

Slovakia: Normality or Solidarity - The Worrying Undertones of Eastern European (Post)pandemic Governance

Wednesday 12 August 2020, by [CRCHA Jakub](#), [MOKASHI Shachi](#) (Date first published: 4 August 2020).

Looking at the trajectory of the development of the pandemic since the outbreak, most of the countries in Eastern Europe rank as the most successful in containing the virus. These are the countries where the number of confirmed cases is disproportionately low and where life has returned to a pre-pandemic normal less than three months after the outbreak; even places with high transmission potential such as swimming pools are open and safe. This 'miracle' received a lot of attention in the international [press](#) and is frequently used by regional leaders to gain political capital to push for otherwise unacceptable legislative changes. While the achievements of several Eastern European countries in tackling the pandemic can rightfully be celebrated by the local populations, the rapid return to pre-pandemic normality at all costs hints at a terrifying present and a worrisome future to come.

Many on the Left articulated a sense of hope in the transformative potential of the pandemic when it reached a global scale. Often citing it as a defining moment of our generation, there was an unwavering hope that the pandemic would expose the atrocities of the current order and infuse potency into the cause of global solidarity. It is safe to assume that almost half a year after the outbreak, such wishful thinking seems absurdly misplaced. Instead of appealing to the universality of human suffering under a pandemic, we have experienced a return to and reconstruction of nation states as defining structures of biopolitical organisation. Instead of a coordinated effort of WHO, international bodies, states, and scientists our lives became governed by a dangerous medley of mindblowing idiocy, coldblooded protectionism, racial and ethnic exclusion, and a heightened disregard for human life and dignity. Although the Left does not usually harbour any illusions about the condition of life under global capitalism, we can assume that many developments seen over the last couple of months trumped even the most critical predictions made at the beginning of the pandemic. What we see in Eastern Europe now is the manifestation of a trend long in making; maintenance of a certain idea of normality at a cost of resorting to evermore radical tools of governance.

Unsolidaristic emergency health infrastructures

When faced with a biological threat, we have heard repeatedly over the past few months, states need to act in a most rational manner in accordance with expert advice of the court epidemiologists and public health experts. There is no space for ideological conundrums and backstops when an urgent response is required to combat an unprecedented enemy. It just so happens that the lack of this space in addition to the constructed rationality imposed on the decision-making comes dangerously close to the fascist imaginary; closed borders, radicalisation of detainment of refugees, militarised quarantining of racially segregated communities. While all of this is being enacted, there is a

tremendous mobilisation of emergency care infrastructure aimed at state protection of the majoritarian ethno-nationalist subject-citizen.

Every single Eastern European country with a significant Roma population used the pretext of the crisis to further rationalise their modes of racial governance which, they all convincingly argued, was absolutely necessary in order to combat the pandemic. Few days after the outbreak in the country, the Slovak government imposed a quasi-military regime in many of the country's Roma settlements. Next month, a police officer physically [assaulted](#) a group of Roma children around the age of 10 for wandering outside of the quarantine area around their village. For over a month another Roma settlement was placed under a 24 hours police-supervised quarantine after a small cluster of Covid-19 positive cases was identified. No 'white' community underwent such treatment, when a cluster occurred in 'civilised' places, the positive cases together with the people they interacted with were taken to a hospital for observation. No white child was beaten for playing more than five metres from their home.

While it is foolish to believe in Europe's 'humanitarian' treatment of asylum-seekers and other displaced persons before the pandemic, the unabashed closing of borders to refugees is yet another 'rational' form of exclusionary governance. It allows for the development of social-distancing and hand-washing campaigns alongside the rationalisation of the fact that there are thousands of people crowded on islands without appropriate healthcare (and other basic necessities for life). One should not be under any delusions about the structures of this exclusionary violence, for it has been in the making long before this pandemic. But, the rationalisation of this violence is being reconfigured—all the previous frills of 'humanitarian' or 'social' help are abandoned for an epidemiologically necessary governance. What should have been obvious long ago showed itself more clearly; the social side of Europe is merely a game to play when the times are good and we can afford to generously 'extend a helping hand' and engage in social experiments with racial inclusion, migration, or protection of the most vulnerable.

The exercise of exclusionary violence was not limited to containing the pandemic; it has been crucial in constructing a post-pandemic normalcy. Several Eastern European countries, which were one of the first to take drastic actions in response to the Coronavirus, were also the first to experience a semblance of normalcy—a construction that is necessarily supported by certain exclusionary and violent politics. The 'recovery' and 'post-COVID' plans, in addition to dealing with the economy, are concerned with bringing a certain lifestyle back to normal. It is no surprise that this region was one of the first [to discuss](#) travel corridors in otherwise unstable global conditions. Unthinkable in this moment is the notion of solidarity and resource-sharing. In short, there are multiple realities we have to reckon with: one is that these countries who are pioneering certain politics of exclusion and normalcy are loaded with emergency health infrastructure; and the second, is the fact that there are other countries who have been inflicted with the unfortunate scenario of high infection rates and extremely low emergency infrastructures.

Let us look at Slovakia again. Despite the constant public outcry about the desolate state of the national healthcare system the country promptly opened a [Covid-19 unit](#) in almost every hospital and managed to mobilise an infrastructure that would be able to handle a significant outbreak (at the beginning the predictions were that ca. 10 percent of the population will contract the virus). Millions of Euros were allocated into development of this emergency infrastructure, lung ventilators were purchased and distributed, thousands of medical staff as well as soldiers and firefighters were trained in handling the epidemiological situation and all available medical laboratories were mobilised to perform Covid-19 testing on demand. This all took place within the weeks after the first case was identified in the country. When, contrary to the initial models, the virus was virtually contained in the country and the number of hospitalised patients nationally fluctuates around 10, the emergency infrastructure is increasingly underutilised. The notion of a 'global pandemic' would

suggest a development of some sort of global strategy in dealing with the virus. And yet, when a robust health infrastructure is lying idle in a number of countries, the question of using it to assist in places with much more serious epidemiological situations is not only discarded, it is entirely unthinkable. While it is shocking that a resource-sharing network is not part of the post-pandemic imagination, the regional lack of sharing health infrastructures is even more jarring. Underutilised equipment from countries like Slovakia can be easily transported to struggling neighbours who are nowhere near a post-pandemic normalcy. Therefore, what is unthinkable in this moment isn't just a coordinated global effort to support countries still dealing with the outbreak, but also a regional effort which is entirely possible to coordinate in a short period of time. A good example of a potential regional solidarity would be redirecting of underutilised resources in countries like Slovakia, Slovenia, or Hungary towards assistance in other states in the area such as Moldova or Romania that are experiencing significant difficulties in tackling the virus.

In the case of the pandemic, there is an active opposition between the efforts to recreate the pre-pandemic middle-class European normality and any notion of transnational solidarity. These apparent contradictions are not particularities of this pandemic; in fact, they accentuate the already-existing extremities of historically produced global conditions of inequalities and exclusions. Speaking to a worrying future: we can expect analogous tools of exclusionary governance passed off as a rational necessity to play an integral role in state strategies in the face of a variety of potential crises—one of which is the crisis of the climate; albeit at a slower pace, already reconfiguring central tenets of governance.

Shachi Mokashi recently graduated from Bennington college, USA. She is based in India.

Jakub Crcha is a student from Slovakia with a BA in Political Theory from Bennington College, USA

[Click here](#) to subscribe to our weekly newsletters in English and or French. You will receive one email every Monday containing links to all articles published in the last 7 days.

P.S.

Left East

<https://www.criticatac.ro/lefteast/normality-or-solidarity-eastern-european-postpandemic-governance/>