future action on tackling prejudice connected to religious groups should include state-faith actor partnerships and draw lessons from earlier pandemics. Governments and international institutions should be invited to appreciate the power and complexity of religion in order to design effective outreach efforts to religious minority communities. Knowledge about such groups is therefore essential. At the same time, religious leaders should abstain from conveying inaccurate and polarizing information and focus on encouraging positive behavioral change and adjustment to the pandemic. In addition, international stakeholders and local human rights activists need to remain constantly alert both during 'ordinary' as well as 'extra-ordinary' times in order to mitigate discrimination against these groups in the long run.

Kerstin Wonisch: Concerted efforts are needed to tackle discrimination of, and prejudices against, religious minorities. This starts with the empowerment and engagement of religious leaders in policy making at local level, and of interfaith councils and initiatives at national level, and continues with the need for legal measures with binding force particularly dedicated to the rights of religious minorities at supra-national level.

Detlev Rein: Awareness campaigns are key, based on current research on the actual trends of discrimination and prejudices. And in this undertaking, all levels of public and private life should be involved, from the United Nations to the Mayor of a small municipality, from the leaders of all majority and minority religious denominations to local church officials. The CoE's Advisory Committee on the Framework Convention pays special attention to the rights of minorities in times of pandemics and has passed a statement, noting with deep concern that the pandemic has increased the vulnerability of certain national minorities in many countries and has deepened already existing inequalities in many European states.

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#3 Covid-19 and Roma

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The Roma are the largest minority group in Europe and present in virtually all European countries. Under this umbrella term, they comprise millions of individuals and communities, including for instance Sinti, Travellers, Kalé, Gens du voyage, whether sedentary or not. It is acknowledged that most Roma populations face considerable obstacles to the full enjoyment of their fundamental rights and that the Covid-19 pandemic intensifies existing inequalities and vulnerabilities. In this brief, three experts on Roma rights share their insights into these challenges.

Roberta Medda-Windischer: **Neda Korunovska, as co-author of the comprehensive report "Roma in the Covid-19 crisis: An Early Warning from Six EU Member States", you are in an ideal position to give us a short overview of the major results of the report, especially on access to health and labour.**

Neda Korunovska: The report documented the inadequate support and measures that were not adjusted to the conditions of extreme poverty and many systemic disadvantages that Roma face, such as lack of statutory health insurance or access to basic infrastructure, such as clean water and sewage. Soldiers, police personnel and drones have been more present in Roma communities in Bulgarian and Slovakia than nurses, doctors and medical supplies. Disinformation by the far right and others, in combination with excessive security measures and police abuse, framed the Roma as a public health threat, which reinforces and politicizes hatred.
The most dramatic and long-lasting impact of the pandemic is on Roma workers and entrepreneurs, many of whom worked in the informal economy, in low-skill and low-wage jobs, or in the arts and culture industry, and who are not included in social and economic recovery plans. Even the new EU SURE program aimed at "protecting citizens and mitigating the severely negative socio-economic consequences of the coronavirus pandemic" provides support for the existing Member States' measures (mostly focused on wage subsidies), missing an opportunity to provide coverage for the most vulnerable citizens.

Roberta Medda-Windischer: **In the economy, the slogan "Never let a crisis go to waste" is often used to refer to the fact that a crisis should be used as an opportunity to do things you previously could not do. After the pan-European Decade on Roma Inclusion that was supposed to eradicate poverty and bring tangible improvements in the lives of the Roma population in Europe, and 10 years after the adoption of the EU Roma strategy, which lessons can we learn from these ambitious initiatives that may serve in the post-pandemic scenario to transform, effectively, a crisis into an opportunity?**

