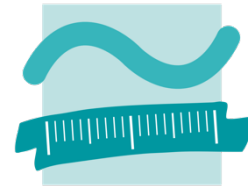


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# **The World after Corona**

## **Implications for International Relations and Migration**

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## 1. Introduction

In the past decades, humans and goods have been travelling at speeds and frequencies never seen before. Confronted with the coronavirus, especially human movement is becoming a danger for a country's prosperity, instead of ensuring it. Shutting down borders and reducing inner-country movement has become an unavoidable disruption for the sake of preventing the downfall of a nation. For the privileged, these travel restrictions are an inconvenience, for others, they can initiate misery.

Finding the equilibrium between determining legitimate measures of flattening the curve of COVID-19 cases and at the same time maintaining worth-living conditions for the people is becoming the challenge and theme of the year 2020, perhaps even beyond.

Although responses have been different in intensity, the world is collectively recognizing the risks of the COVID-19 health crisis and its accompanying effects.

In a globalized world, every nation is to some degree dependent on the collaboration with other countries. A fundamental matter which this essay focuses on is the extent to which international relations might be affected through the pandemic and especially how these developments impact the lives of migrants and refugees.

## 2. A Look into History

It is always beneficial to delve into historic events which bear similarities to the current situation, thus providing valuable insights for the evaluation of the present situation. In the past, pandemics and wars have taken place as recurring intertwined incidents, as will be elaborated in the following chapter. It is common knowledge, that wars and conflicts are one of the main reasons for mass migration<sup>1</sup>, thus suggesting a link between pandemics and migration. Therefore, it is questionable in which way a pandemic may influence military activities.

### Pandemics and War

During the Second Peloponnesian War (430 BCE), a plague overwhelmed crowded Athens whilst the Spartans ravaged the countryside. Pericles, leader of Athens, sent a large military force into battle with hopes of lifting spirits of his people through a military victory, but more importantly, it was to remove some of his combat power from the diseased city in order to scale

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<sup>1</sup> BBC Bitesize (2020)

down their rate of infection. Likewise, Typhus began to spread in Serbia during the First World War, quickly infecting large parts of the population and significantly weakening military ambitions against Austria-Hungary. Neither the Spartans, nor Austria-Hungary, mostly unaffected by the epidemic, struck against their weakened enemy. They feared the plague more than they strived for military dominance.<sup>2</sup>

Apart from some military offensives, such as China's claim of areas in the South China Sea (de facto accredited to Vietnam<sup>3</sup>), we are presently witnessing rather a decline in military activity: According to the Global Peace Index 2020, weapon imports and exports have roughly decreased by two percent. Furthermore, the number of deaths from conflicts fell significantly, although their intensity and frequency has seen a rise. Reasons for these trends could be that promoting a large military force or even a war is proving difficult when confronted with a global economic crisis following the pandemic. However, internal struggles are stirred up by these economic setbacks and consequently the growing unemployment.<sup>4</sup>

### Effects on Migrants

Pandemics have a long history of being linked to migrants and minorities, especially by those who oppose population mobility.

In the case of European-American migration in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century, the danger of imported diseases was counteracted by medical examinations of incoming migrants.

The need of testing the health conditions of arriving people in order to prevent the spread of infectious diseases was recognized, although it sparked natives' irrational fears of being infected by fellow citizens - solely on the basis of race and religion.

In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, stigmata and racial prejudices arose as Irish refugees were associated with cholera, whereas tuberculosis was labeled as "The Jewish Disease". In 1900, Chinese immigrants were persecuted in San Francisco after a Chinese immigrant died, possibly from the bubonic plague. During the First World War, Italian immigrants in the US were stigmatized of having polio, even though death rates were much lower among Italian children when compared to the overall average.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Berman and Tischler (July 30, 2020)

<sup>3</sup> Piñeiro Rodríguez and Rosenblatt (July 13, 2020)

<sup>4</sup> Institute for Economics & Peace (June 2020)

<sup>5</sup> Kraut (2010)

This internalized association of immigration with germs surfaced again recently, when the president of the US labeled Mexican immigrants a “tremendous infectious disease...pouring across the border”, even before COVID-19 had been discovered<sup>6</sup>.

### 3. A Changing Political Landscape

Leaders all over the world have imposed strict rules and regulations in pursuance of controlling the spread of the coronavirus, complying to the recommendations made by leading scientists and virologists<sup>7</sup>. Although necessary, some of these measures would be described as authoritarian under pre-COVID-19 circumstances. This is why societies must be even more vigilant than usual of anti-democratic tendencies.

Some countries will or already have witnessed severe transformations in leadership as a response to government failures regarding the handling of the pandemic.

#### Paving the Way for Authoritarian Regimes

Due to the pandemic, elections have been delayed or cancelled in around 70 countries and territories. Whereas the postponement of an election may derive from an appropriate need for security, the reasons must be scrutinized in the interest of a fair democratic process.

