

**IRMO**

**BRIEF**

**1**

**10**  
2023

## COVID-19 Pandemic and its Impact on Society

*By Jadranka Polović*

### Introduction

Since the beginning of the 21st century, the international community has faced numerous security challenges, including unstoppable waves of migration, Islamic radicalism, and terrorist threats, a series of economic and social crises, and escalating conflicts with a tendency to evolve into a global, world war. However, the emergence of the coronavirus

disease 2019 (COVID-19), which is caused by infection from the previously unknown severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2), has presented unprecedented and unique challenges to the global society.

The pandemic declared by the World Health Organization (WHO) in March 2020 confronted us with a global challenge of unmatched proportions. In addition to the health crisis, it generated strong economic, political,

and security turbulence within national states, the European Union, and globally. It is undoubtedly a dramatic challenge for societies, perhaps the greatest since World War II, with far-reaching consequences in the context of international relations. COVID-19 tested all aspects of the unipolar order and the power of the West - the global economy, and therefore testing also the globalization and crisis management of governments, as well as international organizations, especially the allied relationships within the EU and the NATO alliance. Subsequently, international relations became marked by a new dimension of distrust and competition among major powers.

Due to comprehensive epidemiological and political measures that were applied at the national, regional and global level, and based on the recommendations of the World Health Organization (which have never been applied in the history of the epidemics policy), some of the consequences of the pandemic have been significantly intensified. It is a fact that many aspects of human life have been deeply disturbed under such circumstances. In particular, the COVID-19 pandemic has imposed enormous health, economic, environmental and social challenges throughout the world, while the decrease in mobility, changes in the education system and an alarming increase in social

inequalities and vulnerabilities are among the most significant challenges that countries all around the world are facing.

### **Covid-19 in the context of securitization theory**

The implementation of public health measures such as quarantine, continuous testing, and complete “lockdown” of people and economies, which imposed the obligation of social distancing, has in a way, turned social communities into a part of experimental social engineering. In other words, measures taken to combat the virus have exceeded the scope of public health issues, and the way they have restricted basic freedoms and human rights points to an important dimension of the health crisis that has been treated as an extreme security threat.

*Theoretical framework of securitization is associated with the Copenhagen School of Security Studies.*

Therefore, the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on various aspects of society can be considered in the context of the theory of securitization. In circumstances of the post-

Cold War international relations shaped by multidimensional processes of globalization, especially the rapid development of information and communication technologies, the international community has become confronted with new types of security threats such as widespread activities of organized crime and international terrorist groups, regional ethnic conflicts, armed conflicts, uncontrolled migrations, the consequences of climate change and environmental crises, as well as the spread of infectious diseases.

In this context, the theoretical framework of securitization is associated with the Copenhagen School of Security Studies originally developed by Ole Wæver, Professor of International Relations at the University of Copenhagen. By the end of the Cold War, the security paradigm underwent significant changes and is discussed within five different sectors: military, political, economic, environmental and social. The implementation of public health measures such as quarantine, continuous testing, and complete “lockdown” of people and economies, which imposed the obligation of social distancing, has, in a way, turned social communities into a part of experimental social engineering. In other words, measures taken to combat the virus have exceeded the scope of public health issues, and the way they have restricted basic freedoms and human rights points to an important dimension

of the health crisis that has been treated as an extreme security threat.

### *Measures taken to combat the virus have exceeded the scope of public health issues.*

Since the beginning of the 1980s, a series of new global health challenges, such as the HIV/AIDS pandemic, SARS, Ebola, and Zika, have significantly destabilized developing countries. Their spread in developed nations was facilitated by processes of globalization, leading to a significant increase in global interest in public health protection. In particular, the HIV/AIDS pandemic shook the previously held belief that infectious diseases had been conquered by modern public health measures. Consequently, a new concept of addressing emerging diseases, caused by ecological disruptions, urbanization, and global mobility, was embraced. This involves the spread of new (infectious) diseases to which people lack immunity, potentially leading to catastrophic consequences for national and global security. In this context, infectious diseases are understood as a global security challenge, especially after the United Nations Security Council adopted Resolution 1308(2000) in the year 2000, declaring the HIV/AIDS pandemic a threat to the international peace and security.

*After experience with AIDS/HIV and SARS, a readiness model for emerging diseases was developed.*

After the experience with AIDS/HIV and SARS, a readiness model for emerging diseases was developed, and soon this paradigm was incorporated into the World Health Organization's regulations. The revised International Health Regulations from 2005 expanded the list of infectious diseases (beyond the three "classic" scourges - yellow fever, cholera, and smallpox), defined the development of tools for recognizing "public health emergencies of international concern," and required all WHO member states to develop the capacity to detect and respond to potentially catastrophic disease epidemics. This paradigm was further articulated in a WHO report from 2007 titled "A Safer Future: Global Public Health Security in the 21st Century."