Lorant Vincze: In the ten years that the European Union's Roma strategy has been in place, the situation of Roma has not improved significantly. All the data show that their situation has worsened; in Central and Eastern European countries Roma intergenerational poverty remains, access to education, public services and the job market is hindered, and basic infrastructure is missing. In Western Europe, Roma discrimination and antigypsyism have intensified. The European Parliament has adopted a revised strategy, which focuses more on inclusive education, better access to the labor market and facilitation of political participation of Roma. The pandemic has brought to the fore the flaws of the current program: there is a lack of good national programs, while local good practices are not promoted. A study conducted at the level of the Federal Union of European Nationalities with the support of the European Parliament's Minority Intergroup has shown that half of the minorities did not have access to general health care information in their mother tongue

and especially Roma lack access to online education. We have to transform the crisis into an opportunity, and we need stronger legal acts to make the Member States take measures. Coordination is not enough; we need an EU Directive.

Roberta Medda-Windischer: A deficit of mutual trust and dialogue seems to be a recurrent problem in many European countries in the relation between public authorities (and part of the non-Roma population) and many Roma communities. How do you evaluate the impact of the pandemic on the Roma community from this perspective?

Zora Popova: Covid-19 tested the societal systems and their functionalities and exposed their deficits. The crisis revealed that the lack of trust exists both ways – from governments to communities and from communities to governments. Although the following two illustrative examples are from Bulgaria, this does not mean that this is only a Bulgarian problem. The so-called "anti-epidemic measures", such as imposed curfew and strictly controlled social isolation through introduced checkpoints from and to the Roma neighbourhoods, are examples of the lack of established cooperation and communication mechanisms between public authorities and stakeholders resulting in use of force to ensure compliance. The Covid-19 patient who ran away from the hospital to his home village (infecting other people as a result), clearly demonstrates the pattern: lack of trust in the institutions and expected support from the family. In both cases, the signal is the same: This is not an integrated society and before mutual trust is achieved, individuals belonging to different communities will maintain the separation between the communities. The important role that Roma mediators played during the crisis – providing medical support and information or serving as negotiators to reduce tensions – emphasised the perpetuating communication gap between Roma and the general population.

Roberta Medda-Windischer: Looking toward the future, can you give us a recommendation on the 'way forward' for a better future for the Roma communities?

Neda Korunovska: Our primary recommendation is that the European Commission and the EU's financial institutions— for example, the European Investment Bank — should take responsibility for complementing the measures of national governments, both in the short and long term. Such direct approach should especially target cities, towns and districts with a higher share of Roma population and be carried out in partnership with innovative and capable Roma-led organizations and businesses. Unfortunately, at the moment the new EU Roma strategic framework – expected to be promoted in October 2020 – is decoupled from the policy debates on the new EU budget (the Multi Annual Financial Framework) and the Resilience and Recovery' Plans under the Next Generation (NGEU) . The upcoming recovery – similarly to the post-2008 – risks leaving Roma further behind, missing an opportunity to reimagine the future which builds on the potential of the youngest and largest minority in Europe. If that happens, we can expect a humanitarian catastrophe among the Roma, higher trends of migration towards Western Europe and strengthening of anti-Roma politics that is a danger for democracy and rule of law. In sum, we argue that to recover from Covid-19, the EU cannot afford the cost of inequality.

Lorant Vincze: Education is the key. Everything starts with education, as this is the only way to get Roma children out of intergenerational poverty. Families need to be motivated to keep their children in school, all involved stakeholders need to work on reducing school drop-out rates and schools need to put higher emphasis on providing quality education so that children would have better academic results. Afterschool programs with hot meals, combined with adult learning programs with Roma parents are promising. The majority population also needs to be educated in order to deconstruct prejudices. Discrimination and xenophobia persist in society, and Roma are one of the most targeted communities. Discrimination negatively impacts school attendance, access to social services, education and health care, vocational education and ultimately access to the labour market.

