



Eurac Research Webinar Briefs

# Minorities and COVID-19

## #5 Diversity Governance: Future Post-Covid Scenarios

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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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