

Democracy in coronavirus times

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The Director of the [Albert Hirschman Centre on Democracy](#), [Professor Shalini Randeria](#), was in conversation with Ivan Krastev on the paradoxical world and new power dynamics emerging from the COVID-19 crisis. Krastev, chairman of the Centre for Liberal Strategies in Sofia and a permanent fellow at the Institute for Human Sciences (IWM) in Vienna, offered his reflections on the nature of the current crisis – and how it different from the crises of the previous decades. Shalini Randeria and Ivan Krastev considered how globalisation, migration patterns, and levels of public trust in science shaped the emergence and effects of COVID-19. In turn, they considered how the crisis promises to reshape these three phenomena, and with them, the future of liberalism and the nation-state.

Interview:

Shalini Randeria: Ivan, let me start with the title of your new book "Is it tomorrow yet?". In the book you argue that the Coronavirus and the COVID-19 pandemic that it causes will have a lasting impact on our lives; it'll change the world in which we live in profound ways. Although we may not always know at the moment what these changes will be because we are in the midst of the pandemic. But you think the crisis that the virus has caused is fundamentally different from the crises that we have seen before — (though as far as I can remember the European Union has always been in crisis!) — but you say that it is different from both the 2008 financial crisis and the so- called migration crisis. Could you elaborate in what ways you think the present crisis is different?

Ivan Krastev: I do believe that this is the end of a certain cycle, so we have seen changes. The problem with the pandemic is not that it simply changes the world but it shows us how much the world has been changed. Many of the things that have been there before, for example, the crisis of the global supply chains and the reversal of globalisation started already with the global financial crisis. The importance of the borders has been there since the migration crisis and, of course, even some of the restrictions of rights have been very much brought on by the war on terror before they came with the COVID-19. But my major argument is that you can not simply say that this is the second coming of all these crises. But I believe that many people have been discussing different aspects of the COVID-19 reality in these terms. So when people like (Giorgio) Agamben and others started

to talk about the state of exception for them this was simply once again the war on terror: we have restrictions, we have governments that are trying to govern by normalising the state of emergency. When some of the financial experts have been talking about the economic aspects of this, it was very much as if we were back in 2008/2009. And, of course, many people feel that this kind of a nationalistic instinct, and closing of the borders and support for closing of the borders, are bringing us back to the refugee crisis.

My major argument is that everything seems very similar but it is also slightly different. First, support for surveillance is much higher now when we talk about the public health crisis than it was when it comes to the war on terror. People are much more ready to be followed by having these virus tracking apps and so on. They were less tolerant (of surveillance) when it comes to terrorism. And the story is that you are not simply afraid that you're going to be infected but you are very much afraid that you can innocently infect somebody else.

When it comes to the economy it's also different. The financial crisis was basically a banking crisis. Now we have both a crisis of demand, and a crisis of supply, the depth of which is much bigger. And also the role of the state in this (crisis) is totally different. Earlier the state was saving banks, now the state is saving everybody in certain ways with the money that has been given. And even the type of nationalism that came with the COVID-19 is different than the type of the nationalism that we saw during the refugee crisis. The refugee crisis was classical ethnic nationalism. The "we" was defined then simply by origin. Now the "we" is defined by residence. When Bulgarians decided to go back to Bulgaria during COVID-19, the local people were not particularly happy because they said, "You can infect us". So from this point to a certain period of time, the community was very much about leaving those people on the borders. It was much more a territorial type of nationalism as it was different from a classical cultural nationalism, which accompanied the refugee crisis when ethnicity was the only name of the game.

Shalini Randeria : Let me pick on that one point on the migrant crisis. In a sense, yes, you are right. And yet interestingly in a country like Austria — (I was here in Vienna throughout the lockdown) — the government was trying to get back every Austrian to Austria whether they were holidaying in the South Sea islands or in the Caribbean back. So it was very much a question of citizenship rights. Whereas the casualty of the pandemic in my view is going to be the rights of migrants, I think the (rights) of refugees are completely forgotten. Human rights have just gone off the political radar and the public discussion. But even migrant rights were discarded or overlooked until everybody realised that if we want to eat our asparagus, and if we want our strawberries, we indeed need migrant labour from eastern Europe and the people, who are looking after the elderly in western European societies as elderly care is primarily in the hands of women from eastern Europe. So the first set of people for whom the borders were opened as an exception was cheap migrant labour coming from Eastern to Western Europe, whereas in the 2015 migrant crisis it was a problem of Non-European migrants entering Europe. So I think there is a dimension to the migrant labour, which somehow was not as much in the public eye as it could have been. But the crisis showed how dependent we are on migrant labour. Even if we say, "let's eat locally produced food", it's produced on Austrian, German or Swiss soil but the labour on it is from outside of these countries.

