

Introduction to the Special Issue

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The Covid-19 pandemic and the ensuing global state of emergency have fostered a new global debate on whether the current ‘state of exception’ makes differences between democracies and non-democracies, as well as liberal and illiberal regimes less politically relevant. There are many arguments that seem to lead us towards an affirmative answer. Many authoritative voices in global academia assume that all governments nowadays face similar challenges and similarly react to them (Kimmage 2020). In accordance with this logic, what matters is not the nature of political regimes (democracy or autocracy), but rather the resourcefulness and decisiveness of the government that translates into the state capacity to control and discipline the society badly affected by the deadly virus. Indeed, one may agree that all governments have to deal with the pandemic using a set of standard methods, in many respects constraining liberal rights – the rights to public assembly, free travel, or privacy, just to name the most salient among them. This shift towards what might be dubbed “*monitory democracy*” often “*makes the demarking line between authoritarian power and democratically elected government almost indistinguishable*” (Navarria 2014: 77).

Some opinion makers would go so far as to claim that liberal democracy is incompatible with robust crisis management and the fight against the virus, which makes the Covid-19 pandemic a part of the broader discussion on the transformations within the liberal order. This reasoning is largely based on Giorgio Agamben’s claims of “*the collapse of the rule of law into the state of exception*” and the concomitant “*impotence of the Western liberal democracies*” that always have to confront the challenge of sovereign power (Sharpe 2006: 103). Against this background, liberalism may be declared as a major loser of the coronavirus, whose positions have been undermined by “*pandemically successful social polities*” of non-Western states with a higher social cohesion and a better sense of collective social responsibility (Therborn 2020).

From a geopolitical perspective, this discourse translates into a vision of Europe losing its global subjectivity: the most important structural feature of the world shaped by Covid-19 “*is not the multilateralism Europeans dreamed of, but rather a competition between China and America, the EU’s two most important economic partners*” (Leonard 2020). Apart from that, the EU’s Eastern Partnership programme might be severely

damaged by Covid-19, at least in the sense of visa-free travel arrangements with Moldova, Ukraine and Georgia. This major achievement, which was conducive to a de-bordering between the EU and its eastern neighbors, is now temporarily scrapped.

With all due recognition of some validity of these arguments, they might be counter-balanced by an opposite logic positing that the pandemic did not annul the distinction between democracies and non-democracies. With a few exceptions (such as, for example, Hungary), the pandemic didn't change much in the procedure of democratic governance. It is true that there is no direct correlation between the level of democracy and the Covid-19 statistics, and so far procedurally democracies managed to survive (Niblett – Vinjamuri 2020), and many of them learned how to incorporate exceptional measures into the system of democratic governmentality (Raimondi 2016: 53).

In fact, the pandemic seems to have shattered some dictatorial regimes by exposing their incompetence and inefficiency in dealing with the threat. Thus, in Belarus, the Covid denialism of its authoritarian ruler seems to have alienated even many of his former supporters, leading to mass protests which erupted on a hitherto unprecedented scale, following the rigged presidential election in August 2020. Similarly, illiberal and populist leaders in democratic countries also had their image tarnished by mismanagement of the crisis. There is, therefore, no linear dependence between the pandemic and consolidation of authoritarianism, nor is there grounds to argue – as some do – that democracies have proven to be relatively weaker in the face of this challenge (see for instance Lu 2020 or similar Chinese 'soft power' attempts).

Moreover, the logic of sovereignty, with its bans and closures, works only in a very limited sense. Usurpation of power and riddance of democratic procedures – as theorists like Carl Schmitt would have expected – was not a central point in the political agendas of Western governments. The retrieved national sovereignty actualized by Covid-19 is to be better conceptualized as post-sovereignty, an agglomeration of specific practices (Loh – Heiskanen 2020) that are *"intrinsically linked to life as a biological force and to the body"* (Stepputat 2015: 130). In other words, sovereignty can be approached *"as a territorialized technology of (b)ordering bodies"* (Nayar 2014: 133), which differs a lot from sovereignty as a product of the political will that requires a friend-foe distinction.

However, the limitations that sovereignty has to face were not results of the progression of human rights or the rise of supranational cosmopolitanism, as some theorists have expected (Gümplová 2015). Sovereignty revealed itself as a precarious and vulnerable construct due to its high dependence on multiple actors and factors beyond the direct reach of the government – health care infrastructure, medical expertise, volunteering, and corporate and individual responsibility (Makarychev – Romashko 2020). In other words, top-down coercion works only partially, or fails to work at all, and the general trend in Europe is to rely more on social responsibility (responsibilization) than on punishment and repression.

Against this background, the eruption of Covid-19 made us return to the Foucauldian interpretation of liberalism. The latter comes to be understood not merely as a political ideology that sees individual rights as a limit to state power, but as a mode of governing and disciplining human subjects through these very individual freedoms. Liberal governance allows them to play out according to the autonomous laws of social life. This, however, also implies managing the inherent risks *"by regulating human bodies and by controlling the natural and artificial conditions of life"* (Renault 2006: 162).

