

# The Security Implications of the Pandemic: COVID-19 and European Security

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**Pandemics and epidemics generate widespread sickness and mortality and leave enormous humanitarian suffering and economic damage in their wake. Their health and financial impacts are well documented. The costs of the SARS epidemic in 2003, the H1N1 flu pandemic in 2009, and the Ebola pandemic in 2014-2016 amounted to over US\$40, US \$45, and US\$55 billion respectively. To date, the current COVID-19 pandemic has infected over 45 million people worldwide and resulted in almost 1.2 million fatalities, with economic consequences that are already staggering.<sup>1</sup> Much less is known about the security implications of pandemics. To fill this knowledge gap, we conducted a review of historical pandemics and identified various direct and indirect security implications (see Table 1).<sup>2</sup>**

	SECURITY IMPLICATIONS
<b>INTERNAL POLITICAL AND SOCIOECONOMIC INSTABILITY</b>	Critical restrictions on civil liberties can result in political tensions, social instability, demonstrations and protests.
	Through the demonization of “the other” and social polarization, pandemics invite inter-group animosity.
	Pandemics lend themselves well to the spread of misinformation and disinformation.
	Pandemics can facilitate authoritarian consolidation.
	Pandemics have the potential to decimate existing political and economic elites thereby facilitating economic transition which is often accompanied by increased instability.
	Food insecurity or unemployment can increase migration resulting in regional and domestic instability
<b>THE MILITARY BALANCE OF POWER</b>	Pandemics affect military personnel, forcing militaries to reduce military readiness.
	Pandemics can unleash the potential of biological warfare.
	Pandemics strain military resources by requiring them to provide disaster relief and diverting budgets.
<b>INTERSTATE COOPERATION AND COMPETITION</b>	States respond to pandemics with nationalist, isolationist, and protectionist policies.
	Protectionist response measures can culminate in the profiling and exclusion of people and goods from specific regions or nationalities.
	States are incentivized to withhold information pertaining to the disease’s development, creating serious mutual distrust and animosity. disaster relief and diverting budgets.

Table 1: Security implications of past pandemics.

Our analysis highlights that past pandemics generally had indirect rather than direct security implications at both the national and international level, though with considerable variation. Because history tends to rhyme rather than repeat itself, we supplemented our historical assessment with an analysis of the expected security implications of the current pandemic identified in the popular and professional literature. We refined these in an expert survey among twenty researchers at The Hague Centre for Strategic Studies (HCSS) with specific attention to the situation in and around Europe (see Figure 1).

The current pandemic is generally seen as an accelerator, an exacerbator and a catalyst of security dynamics and concomitant effects, which can be grouped in three clusters: interstate competition; political instability and societal unrest; and governance and human rights.

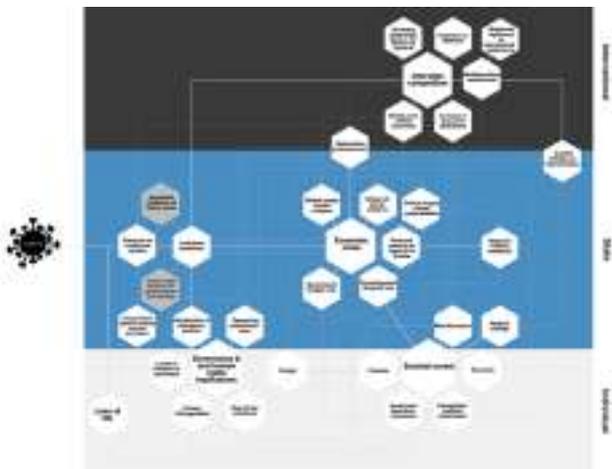


Figure 1: The projected security implications of COVID-19 (source: The Hague Centre for Strategic Studies (HCSS))

**Intensifying Interstate Competition and Grey-Zone Tactics**  
 The pandemic has fueled interstate discord and intensified competition between states, amplifying already existing zero-sum dynamics in interstate relations. US President Trump immediately labeled COVID-19 the “Chinese virus” and launched the uncorroborated theory that COVID-19 was created in a biolab in Wuhan. In what may be seen as a textbook example of political diversion, Trump blamed the World Health Organization (WHO) for negligence in its duties and announced the termination of US membership, coming into effect on July 6, 2021. Meanwhile, competition for scarce medical supplies highlighted how health, economic, and national security concerns collided in grey-zone competition.<sup>3</sup> Pharmaceutical companies, including European ones, became a prime target of espionage attempts. At the same time as European states joined forces in the “Inclusive Vaccine Alliance,” other states’ competition for access to the vaccine further reinforced isolationist and protectionist trends. The arguably botched response in

the West offered an opportunity for China and Russia to increase their influence. Chinese shipments of medical supplies were accompanied by “wolf warrior diplomacy” expressed through official and social media channels that highlighted Beijing’s role as a benefactor. It was part of a broader campaign launched by China to strengthen its position in the post-Corona world order.<sup>4</sup> In Italy, *Arrivani i nostri* (“here come our friends”) no longer referred to its partners from Northern Europe and the US but to Russia and China.<sup>5</sup> Overall, the pandemic has exacerbated existing pressures on the multilateral system and the institutions that comprise it, and has led to an increase in grey-zone competition, further normalizing forms and norms of behavior that can unfortunately not be expected to wither away any time soon.