Zora Popova: Increasing trust is a two-dimensional process, which requires the active involvement of all actors involved. Trust is the end result of a process that starts with rapprochement, open and constructive dialogue, respect for the other, willingness for cooperation, and a vision for a common future. To overcome the problems that Covid-19 revealed, and to prevent them from happening in the future, targeted efforts to establish mechanisms for direct communication between Roma communities and the general society and public authorities, as well as platforms for interaction are needed. A possible step forward is the transformation of the Roma mediator into a public service position. The involvement of Roma communities in decision-making processes as a regular practice would allow the development of joint plans for action in extraordinary situations such as the pandemic. Such an approach would not only enable the reduction and possible elimination of existing democratic deficits but also enable mobilization of support for overcoming future crises.

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Minorities and COVID-19

#4 Security in times of a pandemic: borders, states and minorities

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Did states fail to protect their citizens from the Covid-19 pandemic, thus breaking the trust between citizens and their institutions? And how did the pandemic affect the life of vulnerable groups in South Asia and the Balkans? This brief explores the impact of Covid-19 on minorities and its security considerations through a regional approach with case studies from India and Europe. It argues that despite the manifold challenges linked to the pandemic, Covid-19 could also be a stimulus to address the problems that affect vulnerable minorities.

Günther Rautz: **Ranabir Samaddar, you published a book titled "**<u>Borders of an Epidemic – Covid-19 and the Migrant Workers</u>**". The book which highlights the ethical and political implications of the epidemic particularly for India's migrant workers was conceptualised as soon as the migrant crisis broke out in the wake of India's nationwide lock-down. In the book, you are comparing the actual crisis with a war, what does this mean?**

Ranabir Samaddar: War revises international order. Colonial wars changed political orders in many parts of the world, set up new borders and boundaries, and created divisions. But we rarely notice how much a massive outbreak of a disease may change the global order. In the context of the Covid-19 pandemic, the world witnesses a neo-Malthusian scenario in many countries. What will be the response to this resurgence of neo-Malthusianism in global politics? In the book, I want to present a rough vision of a new politics of life and the importance of care in a transformed politics. I also suggest that this calls for a new type of public power which values care as the guiding principle of organising society, which will be treated as a common resource. We have to consider the following questions: What kind of power will guard the society that emerges as the common resource? What kind of power will nourish the world of care, which would mean protection and a consequent norm of responsibility – precisely the principles which have been central to care of the self and manipulated by modern bourgeois democracies? What will be the new policies and modes to reinforce and widen the social bases of care and protection? The more we think about these questions, the more we shall see that these are issues of how to imagine self-rule in a different way, learning from the histories of fighting diseases and wars in the past, and yet will be infused with an order of new imaginary of a state that runs things differently, assures protection to its people, discharges responsibility for the safety, security, and well-being of its people. In short, a new combination of autonomy, history, and politics. The effects of the epidemic are not, unlike what the media tells, evenly distributed. The poor and the migrant laborers, the elderly and the vulnerable, the assembly chain workers in a plant that produces ventilators and the mechanics in a small shop producing test kits, or the vigilant guards of a village and an urban slum – they all are playing roles in this war. The closer a government will pay attention to how people respond to the danger of a pandemic and mobilizes its resources (by which I mean the people, the country, the nation), the less costly will this war be. Trust will be an important element in protecting society as a common resource. Although this is a crude sketch of the new type of general power that the post-epidemic scenario will call for, I think it provides a starting point to reconstruct and characterize what is specific about this "war", the other conflicts it will unleash, and other confrontations it will provoke. In some sense it is a counter-history based on elements that the given history of crises and statehoods provides.