**Online education - significant system changes or a challenge to the mental health**

Due to the threat to human lives, the COVID-19 pandemic has become a challenge for healthcare systems worldwide, affecting the treatment of other diseases due to the closure

of healthcare facilities and patients avoiding them. Furthermore, even in diagnosed cases, the treatment of severe illnesses, such as cancer, had to be postponed in many instances because of the immediate threat of the virus. COVID-19 has, in this way, almost entirely occupied healthcare systems and depleted their resources. In addition to its impact on physical health, COVID-19 has also resulted in dramatic psychological effects such as stress, anxiety, and depression, which have particularly affected vulnerable groups, including children, women, the elderly, and healthcare workers who have shown the greatest susceptibility to post-traumatic stress. In fact, as stated by the WHO in its 2022 report, a large number of cases, deaths, and governments' inability to find reliable vaccines and sustainable solutions, along with harsh living conditions and restrictions, have worsened people's mental health.

*COVID-19 has almost entirely occupied healthcare systems and depleted their resources.*

Young people's mental health issues are a growing public health issue, largely resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic, which initiated the largest and unprecedented experiment in distance learning. According to UNESCO, the

online learning model had already covered nearly 1.6 billion students in 165 countries by September 2020. Over 100 countries around the world closed down their universities, impacting half of the global student population. The closure of schools and universities is one of the most visible and controversial tools of the global lockdown.

Online education, or the model of online teaching, which globally replaced the centuries-old traditional model of education, that is face-to-face interaction between students and teachers in classrooms, due to the COVID-19 pandemic since mid-March 2020, exposed the education sector to significant turbulence and radical changes. However, in the midst of spread of SARS-CoV2 infection and COVID-19 disease, the accelerated integration of information technology into the education system shifted this issue out of the public's focus, making the long-term impact of the COVID-19 pandemic in the context of education emerge as a challenge targeting its structural change. The pandemic has brought significant changes to the education system, confirming the relevance and importance of online education, which has required the introduction of new teaching methods and the adaptation of educational content.

*Online learning model had already covered nearly 1.6 billion students in 165 countries by September 2020.*

Given that digital skills have become an important prerequisite for the teaching profession, digitalization has gradually transformed the role of teachers over the past two decades. In line with the changes brought about by the use of modern technologies in education, the focus has shifted gradually from the teacher as an authority and central figure in the teaching process to the student, upon whom the funding of academic institutions depends. The commercialization of education as the dominant trend in digitalization has gained a new dimension. Specifically, the rapid transition to Education 4.0, along with the internationalization and affirmation of new values defined by a global curriculum, has made the benefits of online education obvious. These benefits include reduced time, space, and overall financial costs that are present in the traditional model of teaching.

It is evident that the pandemic has completely disrupted the existing education system, which, how many argue, was already losing its significance. Therefore, the introduction



of a new hybrid education model appears highly attractive. Prior to the pandemic, public focus was directed towards the concerning consequences of technology dependence, especially when it comes to the mental health of young people. Undoubtedly, with prolonged internet usage, individuals become socially isolated and experience physical and mental exhaustion, which impacts their family, social, school, or work functioning and can result in complete psychological decompensation.

### *Introduction of a new hybrid education model appears highly attractive.*

However, during the pandemic and after it, electronic violence (cyberbullying) in the world is almost a marginal topic. Just like the ever-present problems of youth socialization, which are partly the result of an almost three-year process of online education and lockdown. In this context, it is important to emphasize that COVID-19 additionally catalyzed a significant increase in depression and anxiety among young people, as well as hospitalizations due to suicide attempts. It is evident that this crisis period has led to an inflation of health issues and mental health problems, as well as brought attention to the issue of violence among children and internet addiction.

### *COVID-19 additionally catalyzed an increase in depression and anxiety among young people.*

From school and university closures to weakened economies and millions of lost jobs – the social and economic costs of the pandemic are numerous. Among the most affected are young people and women, as they make up a large proportion of workers in sectors severely affected by COVID-19, including accommodation and food services. Certainly, women are strongly represented in sectors such as health and social care, which were particularly affected by the pandemic. In this context, it is necessary to deepen scientific research on COVID-19 and discuss the long-term effects of the pandemic on people. Scientific studies on COVID-19 are of great importance in order to limit its destructive impact, which is clearly present in the social, political, psychological, and economic dimensions.