Several countries had good reasons to postpone the elections, such as New Zealand after an outbreak in Auckland, as well as Chile and Switzerland with some of the highest percentages of infected people.<sup>8</sup>

In other countries, the reason for postponement was clearly going in the direction of bending the rules of democracy:

The national elections in Bolivia have been postponed twice already, unleashing heavy civilian protests which were violently challenged with ongoing casualties for the Bolivian people<sup>9</sup>. Idriss Deby Itno, president of Chad has postponed elections for the fifth time in the past five years<sup>10</sup>. The island of St. Kitts and Nevis kept international election observers from entering the country and made it impossible for leaders of the opposing parties to campaign effectively for election. The Venezuelan government is continuing to undermine and persecute journalists, activists and political leaders who are questioning the responses to the pandemic<sup>11</sup>. Moreover, the president of the US suggested postponing the presidential elections supposedly because of

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<sup>6</sup> The Economist (August 17, 2020)

<sup>7</sup> Calisher, Carroll, Colwell, Corlez, Daszak, Drosten, et al. (February 19, 2020)

<sup>8</sup> The Economist (August 17, 2020)

<sup>9</sup> Hetland (August 26, 2020)

<sup>10</sup> AFP (June 10, 2020)

<sup>11</sup> Kurmanaev (July 29, 2020)

safety reasons, with many experts and large portions of the general public suspecting his motivation being to enhance his chances of winning the election<sup>12</sup>.

### Instrumentalizing the Pandemic

While the US has stood in the forefront of major international conflicts in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, it has retrieved itself increasingly from international responsibility and chosen a more nationalist approach in the past years. For example, the US withdrawal from the World Health Organization was very much linked to the organization's disapproval of Washington's handling of the pandemic<sup>13</sup>.

A different approach can be seen in China: With its uprising as an economic superpower, China has not failed to gain influence in areas where traditional players from Europe and North America have lacked engagement. For example, China is aiding countries in Central Asia technologically and medically as a means to fight the spread of the virus, becoming the region's biggest investor and contributor. The pandemic poses an opportunity for Beijing to expand their influence through the presumed humanitarian offensive.<sup>14</sup>

However, it must not be forgotten that Beijing's interest in human rights is very limited, as can be seen in the ongoing persecution and imprisonment of more than one million Uyghurs in Xinjiang<sup>15</sup>.

## 4. Feeding Racist Agendas

International mobility plays a big role in the pandemic, bridging countries with high infection rates to those with lower ones. When analyzing this interconnection on a global level and its cause and effect, the focus is often mistakenly put on the lower-class' migrating and marginalized people, instead of the wealthy and frequently travelling.

Therefore, the question arises: Where is the line between reasonable population mobility policies and racially motivated discrimination, legitimized through the current situation?

The South African government built a 40km fence at the borders to Zimbabwe, although COVID-19 is entering primarily by air from Europe. Furthermore, the built fence is not

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<sup>12</sup> Skelley (August 7, 2020)

<sup>13</sup> Smith and Perlmutter-Gumbiner (July 7, 2020)

<sup>14</sup> Standish (July 26, 2020)

<sup>15</sup> Ibidem: Standish (July 26, 2020)

effective and easy to cross, disqualifying itself as a public health measure, even if there was a high risk of the virus being transmitted from Zimbabwe. Failing to address real threats, the government forced foreign-owned grocery shops to close in March, targeting especially Ethiopian and Somali shops. Whereas in China, a rumor spread, insinuating that Africans posed higher chances of being infected by COVID-19. In some cases, black immigrants were banned from hotels and forced out of their homes. On the other hand, Chinese immigrants or people who may be erroneously categorized as Chinese, are being racially targeted all over the world, disregarding the relatively low number of infected people from China. It goes without saying that one cannot know where a person lives or has travelled based on their appearance, highlighting the irrationality of these examples of fear.<sup>16</sup>

In Germany, the situations in the ‘Lagers’ are reaching a critical point regarding racial discrimination. Police and security staff are using particularly harsh methods to forcefully discipline the residents, tapping into century-old colonialist stereotypes. Some women have reported harassment by the police, questioning their (legal) residence permits and claiming that further payments would have to be settled. Three women have even gone missing after interaction with the police, sparking even more fear among their companions.<sup>17</sup>

State agents are abusing the current situation for the sake of intimidation, making refugees’ lives even more precarious than before. Clearly, the idea of a community spirit and social goodwill in these challenging times does not include everybody.

## 5. Displacement

While the far-right and conservatives of Germany are camouflaging their racist agenda of keeping out immigrants through the argument of security, the closing of borders in Europe has disrupted the routes for migrants through the Mediterranean Sea and the Balkan. Consequently, refugee camps, such as the prominent camp Moria on the Greek island Lesbos, are overcrowded and help has been mostly denied up until Moria’s recent destruction in a massive fire. The conditions in these camps are devastatingly optimal for a fast spread of the virus, putting many lives in danger. Refugees are being forgotten, as no government wants to take responsibility,

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<sup>16</sup> The Economist (August 1, 2020)

<sup>17</sup> International Women\* Space (2020)

cowardly fearing the growing far-right propaganda, or even worse, because they are the ones spreading it.<sup>18</sup>

Another extreme example can be found in Lebanon, where around 900,000 refugees from Syria are given asylum at the moment<sup>19</sup>. Initial solidarity started to fade when confronted with the country's economic crisis. The government has imposed harsh lockdown measures aimed especially at refugees, threatening to take away visa papers from whomever does not comply, making it even harder to seek medical assistance or to provide for basic needs<sup>20</sup>. This targeted discrimination has the aim of pushing refugees back to Syria, despite of an ongoing war.