What the Covid-19 pandemic also made clear is that democracy comes in a broad variety of versions and forms, some more liberal and some less liberal. This variety of policies reflects the uncertainty existing within medical expertise itself. As Katsambekis and Stavrakakis (2020: 8) put it, for instance, the pandemic has *"revealed the deeply political character of scientific input in critical junctures as well as the very political agency of experts themselves"*. As an illustration of their claim they point to the contrasting

cases of Greece and Sweden, where the appointed professional epidemiologists Professor Sotiris Tsiodras and Anders Tegnell adopted divergent approaches. This contrasting example elucidates a ‘crisis of expertise’. We lack “*a broadly shared definition of the situation*”, with interpretations of Covid-19 varying from ‘the greatest danger of our lifetimes’ to ‘merely a seasonal flu’ (Brubaker 2020). Accordingly, the anti-pandemic measures can be viewed both as vital and indispensable and, on the contrary, as ineffective and detrimental to the economy. Evidently, this variety of approaches among professionals creates additional space for political manipulations and machinations within democratic polities. For instance, one of the lessons learned after the Fukushima tragedy was that “*even when exact radioactive measurements of food or soil are known, there is a diversity of opinion about what is a safe level and about who should be involved (government, merchants, farmers, consumers) with setting safety standards*” (Davis – Hayes-Conroy 2018: 726). Similar distinctions among professional epidemiologists complicate decision making in the case of Covid-19 too.

This collection of papers makes several important contributions to the ongoing debate on Covid-19. First of all, it shows that old lines of distinction became more contextual and less certain, which includes not only the lines between liberalism and its opposite but also those between the political and the depoliticized or technocratic. In their contribution Zuzana Maďarová, Alexandra Ostertágová and Pavol Harďoš pointed to a paradoxical function of scientific knowledge, namely that it could be used as a tool of othering, from differentiation of lives to discursive production of “*lives of no value*”, ungrievable non-lives. This public effect of academic cognition as a policy instrument is particularly visible in times of crises and emergencies. Long before the outbreak of Covid-19 some authors predicted that the “*familiar distinction between illness and health can no longer hold... [T]he line of differentiation between interventions targeting susceptibility to illness or frailty on the one hand, and interventions aimed at the enhancement of capacities on the other, is beginning to blur. [...] [I]dentification of high-risk plus biological incorrigibility can switch the affected individual – or potential individual – onto the circuits of exclusion*” (Rose 2001: 34).

Some of the articles in this special issue assume that the Covid-19 pandemics might become a factor triggering intrinsic transformations within the liberal doctrine. Ahmed Maati and Žilvinas Švedkauskas start their analysis with references to ‘old liberalism’ and its focus on citizens’ individual rights, yet we know that today’s protestors against lockdown measures that unfold under similar slogans aggregate a patchy agglomeration of different groups, from left- to right-wingers, and it is very likely that many of them have very little to do with ideas of classic liberalism. Importantly, it has also argued that there is no fixed correlation between ‘liberal’ and ‘illiberal’ discourse on the one hand and the state of democracy and rule of law on the other. This falls into a broader trend of rhetoric being decoupled from practice. During the pandemic some authoritarian regimes (e.g. Belarus) have opportunistically pursued a ‘liberal’ discursive strategy, resisting economically undesirable restrictive measures in the name of individual rights and freedoms, such as the freedom of worship or movement. On the other hand, metaphors of war and conflict have visibly oozed into the discourse of democratic politicians who used them as one of their mobilization tools as part of the crisis management strategy.

By the same token, Covid-19 might contribute to transformations within the phenomenon of populism. As the Ukrainian case demonstrates (see the article by Yuriy Temirov and Ivanna Machitdze), Covid-19 does not seem to kill populists in power, as some commentators have predicted (Rachman 2020); moreover, it may create new niches for them. The comparative study of Ukraine and Georgia which the authors pursue demonstrates that there can be a variety of outcomes in terms of how the so-called hybrid regimes respond to pandemic challenges, ranging from a ‘success story’ to a triumph of incompetence. In future research, the Covid-19 ‘crash test’ is thus likely to provide a new

perspective on this type of regime and, consequently, new food for thought in terms of how the application of the category of 'hybrid' might be in need of reevaluation or further specification.

Also focusing on Eastern European hybrid regimes, *Makarychev, Goes, and Kuznetsova* provide a Foucauldian analysis of the Russian Covid-19 crisis management. Contrary to a more traditional view of Russia as a hypercentralized polity over which the Kremlin exercises single-handed sovereign power, the authors see it through the lens of biopolitics and governmentality. They argue that Moscow's relegation of crisis management to regional authorities becomes "*an important contribution to the gradual decentralization of the Russian political system*" and stimulates the demand for autonomy in some of the regions. The pandemic thus exacerbated and made more visible multiple tensions between the centre and the periphery which existed alongside Putin's 'vertical of power', perhaps even sowing seeds of its future transformation.