Günther Rautz: **Marika Djolai, in your analysis, drafted with colleagues in the Europe Policy Advisory Group, you focused on the role of state and the relationship between citizens and the state in times of pandemic. What did you find out?**

Marika Djolai: For many citizens around the world, the Covid-19 pandemic became not only a health threat but also a security issue. Some have argued that the pandemic poses a threat to national, as well as international, security by putting a significant strain on the economy, particularly the workforce, the health system and societal cohesion. Having a threat to the state is used as an invitation to protect national security, whereby a "war" on the pandemic is manifested in disproportionately securitised responses, particularly by populist and less democratic governments. Swift introductions of repressive measures were observable around the world, particularly in countries with pre-existing conditions of populism and authoritarianism, one of the blatant examples being the Western Balkans. The state of emergency was introduced in all six countries as early as March, but it was perceived as a mechanism of control rather than a measure aimed at protecting the citizens. It was also done in haste without respect for due decision-making procedures or transparency.

Günther Rautz: **Can there be trust between citizens and the state under such circumstances and what are the consequences?**

Marika Djolai: Two main complications arise from disproportionate state responses during the pandemic. First, it leads to a break of trust between citizens and the state, particularly for minorities and those living on the margins of the society. In the context of the global pandemic, the trust between citizens depends on accurate information (provided by the state to the citizens); full protection of the citizens by the state (strong health responses and provision of services) and the state commitment to mitigating the long-term economic impact of the pandemic. Furthermore, on a collective level, traumatic experiences such as the pandemic lead to a lack of trust as well. Second, in a situation where governments chose to mobilise police and army to implement 'protective' measures, the citizens de facto become a security threat, and securitisation of their everyday life will lead to further breakdown of trust. In short, weak states with authoritarian regimes have used the pandemic to tighten their grip of power and accelerated Covid-19 to become a human security issue.

Günther Rautz: **In the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic, security issues have surfaced as an essential concern. What have been the security considerations for minorities and what will be the consequences of the pandemic on securities and insecurities of/for minorities?**

Andrea Carlà: Indeed, the pandemic has sparked several security related challenges and insecurities for the society, and more specifically for members of minorities. Five types of considerations can be pointed out. First, the response to the pandemic has been a politics of securitization, i.e. Covid-19 has been considered as an existential threat requiring exceptional measures, as showed by the rhetoric of war often used by politicians and public discourses. Second, the pandemic and related state responses raised personal, health, economic and social insecurities for members of minorities because in combination with existing inequalities and structural discrimination the virus discriminated against populations at the margin. For example, in some countries like the USA, minorities had a higher death rate. Third, together with the virus, also some minorities, like Roma and migrant communities, were securitized. Indeed, the pandemic increased the politics of fear, leading to a higher risk of xenophobia and intolerance. Thereby, some governments used minorities as scapegoats for their failure in addressing the pandemic, and populist politicians associated them to the spread of the diseases. Fourth, the concept of border has been securitized. Indeed, borders have been used mainly as a defensive tool to protect against potential carriers of the disease and various border closures and travel restrictions were put in place, further complicating migration paths and sparking tensions in border areas where national minorities often live. Last, the Covid-19 pandemic could be framed in terms of a human security crisis which revealed profound problems in the society, such as the weakness of health systems and rising inequalities which particularly affect minorities and vulnerable groups. However, in some cases specific actions were taken to deal with the needs of minorities. Thus, in a world facing transnational challenges, where one's security is linked to the security of others, the hope is that the pandemic could also be a stimulus to address the problems that affect vulnerable minorities.

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#5 Diversity Governance: Future Post-Covid Scenarios

FULL WEBINARS AVAILABLE HERE

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After the end of the spring-2020 lockdowns, analyses of how political systems and decision makers handled the pandemic as well as a predictions of long-lasting societal changes have become central topics in public discourse. In relation to diversity governance, Covid-19 has triggered discussions about the efficiency of international actors, as well as a heightened awareness of inequalities and their possible consequences for the future of our societies. In this brief, two experts on minorities and fundamental rights share their assessment of the EU's response to Covid-19 in terms of diversity governance, and provide their thoughts on the impact of the pandemic on diverse societies.

