

ECMI ONLINE TALK

Summary

ONLINE TALK

WEDNESDAY
7 APRIL 2021

**COVID-19:
Securitisation,
Minorities,
Diversity**

Introduction

by Marika Djolai (ECMI Senior Researcher)

The recent, long awaited, WHO report (30 March 2021) a joint investigation between international and Chinese researchers, confirmed a well-known timeline of the events and placed the onset of the pandemic in the months before December 2019 in Wuhan, China. A widely accepted assumption confirmed that the virus originated from bats, but a mechanical vector (an animal, probably used in consumption) that carried the virus to humans remains unknown. Nevertheless, WHO still maintains that all hypotheses remain open, but the scholarship is inclined towards categorising it as a zoonotic disease which means the virus is spread to humans via consumption of infected animals. The novel virus was officially named severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2), belonging to the Coronaviridae family, by the International Committee on Taxonomy of Viruses.

On 11 March 2020 the World Health Organisation declared the COVID-19 virus a global pandemic. The coronavirus disease was characterised as the one that made no differences between people's origin, religion, or wealth. As the virus spread and infection rates rose sharply, national governments employed a variety of security measures to prevent the spreading of the disease. Restrictions on the assembly of people, travel and eventually lockdowns were quickly put in place. Media reports and human and minority rights groups soon raised alarm of how minorities have been differently and more severely impacted by both the COVID-19 virus and the security measures. Increased evidence shows that minorities are disproportionately affected by COVID-19, due to social determinants of health such as poverty and lack of healthcare access. In short, COVID-19 aggravated long-standing systemic health and social inequities and placed racial and ethnic minority groups in an even more vulnerable position. Scapegoating, severe restrictions and targeted policing have characterised the experience of the pandemic for minority groups across the world, resulting in their increasing vulnerability.

Finally, COVID-19 has already emerged as a major national security threat, with an impact on international security. It also prompted bad governance around the world and acted as an accelerator in countries where pre-existing conditions of populism and authoritarianism are deeply entrenched, and which rushed to securitise the response disproportionately. Securitisation of the pandemic reflects the politicised tension between the ruling elites with a tendency for state capture and the role that the state should play in providing security and protection for its citizens. This distinguished international panel of experts discussed two diverging trajectories of COVID-19 – securitisation of the pandemic itself and securitisation of some social groups, with the aim to highlight the impact on minorities and diversity more broadly under the current circumstances, from interdisciplinary perspective



Fernand de Varennes

Foreword

Fernand de Varennes is Extraordinary Professor at the Faculty of Law of the University of Pretoria (South Africa), Adjunct Professor at the National University of Ireland-Galway (Ireland), and Cheng Yu Tung Visiting Professor at the Faculty of Law of the University of Hong Kong (China). He was appointed United Nations Special Rapporteur on Minority Issues by the Human Rights Council and assumed his functions on 1 August 2017.

“While the virus may be blind to our ethnicity or religion, government measures and policies are not so neutral.”



Biljana Vankovska

Panelist

Biljana Vankovska is full professor of Political Science and International relations at the Institute for Security, Defence and Peace, Faculty of Philosophy, Ss. Cyril and Methodius University, Skopje. Guest Senior Research Fellow at Copenhagen Peace Research Institute (COPRI) in 1997-2000. Faculty staff member at the European Peace University (EPU), Stadtschlaining, Austria (2000-2014). Worked as Senior Fellow at the Geneva-based Centre for the Democratic Control of Armed Forces (DCAF) in 2001/2002. Chief editor of the academic journal Security Dialogues. Her research interests include international security, peace and conflict analysis, civil-military relations, transitional justice and the Balkans affairs.

Summary

As elsewhere in the world, the Covid-19 pandemic has found fertile ground for further deepening of the already rooted and irreparable pandemic of inequality and discrimination in the Western Balkan societies. The pandemic has de facto served as a catalyst for the existing structural violence partly induced by state building therapies and corporate peace nurtured in the region. Covid-19 has treated badly those most vulnerable but also created new minorities. Many have seen that they had been discriminated against and marginalized for a long time, without being aware of this due to unjust economic and political systems. The most disturbing picture is to be seen in two key sectors: access to health and education. There are many shared similarities in terms of the governmental roller-coaster measures (including mockdowns instead of lockdowns) for dealing with the Covid-crisis across the world, so the Balkan governments are no exception at all. The wide use of securitization and desecuritization (and even gas-lighting) tools is usually carried out by the same securitizing agents (such as state officials and media) according to their liking or short-term populist interests (such as elections, censuses, saving economics or religious events). In the societies where identity politics is the only 'game in the town', the Covid-regimes have depended on the need to preserve inter-ethnic or inter-religious balance, and the same applied to the selective application of the rule of law. To make things worse, even the rational decisions and measures, such as vaccination, are met with disbelief and skepticism by those who are the most vulnerable and exposed to the effects of Covid-19. The individuals that have been betrayed and outcast for so long now are unwilling to take the governments' offers for free treatment as something beneficial for their health and wellbeing. The dependency syndrome of the Balkan governments has taken its toll especially due to the geopolitics of vaccines, which manifested loss of any state or popular (health) sovereignty.