Against this background, one may also predict that Covid-19 may foster a further conceptual divorce between liberalism and democracy. The latter is very likely to survive as procedural and institutional democracy, while the former will increasingly face new limitations related to the crisis of the liberal conception of society as composed of rational and therefore inherently free human beings. As *Maďarová, Ostertágová and Hardoš* suggest, it is the crisis of the liberal notion of self-sufficient and self-secured human subjects that can partly explain the vast proliferation of demands for empathy and care (Borovoy – Zhang 2017), which, during the pandemic crisis, were politically instrumentalized by EU-critical narratives of 'abandonment' in such countries as Italy, but in many other places as well.

At the same time, some of the articles identify issues that, due to their complexity, can't have a single conceptualization. Thus, *Temirov and Machitdze* claim that, on the one hand, in times of the pandemic crisis many illiberal regimes seem to be quite vulnerable, which may be illustrated by the examples of the mass scale protests in Belarus (after August 9, 2020) and Kyrgyzstan (in October 2020). Evidently, in both cases the main triggers of the street protests were fraudulent elections, yet the mismanagement of the pandemic crisis by the authorities was a significant factor that fuelled the discontent. Yet, on the other hand, as the two authors explain, a major factor of Georgia's relative success during the first wave of Covid-19 was the concentration of informal tools of governance in the hands of the country's wealthiest oligarch Bidzina Ivanishvili, a development which has very little in common with liberal democracy.

Looking at the broader post-Soviet context, one may see that Covid-19 became a factor that complicates foreign policies of illiberal and dictatorial states. Thus, the closure of the Russian-Belarusian border by the initiative of Moscow became an irritant for Aliaksandr Lukashenka. Here, the pandemic exposed the extent to which dictatorships – which had long taken pride in the rhetoric of sovereignty and self-sufficiency – are structurally dependent on cross-border flows of goods and people. On the other hand, Lukashenka's decision to hold a military parade dedicated to Victory Day on May 9, 2020 – against the background of Putin's decision to cancel this highly ceremonial event in Moscow – can be interpreted as a symbolic competition between the two regimes in the sphere of memory politics. Some elements of this story are touched upon by *Sergey Pakhomenko* and *Iryna Gridina*. What might be added to their analysis is that the border lockdown between Russia and EU member states has complicated the practical implementation of Russian soft power, which is largely understood as a series of policies promoting a Russia-friendly world outlook in general and Russian memory politics in particular. Here, the comparison of Latvia and Russia is useful as it outlines similarities and differences between the effects of the pandemic crisis on memory politics in democratic and authoritarian states. Restriction measures played a key role in limiting the power of popular protest both as an instrument of shaping democratic decision making in the sphere of memory politics and

as a potential niche for authoritarian subversion engineered by external actors like the Kremlin. One of the notable similarities is that in both cases, the Covid-19 crisis intensified the securitization of collective memories, thus bearing an effect on a domain of social life which, at a glance, would seem distant from the pandemic agenda. Furthermore, the closed borders further distance Russia from Russophone communities in such countries as Latvia and Estonia and can potentially contribute to the Russian speakers' better integration with these countries' national mainstreams. A similar problem of cultural and linguistic integration, namely that of the Azeri minority, also exists in Georgia, which demonstrates the importance of effective information policy for successful crisis management.

In sum, the special issue offers a variety of case studies that demonstrate how broad and profound the political effects of the 2020 pandemic crisis are likely to become for increasingly “*medicalized societies*” (Boggs 2015) with ‘digitalized’ and “*biocoded bodies*” (Colman 2015). Above all, the lesson to be learned from them is that fixed correlations and linear dependencies between the pandemic and its effects on social and political life are an exception rather than a rule. The reverberations of the crisis tend to differ from case to case, and sometimes even the *most similar* cases can yield varying outcomes. So far, the existing research has also suggested that many trivializing, ‘commonsensical’ assumptions about the ramifications of the crisis need to be taken with a grain of salt. If in some cases, the state of crisis and emergency does indeed seem to have helped strengthen populist and ‘illiberal’ leaders and weakened liberalism, other instances clearly demonstrated the opposite. Thus, Donald Trump’s erratic response to the pandemic clearly did not improve his public image in the runup to the 2020 US presidential election. In some places (e.g. Belarus), the pandemic even visibly spurred the anti-authoritarian momentum, shattering the legitimacy of dictatorial regimes that previously seemed stable to most observers. Finally, the pandemic exposed once again the complex and ambiguous relationships between key notions of modern politics such as the tension between the *liberal* and the *democratic* for instance, or between the *technocratic* or *epistocratic*, on the one hand, and the majoritarian and politicized, on the other. The triumph of *expertise*, which, at some point, seems to have replaced the global triumph of populism, simultaneously became its crisis, as under conditions of grave uncertainty, the inherently *political* nature of crisis management measures became increasingly obvious.

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