



Eurac Research Webinar Briefs

Minorities and COVID-19

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

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Institute for Minority Rights, Eurac Research
minority.rights@eurac.edu
www.eurac.edu/imr

Contributors:

Günther Rautz (moderator)

Head of Institute, Institute for Minority Rights, Eurac Research

Marika Djolai

Senior Researcher – Head of Conflict and Security Cluster, European Centre for Minority Issues (ECMI)

Ranabir Samaddar

Director of the Calcutta Research Group (MCRG)

Andrea Carlà

Senior Researcher, Institute for Minority Rights, Eurac Research

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 “[Borders of an Epidemic – Covid-19 and the Migrant Workers](#)”. 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.

Watch the full webinar [HERE](#)