João Nunes

Panelist

João Nunes is Senior Lecturer in International Relations at the University of York. Previously he was a Postdoctoral Research Fellow at the University of Warwick. He holds a PhD from Aberystwyth University and has held visiting positions at the University of Gothenburg and University of São Paulo.

Summary

I began by clarifying the notion of securitisation, which can be understood as the invocation, on the part of a securitizing actor, of an existential threat demanding extraordinary measures. This means that securitization can lead to exceptions to existing rules, but also to changes in the rules themselves. Securitization is not inherently good or bad, but it is dangerous since it can reduce the space for political participation and democratic deliberation. By being an effect of power, securitization also tends to privilege powerful actors and the views of elites. This lends securitization particularly prone to being instrumentalized by elites and resulting in the abuse of weaker groups in society (including minorities). In what regards the securitization in the case of Covid-19, it is important to distinguish between the securitization of the disease and the securitization of minorities during responses to the disease. I focused on the former. I argued that, when successful, the securitization of the disease led to restrictions of movement and circulation, as well as to lockdowns which were justified in the name of the common good and the protection of vulnerable groups. This securitization was positive in that it saved lives and avoided suffering, in contrast with countries (like the USA and Brazil), where the securitization of the disease was opposed by populist governments in the name of the "economy" and "individual freedoms", while being shaped by denialism of the severity of the crisis. However, securitization of the disease was contradictory in that it also revealed and, in some cases, exacerbated vulnerabilities. This is because it happened in the context of a neoliberal world order which has resulted in rising inequalities and precarization of lives and working conditions. It also happened in the context of the retreat of multilateralism and international solidarity. In some cases, securitization was also instrumentalized by leaders to help advance their own power or political projects. Overall, then, what we need is not the desecuritization of Covid-19, but rather its embedding within a worldview of global health security that is cognizant of inequalities and difference, that seeks to redress vulnerabilities, that privileges the experiences of the most vulnerable and that sees this as an inherently collective endeavour.



Marta N. Lukacovic

Panelist

Marta N. Lukacovic (PhD, Wayne State University, Detroit-Michigan) is Assistant Professor of Communication Studies at Furman University, South Carolina-USA. She researches digital media communication that surrounds security-related issues such as risks of violence, extremism, or infectious disease. She currently serves as the president of Communication Association of Eurasian Researchers (CAER). She is a co-editor of the book Media and public relations research in post-socialist societies (2021, Lexington Books – Rowman & Littlefield).

Summary

Securitization can serve as a useful and powerful persuasive discursive tool when asserting that a pandemic such as Covid-19 poses an existential threat and thus should be met with a set of extraordinary means. However, it is important to maintain an obligation to normative integrity of the securitization, which requires justice and inclusiveness on both the level of communication about the issue as well as the application of the actual mitigation means.

Slovakia represents an example of state-advanced securitization of the pandemic that in some aspects failed to include minority and marginalized populations. For instance, the Roma ethnic minority was scapegoated and victimized through frequently occurring ethno-nationalist and racialized language which does not see the Roma as an integral part of the Slovak nation. Moreover, discriminatory measures were exclusively employed towards Roma settlements. Furthermore, counter-pandemic measures did not consider the disparities that are experienced by those who live in poverty, the homeless, and the elderly people. For example, to register for vaccination, one must use the internet. This policy ignores the fact that the marginalized poor and elderly people have little access and often very little skills in the usage of digital devices and online platforms.

Lessons should be drawn based on the case of Slovakia which can inform responses in other countries and across the contexts of future crises. When implying securitization, normative commitments should be maintained. First, this means that the discourse should be inclusive of all relevant communities in the society. Second, the nature of the real threat should be thoroughly explained to the public to avoid scapegoating groups that repeatedly become stigmatized in crisis situations. Lastly, policies and measures must be also inclusive and actively engaged in eliminating structural limitations.

Find the whole online talk at
<https://www.ecmi.de/online-talks>



© 2021 ECMI

European Centre for Minority Issues (ECMI)
Schiffbrücke 12
24939 Flensburg, Germany

T: +49 461 141 490
E: info@ecmi.de
W: www.ecmi.de

**BECAUSE
MINORITIES
MATTER...**