Ivan Krastev: Totally agree. In a certain way what was interesting about this crisis was that it started with the reaffirming of borders and loyalty to the nation-state and it ended with the public health crisis becoming an economic crisis. It exposed the limits of a particular of

economic nationalism. You are right on the level of labour. Exactly as you think, there were charter flights for Bulgarians and Romanians to go to Germany and Austria in order to enable the harvest of asparagus. ... All those countries, which otherwise were insisting on how much they like the borders including eastern European ones, were the first to open them because economically they depend on open borders. So from this point the impact of nationalism is slightly different because during the refugee crisis the nationalism was a matter of symbolic politics: you talk about it, you mould the national sentiment but you don't see the economic, and also political consequences of keeping the borders really closed. Now for a while you saw it, and you saw that this is going to be really difficult to deal with. So from this point of view I do believe we are going to have changes as a result of this development; a strange story when it comes to how Europe is going to look after this crisis. You are going to see many more nationalists, who are realising that in order to preserve the relevance of their nation-state they should push for more European cooperation. Not because of the love for European Union and not because of any type of cosmopolitan sentiment but simply based on a very clear nation-state interest.

Shalini Randeria: This is an interesting paradox because there are several paradoxes which you have been emphasising in the book, one of them being the paradox of partial globalisation, I'll come to that in a moment. But here is another paradox that you point to, namely greater European cooperation as a possible outcome of the crisis but lesser European integration. Is that right?

Ivan Krastev: Absolutely, and what is interesting is the language. In all the previous three crises — (let's forget about terrorism which is a different matter) — but during the refugee crisis, and during the financial crisis, the word is solidarity; and what was lacking totally was solidarity. So in a certain way solidarity was absent on the level of transfer of money; solidarity was absent in the way of caring about others. If you listen now to the language, there is not much talk about solidarity. It's a lot of talk about national interest including in Germany and France. When the German Chancellor met together with the French President, they defended the biggest ever transfer in European history when it comes to money, and also when it comes to power. Because we are basically neutralising the future debt of the EU. She (Chancellor Merkel) said the nation-state cannot stand a role. It is not that we are overcoming the nation-state; it is not a post-national politics that people usually believe federalisation is. So, this is not a Newtonian moment, it's our Hamiltonian moment. Nation-states understood that their relevance today depends on the possibility, and capacity, to cooperate. From this point even this crisis in my view brought something important to the European publics too. Europeans were not so shocked at what happened in Europe regardless of fact that the Italians and Spaniards suffered due to having been totally neglected when they needed help from outside. But as a result of this crisis Europeans see the world outside of Europe totally differently. This is the first crisis in which the United States was totally absent. Earlier Europeans may have agreed or disagreed with what the Americans were doing, but they knew that the Americans are going to claim certain global leadership. But this time America was simply absent. Not just simply absent but when you see the news from the US on your screens it was a dysfunctional and broken country, so you don't know if you can you rely on it. Earlier Europeans had been living for a long time with the illusion that the only thing that interests China are economic matters as it is a mere capitalist power. And then they saw a much more muscular and ugly face of Chinese

diplomacy trying to twist the arms of everybody, who disagreed with the Chinese government.

I believe that from this point of view paradoxically what you see in Europe is not so different from what you see on the level of the (European) nation-states. Out of such a feeling of being left alone you have an understanding of Europe not as a community of values but as a community of fate. And you have a kind of a new version of Europe's presence. Whereas earlier Europe tried to see itself as the model for others and then it saw that others are not picking up their model; not the Chinese, not the Americans, not the Indians.

But there is a form of progressive protectionism which is coming from Europe. If everybody goes protectionist, then we (Europeans) are going to tax digital companies; we are going to tax the major polluters; we are going to do things that we believe are right from our point of view. That is how we are going to function. And I do believe that from this point of view this is a major change in the way Europe is developing. It greatly changed the self-understanding of the European Union irrespective of the fact that some of these policies may not work not so very differently; but the scale (of the change) is incredible. If you recall what the consensus in Europe was after the financial crisis, it was first of all that we are not going to loosen the conditions. The first thing we did in this crisis is that we loosened the conditions. The second was that we are not going to neutralise debt, what we did now was to neutralise debt. So, this is not the second coming of the financial crisis. The outcomes (of the earlier crises) are totally different (from those of the pandemic). Europe has now basically gone in a different direction. How successful this is going to be is a different question. But for me it is important that people do not misrecognize the crisis as something it is not. It is not the previous crisis; it is none of the previous three (crises).