Katharina Crepaz: **In the EU, we have a multi-level-governance system where different levels of governance and different actors tackle different tasks. How would you evaluate the performance of this multi-level system in regard to diversity during the Covid-19 pandemic? What needs to be improved?**

Catherine Van de Heyning: A consensus was emerging that multi-level governance holds much merit as it allows for diversification of policy adapted to each level of governance. Covid-19 has shown us that in times of emergency, multi-level governance can also result in friction and distrust. For instance, when the pandemic hit the EU, the member states (even regions or municipalities) all focused on the protection and sustainability of their own health care system, without showing solidarity to the (initially) worst hit regions. In response, we need a structure for emergency governance that is built on prior agreed upon checks and balances, rather than trust.

Joshua Castellino: As a test for humanity, the pandemic reflected a spectacular failure of governance mechanisms. These proved ineffective in containing infection, its spread, and in sourcing and delivering remedies. As the crisis bloomed, 'national interests' were cited in the differential policies within member states. On closer interrogation, these 'interests' favoured maintenance of political hegemonies over national interests. The result is a twinned failure - in outcomes (high death tolls) and in the long-term consequences of keeping economies afloat. This calls for an overhaul of systems of political participation that yield incompetence, favouring control by an elite class within dominant ethnic groups, out of touch with the modern societies they allegedly represent.

Katharina Crepaz: **Over the course of the pandemic, inequalities between societal groups in terms of vulnerability to the illness have become a prominent topic. In the US, we have also seen a rise in Black Lives Matter protests after yet another black person died due to police brutality. Subsequently, there have been protests also in Europe, and a newly fueled discussion on how to deal with racial injustice and colonial histories has emerged. Which lessons can we draw from these protests, and how can diversity governance respond?**

Catherine Van de Heyning: The protests and coverage of police brutality put structural racism and lack of diversity in decision-making again on the top of the agenda. Additional bodies, expert committees or institutions have only little added value as long as the power structures themselves are not more diversified. The Covid-emergency response provided yet another example. Most member states introduced expert panels to advise the government on Covid measures with a profound impact on our rights and freedoms, a particular harsh impact on the most vulnerable and minorities. Yet, there was little to no representation of their voice or experience in these expert panels.

Joshua Castellino: The Black Lives Matter movement highlighted the entrenched and ossified systems of socio-ethnic domination that lie at the foundation of wealth creation in the United States of America and Europe, achieved through global domination over at least two centuries. The key lesson to draw from these protests is the need to effectively challenge superficial notions of 'meritocracy' which have yielded mediocrity, fuelling systematic exclusion and marginalization, bringing societies to the precipice of environmental and socio-economic breakdown.

Katharina Crepaz: **One of the main developments we have seen during the pandemic was a very fast and forced digitalization of many areas of life (e.g. work-from-home). Do you think these changes will last, and what is their impact on different groups?**

Catherine Van de Heyning: This digitalization of life was already ongoing, but it is without doubt that Covid-19 has accelerated this evolution. There are clear benefits, e.g. access to information. Yet, digitalization also results in social, economic and cultural division. First, if equal access to tech, the internet, and technological skills is not ensured, digitalization risks to further widen the gap between the haves and have-nots. Further, while social media can be a tool for freedom of expression, information and protest, it also divides society by the easy spread of hate and misinformation pushing minorities outside the mainstream debate. Maintaining a common 'platform' of understanding and interaction will become a vital challenge for society.

Joshua Castellino: With societies at this point of precarity, digitalization could create a more level playing field, as majorities experience - as 'the new normal' - the systemic exclusion that has characterised lived minority realities. However, unless designed with transparency, digitalization could become another playground to accentuate inequality. The precursors – the lack of effective participation in design, delivery and dissemination of such technologies – do not augur well. If societal will exists to ensure parity such hurdles can be overcome, but a premium has to be placed on their aspiration, imagination and design. A laissez faire approach dictating commercial growth will only yield further growth in the chasm of inequality.

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