



Eurac Research Webinar Briefs

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 South-eastern 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”](#).

Watch the full webinar [HERE](#)