Shalini Randeria: This is an interesting point. What I want to take up, however, is another point which you just made. Which is, if you like, a shift in the configuration of the international political order, or at least in the relationships between Europe, China and the US. As you very rightly say the US was not only absent, but it also compounded the problem by walking out of the WHO at the moment when probably the most important international organisation that was needed is the World Health Organisation, right? People waited to see if China will fill the gap. Interestingly at the World Health Assembly it looks as if the EU has filled the gap; it has not only managed to raise unprecedented resources at the global level, not just at the nation-state level which were mobilised by each country for its own citizenry. But also in another respect, which I think will become very significant next year, and that is who will have the intellectual property rights over the COVID19 vaccine, and who can thus make profits out of the vaccine. Interestingly, it was Merkel, who said that the vaccine is a global public good. She even came to the meeting (of the World Health Assembly) and said exactly that knowing full well that six of the ten major companies which are in competition for making the vaccine at the moment are Chinese.

Ivan Krastev: Absolutely, and this is critically important as I was recently reading on it. Like you I'm not an expert on this at all but it was interesting to read the political analysis of what is happening with the vaccines, and here there are two issues which are incredible. Now the competition between the United States of America's companies also funded by the American government on producing the vaccine, the better vaccine and the cheaper vaccine, and the Chinese is like the space competition between the Soviets and the Americans.

Shalini Randeria: It is a Sputnik moment, right?

Ivan Krastev: Yes, it is a Sputnik moment. This is an incredible because everybody is putting everything on this (race). And this is not simply about money. It is about influence.

Shalini Randeria: And it is about public money.

Ivan Krastev: It's public money. The second interesting story is that for everybody, the medical experts and the public, when you find the vaccine this is the end of the crisis because you can vaccinate the population. And the major issue is only who do you vaccinate first, and how to do it. But here is the problem. Even if the vaccine is available, and even if you can vaccinate everybody as you want at the same time. But only 49% of the Americans declared that they are ready to get vaccinated and almost half of the Germans surveyed also said they are not going to use the vaccine. So we are also seeing a world of vaccine opponents despite the fact that we have also seen a restoration of trust in experts during the crisis. This anti-vaccine movement has become important as you have such strong libertarian and anarchist streams within it, i.e. both from the left and the right. How are you going to stop the COVID19 crisis if half of the population is not going to allow itself to be vaccinated, which is interesting.

I totally agree with you (about the European role at the World Health Assembly) though it was Germany to be frank not the European Union. First it was the German President Steinmeier in an article two weeks after the crisis, who together with the Prime Minister of Ethiopia and the South Korean Prime Minister, that they went for a common policy. Then Germany gave it to the European Union and the European Union took up the German position. So the European Union is trying to preserve the idea of an international order and a global response. But at the moment when the major clash is between the United States and China, it (the EU position) looks like a kind of an utopian response. It's good that we are trying it because I believe that nobody is going to forgive the EU for not trying. But it is not easy to believe that it's going to have a major result with the relations between the United States and China being the way they are looking like now.

Shalini Randeria: Let me take up the point you made on trust in expertise. I recall your article written very early on in the first weeks of the lockdown "[Seven early lessons from the COVID](#)" where you said interestingly that trust in expertise has been restored. And what we saw was that trust in a certain kind of expertise got restored, particularly virologists had a field day. And certain kinds of statistical public health calculations have been very much at the forefront of national discussions. Everybody has an opinion on flattening the curve; everybody can suddenly read and compare all kinds of national statistics. Government performances are being measured by the number of new cases or the number of deaths, so citizens are also going into this kind of auditing of their governments performance based on numbers. But we very quickly saw that equally strongly conspiracy theories were doing the rounds. So you had a sort of moment in which there was partly a restoration of trust in certain kind of scientific expertise. And I think certain countries in which this trust was high did very well in controlling the spread of the pandemic. On the other hand, everywhere in the world, e.g. at social media in India, you look at social media here in Europe and in the US, more conspiracy theories than ever before (were in circulation). And this time it was not only about the Chinese being blamed for using this as a biological weapon but were also being used for internally polarising populations. So in India you have talk about the "Corona Jihad"