International migration, prevalently in response to growing inequalities and lack of possibilities, has subsequently been on a rise worldwide, as well as the receiving countries' need for workers<sup>21</sup>. But now millions of migrants who have lost their jobs are facing deportation, according to the International Labour Organisation<sup>22</sup>. In the middle east, the drastic fall of oil prices due to movement restrictions all over the world is only adding fuel to the fire, hitting one of its main economic resources hard. In spite of owning a nearly endless fountain of fortune, the region stands exemplary for the injustice of capitalism, in which the wealth congregates into the pockets of a few.<sup>23</sup>

The flow of remittances, of which India is on top of the receiving end, give indications about the global distribution of migrant workers<sup>24</sup>. Many Indian workers migrated to the Persian Gulf due to better opportunities of employment<sup>25</sup>. More often than not, these workers are the financial backbone of their families. Remittances of migrant workers are three times bigger than foreign governmental aid and will fall by 20% in 2020, according to the World Bank, presenting the harshest decline in recent history<sup>26</sup>.

In the UAE, where migrants make up roughly 90% of the whole population, almost 250,000 Indian workers have been evacuated already<sup>27</sup>. It becomes obvious that while a country like the UAE profits immensely off of cheap labor from other countries, it does not feel the same responsibility towards foreign workers as towards national citizens. Another example of hostility

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<sup>18</sup> Oxfam (July 1, 2020)

<sup>19</sup> Houssari (July 18, 2020)

<sup>20</sup> Hofmann (July 2020)

<sup>21</sup> World Migration Report (2020), page 21

<sup>22</sup> ILO (June 24, 2020)

<sup>23</sup> Bishara (August 3, 2020)

<sup>24</sup> World Migration Report (2020), page 36

<sup>25</sup> Shrestha (June 19, 2020)

<sup>26</sup> Worldbank Press Release (April 22, 2020)

<sup>27</sup> The Economist (August 1, 2020)



is to be found in Kuwait, a country where the population consists of 70% migrants<sup>28</sup>, the pandemic has accelerated the government's ambition of more than halving this number. This hostile narrative has come to the point where for instance the well-known Kuwaiti actress Al Fahad suggested on national television that migrants should be thrown into the desert in order to free up space in hospitals<sup>29</sup>.

Japan is making an example of how to adapt to the new situation by further incorporating migrant workers' rights into existing laws. Although the intentions were not of a benevolent nature, but rather an indispensability for the aging country, the results for migrant workers have been positive. Initially, Japan has let workers immigrate in order to fill vacancies, namely in the tourism industry. While this area of employment has imploded due to travel restrictions, help was much needed in the health sector. Instead of sending the workers home, which would have been obligatory according to existing legislature, laws were quickly adjusted so that the same workers could start employment at the needed facilities.<sup>30</sup>

This spontaneous progression has shown that migration policies can and must become more precise.

## 6. Conclusion

All things considered, examining past epidemics may help in understanding geopolitical implications for the future, but making a definitive prediction seems impossible. With a changing political landscape, it becomes even harder to predict future developments and possible sources of unrest. Eventually, some countries will recover faster than others and caution must be taken by nations and international councils, in regard to whether or not a sudden shift of power will be exploited. The pandemic did not create totalitarian tendencies, but rather exposed and intensified a declining trend in egalitarianism in numerous countries. This is an opportunity to re-think how democratic values can be upheld in a sustainable way.

Societies will eventually regain their right to move across borders, which was temporarily suspended due to health reasons. However, the world is witnessing growing hostility towards migrants and refugees, deriving from historic preconceptions about pandemics. The necessity for

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<sup>28</sup> Bloomberg (June 5, 2020)

<sup>29</sup> Day (April 2, 2020)

<sup>30</sup> The Economist (August 1, 2020)

people to leave their countries will only become bigger during and after this pandemic, notably for economic refugees, as the economic price of the pandemic is especially being paid by precarious working people.

The responsibility lies within higher income countries, as they host only 16% of all refugees. The only correct responses coming from these wealthier states should be to open up safer routes for refugees, receive more migrating people and to accelerate asylum procedures, among other measures.<sup>31</sup>

Nations have rarely been as similarly affected by the same threat as we are witnessing today. A strong international cohesion and constant re-evaluation of ongoing developments, as well as real policy changes in order to improve the situation of the ones most in need prove necessary in order to navigate these times in the best way possible. Because one must not forget: “COVID-19 thrives in institutional vacuums”<sup>32</sup>.

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<sup>31</sup> Amnesty International

<sup>32</sup> Enriquez, Rojas Cabal, Centeno (September 1, 2020)

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