### **Covid-19 and social challenges**

In fact, the COVID-19 pandemic has exposed and deepened existing social inequality, amplifying social challenges. Massive disruptions in social protection and healthcare systems have emerged within national states, even in the wealthiest countries. Hundreds of millions of

people have simply fallen into poverty. COVID-19 has globalized poverty and undermined the notion of global progress. In a very short period of time, the pandemic has triggered an unseen crisis, causing significant disruptions in the achievement of the UN 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) by 2030. According to the report from the UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs, the COVID-19 pandemic has quickly become the worst human and economic crisis of our lifetime, spreading to all countries, with the global death toll and the number of confirmed cases surpassing 10 million people. As they claim, lost income, limited social protection, and soaring food and energy prices have further deteriorated people's living standards. Underemployment and unemployment resulting from the crisis have affected an estimated 1.6 billion vulnerable workers already engaged in the informal economy, constituting half of the global workforce. It is estimated that during the first month of the crisis, their income dropped by 60 percent.

*COVID-19 has globalized poverty and undermined the notion of global progress.*

Although the origin of the coronavirus remains a very intriguing security issue, no less

controversial are the universally applied decisions to close the global economy, which were initiated by the application of World Health Organization guidelines related to trade, transport and various types of restrictions. It is important to note the background of these decisions - powerful financial institutions, as well as informal lobby groups, including Wall Street, Big Pharma and the World Economic Forum (WEF), have had a significant influence on shaping the WHO's response to the Covid-19 pandemic. The implementation of these measures almost simultaneously in a large number of countries strongly destabilized global trade, traffic and investment activities. In particular, developing countries faced a growing lack of financial resources, which deepened the inequalities already present at the world level.

The COVID-19 pandemic has caught us off guard, and increasing predictions that the world will face a new pandemic have fueled discussions about the readiness of nation states, as well as the global community, to formulate a joint response to the threat of infectious diseases. But as Joseph Stiglitz points out in "What Pandemic Preparedness Would Look Like" (Project Syndicate, October 4, 2023), the latest UN agreement on the issue offers mere platitudes rather than the concrete measures needed to stay ahead of emerging

disease outbreaks. A high-level UN meeting in September 2023 on pandemic prevention, preparedness and response produced a “political declaration” (Political Declaration of the United Nations General Assembly High-level Meeting on Pandemic Prevention, Preparedness and Response, September, 2023) hailed as a milestone. Namely, the document defines the pandemic as a global systemic risk and an existential threat to humanity, thus exempting it from the sphere of the exclusive competence of the nation state. However, as the author states, this is already known. After COVID-19 spread globally, millions of people in poor countries died due to the lack of medicines that were accumulating in rich countries, as well as insufficient health services. We needed a waiver of all intellectual property (IP) related to the pandemic pathogen – including vaccines, tests, personal protective equipment and therapy – as well as commitments from everyone to share their technology and provide all the funding needed to help poorer countries.

*A high-level UN meeting in September 2023 on pandemic prevention, preparedness and response produced a “political declaration.”*

Despite the fact that pandemics undoubtedly require timely, urgent and continuous leadership, global solidarity as well as international cooperation, most countries have not embraced the idea of creating a global body to provide guidelines for preparing and dealing with future pandemics. Many, considering the experience of the past pandemic, question the emphasis on the role of the private sector, especially private pharmaceutical corporations, for which numerous mechanisms of financial incentives by the state are provided. On the other hand, the EU has issued a recommendation encouraging member states to join the World Health Organization’s global digital health certification system for the COVID-19 certification system. It is also a controversial issue that many oppose. However, it is up to the member states to decide whether and when to accede to it.

## Conclusion

The event was meant to secure political support for strengthening global health security after the COVID-19 pandemic highlighted many gaps in the world’s ability to respond effectively to global health threats. The Political declaration recognizes that many challenges to global health are evident, including large inequalities and



vulnerabilities within and between countries, regions and populations.

Therefore, we should be concerned about the incredible social inequality that has become the “new normal” of the dystopian society in which we find ourselves. The unprecedented wealth and power appropriated by high-tech corporations, while avoiding any responsibility for the social problems we now face, becomes a critical threat to democracy that we need to think about.

**Jadranka Polović PhD**, is an Assistant Professor at the Faculty of International Relations, Libertas International University in Zagreb, Croatia.

**DISCLAIMER:** The views presented in this paper are solely of the author and do not represent an official position of the Institute for Development and International Relations (IRMO) or of the Hanns Seidel Foundation.

**IRMO**<sup>60 years</sup>

Institut za razvoj i međunarodne odnose  
Institute for Development and International Relations

 **Hanns  
Seidel  
Stiftung**

Ured u Zagrebu

Institute for Development and International  
Relations - IRMO  
Lj. F. Vukotinovića 2, Zagreb, Croatia  
[www.irmo.hr](http://www.irmo.hr)

Hanns Seidel Stiftung  
Amruševa 9, Zagreb, Croatia  
[www.hanns-seidel-stiftung.com.hr](http://www.hanns-seidel-stiftung.com.hr)