

How the Coronavirus Pandemic Resurrected the Nation-state

The coronavirus succeeded where other people and events failed: It's proved that in a time of crisis, rich and poor alike need the nation-state.



A barricaded back road on the border between Belgium and the Netherlands. The Schengen Agreement was put to the test - and it failed. Credit: Peter Dejong / AP

When the coronavirus disappears, it will leave behind a different world. Not just because social, economic and medical uncertainty has entered our lives and is here to stay, but also because the current pandemic invites us to reexamine the political, economic and social assumptions by which we live.

The first, and most surprising, lesson is that although the coronavirus is a global phenomenon, it reinforces the notion of national sovereignty. The virus does not recognize national boundaries, but the struggle against it reflects a distinct national state of mind. One by one, nation-states are putting their citizens first.

Faced with the prospect of numerous victims at home, countries around the world decided to close their borders, physically separating their citizens from those of other states. The medical logic of such an act is flimsy: An Italian from Milan is probably geographically, economically, culturally and personally closer to a Swiss from Lausanne than to a compatriot from Sicily.

Hence, a more effective strategy might be to map social and economic interaction and ignore national boundaries. And yet, national sentiments prevailed, proving, once again, that in times of crisis, fellow nationals come together. Others - in this case, those residing outside our borders - turn into a threat.

Following Italy, Spain, Austria, Poland, the Czech Republic, Switzerland, Georgia, and Russia closed their borders, even Emanuel Macron, one of the European Union's greatest champions, came around. Although initially, he declared that the virus "has no passport," and is devoid of national characteristics, he nonetheless

did not withstand the pressure and joined the national choir. A great people, he said, “is one that stands together in times of crisis.”

Angela Merkel also gave in. At first, she preached for maintenance of open borders, but within days she too succumbed to the virus and closed Germany’s borders with its neighbors.

The European Union, for its part, was late to respond. By the time it closed its borders, the national horses had already bolted the stable, and it had no choice but to agree retroactively that every country would decide its own policy. The Schengen Agreement – which created intra-European freedom of movement – was put to the test, and it failed.

In each of the countries facing the crisis, a common ritual ensued, with the leader addressing his or her citizens. Appearing against the backdrop of the national flag, he or she would announce the latest restrictions, before concluding with the encouraging words, “We are strong,” “We stand together,” and of course, “God bless our nation.” The national spirit didn’t pass over the battered Italians, who wrapped themselves in their tricolor flag while they stood on their balconies, singing the national anthem and Italian folk songs.

National solidarity didn’t end with flag-waving. The pandemic sharpened the importance of nationwide services that are capable of coping with emergencies: airlines, health care, emergency-response forces, the education system, and public transportation. The nationalization of an airline – whether Alitalia or El Al – suddenly seems like a reasonable move, as does the partial and temporary nationalization of hospitals, pharmaceutical supply chains and other means of production. And, if the economic crisis worsens, states may also decide to take control of such private services as cash machines, pharmacies, and supermarkets.

The economic crisis that will follow the medical one will also require states to become active players in the employment sector: in labor relations, and perhaps also in offering alternative employment to those left jobless by the crisis. It is the state that will decide who will be rescued, in what manner and for how long. One thing is clear, in contrast to the 2008 crisis: This time the bailout will target working people rather than banks. It will focus on the middle and lower classes and will be expressed through public funding and state institutions.



Kazakh medical workers ready to check passengers for coronavirus symptoms as they arrive from Ukraine in an international airport in Almaty, Kazakhstan, March 27, 2020. Credit: Vladimir Tretyakov,AP

If in recent decades, both academics and elected officials tended to criticize the public system, characterizing it as too large, inefficient and to some extent immoral, the present pandemic makes it clear that without a solid (and generous) public system, states will not be able to meet their challenges. A country like the United States, which lacks both a national health system and a federally managed educational system, is likely to fail its citizens, and face a disastrous situation as well as widespread anger.

The fact that 30 million Americans do not have health insurance and a similar number of workers do not have paid sick leave is turning into a national problem, rather than one limited to the country's weaker population groups. The dramatic weakening in Britain of the National Health Service presents a challenge to both the government of Boris Johnson and to the people, no less daunting than that Italy is facing for its lack of public planning. There are other examples, and all teach the same lesson: In times of major crisis, all of us, even the Prince of Wales, will need to rely on the support of the state.

The severity of the pandemic is inducing governments to open their wallets. Until recently, the test of a government's financial stability was the level of its national debt. In the years ahead, the test of a state's economic strength will be its ability to kick-start the economy, increase people's buying power and create new jobs. That message sank in very quickly, and in no time, conservatives, socialists and centrists alike have wrangled over who can transfer more resources to those in need of aid. The "invisible hand" has disappeared, while the state's active role in coping with economic, social and health crises has now become very visible.

Ironically, the international nature of the plague makes clear that there is no escape. With borders closing one after the other, even high-flying globetrotters have to face the reality that their ability to receive proper treatment depends on their citizenship. The gap between rich and poor has narrowed. If your compatriot's life is in danger, so is yours. All of us now are members of the class of the vulnerable.

This is important because the wealthy will have to foot much of the bill of the coronavirus crisis; tax planning and tax shelters will be of no help. The independence of the mega-corporations will be limited – and they too will be compelled to contribute their share. Some have already started to send the public messages attesting to their heightened sense of responsibility. Last week the American giant Starbucks published a statement detailing the measures it was adopting for the economic protection of its employees during the temporary closure of its branches. Other companies are likely to follow suit.

Containing the plague is going to be largely a function of a government's strength and of citizens' trust in the public system. When the coronavirus period is examined after the fact, we will not be able to ignore the success of centralist governmental systems like China, Singapore or Taiwan in fighting it – nor the difficulties experienced by democracies that sought to preserve the confidence of their populations.

Future discussions concerning the nature of desired forms of government will have to confront these comparisons. When the crisis passes, all of us will be forced to reexamine the most basic concepts – such as sovereignty and borders, social solidarity and social services – and ponder the question of how to rebuild their democracies in a way that makes them more just and effective.

While not ignoring the disastrous effects of the coronavirus, we can take solace in what the epidemic hasn't done in the meantime: It hasn't exacerbated tensions between citizens and migrants, between rich and poor, and between residents of the center and the periphery. The fact that the virus started in Hunan, which is an economically developed and rapidly growing region of China, and spread to the richest parts of northern Italy, made it clear that the plague does not differentiate between rich and poor. One can only imagine what would have happened if the virus has started to spread outward from immigrant and poverty-stricken neighborhoods – but it didn't.

Hence, the coronavirus has succeeded where many other, more well-meaning efforts have failed: It has placed a civil-territorial kind of nationalism at the center of the political stage, reminding us that national identity is deeply rooted in our political cultures, no matter our location on this planet.

It can only be hoped that one global virus will be the trigger for significant shifts:

a reinforcement of the nation-state as democratic and inclusive, the return of the welfare state and a desire to forge civil cooperation. There is reason for worry, but also grounds for hope.

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