**THREATS TO THE RULE OF LAW: DEMOCRACY, GOOD GOVERNANCE AND HUMAN RIGHTS INFRINGEMENTS**

*Democratic deconsolidation in Central and Eastern Europe*  
 In trying to get the COVID-19 virus under control, governments have curtailed civil rights and liberties with some governments exploiting the current health crisis to consolidate their political power. According to the International Foundation for Electoral Systems, between March and June 2020 elections (local or national) were postponed in 66 countries, 18 of which were in Europe.<sup>6</sup> Civil liberties, including freedom of movement and press, were suspended. Especially digital measures, such as smartphone apps to track individuals, were widely introduced. Sixteen EU-Member States declared an official state of emergency which considerably expanded their discretionary powers, leading to further democratic deconsolidation especially in Eastern and Central Europe. The governments of Bulgaria and Romania introduced legislation allowing them to penalize persons who spread false information regarding the pandemic. Hungary’s Prime Minister Viktor Orbán imposed restrictions on civil rights and cut subsidies to opposition parties. The special authorization law allowing Orbán to rule by decree was followed by the adoption of 104 state-of-danger decrees between March 30 and June 18.<sup>7</sup> In its *Nations in Transit 2020* report, Freedom House no longer recognizes Hungary as a democratic state, officially classifying it as a hybrid regime. Similar dynamics were observed in Central and Eastern Europe where democratic institutions were further hollowed out due to systemic attacks by governments on judicial independence.<sup>8</sup> The economic recession triggered by the Corona measures aggravates social inequalities and instability. The renewed flare-up of infections is damaging public confidence in liberal governments and may further encourage support for illiberal politicians. Especially in Bulgaria, Hungary, Poland, and Romania, but also on the fringes of the EU in Belarus



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and Serbia, this process of democratic deconsolidation is expected to persist, which may further compound socio-political fragmentation in the coming years and augur surges of societal unrest.

#### *Erdogan's assertiveness*

The pandemic also had remarkably negative effects on the rule of law and the protection of human rights in the countries surrounding Europe. Regime critics, healthcare workers, and journalists have been detained in Egypt, Iraq, Syria, and Turkey over allegations of spreading misinformation about COVID-19 or criticizing national responses to the pandemic. The governments of these countries, as well as those of Algeria, Jordan, Morocco, Oman, and Yemen, issued decrees prohibiting the printing and distribution of newspapers. Thousands of people who challenged these policies have been fined, arrested, or placed in mandatory quarantine.<sup>9</sup> In Turkey, increased censorship, lockdown measures, and the use of the COV-

ID-19 crisis as a scapegoat for the ongoing economic stagnation have provided President Erdogan with opportunities to expand his power, with potential implications for Turkey's political and military assertiveness in the Mediterranean and the wider Middle East in the years to come. The accelerated withdrawal of US troops from the region this year has already allowed Turkey to increase its support – both openly and covertly – to allied militias in the region. Turkey's recent increasingly assertive military activity in the Middle East and the Eastern Mediterranean could have significant adverse consequences for ongoing instability in Iraq, Syria and Libya as well as the recent hostilities between Armenia and Azerbaijan. At the same time, the economic downturn in Turkey and other states in the region resulting from the pandemic may also increase the importance of good economic relations with Europe, which could increase Europe's leverage and potentially reopen the window for broader political dialogue on democratic governance and human rights.



The COVID-19 pandemic is an accelerator, an exacerbator and a catalyst of prevailing security dynamics. The ongoing crisis further fuels existing socio-economic and political rifts that lead to widespread social protests. Depicted is a protest against COVID-19 restrictions in London, September, 2020 (photo: Brian Duffy /Shutterstock.com)

**RISKS TO INTERNAL VIOLENT CONFLICTS: HEIGHTENED SOCIAL AND POLITICAL INSTABILITY**

The direct impact of the pandemic on the number of violent conflicts in the world remained limited in the spring and summer of 2020. In his speech during the UN’s 75th anniversary in October, Secretary-General Guterres reiterated his call for a global ceasefire from March that then received little following: in the 43 countries with at least 50 instances of organized violence in the last twelve months, only ten conflict actors responded positively to his call.<sup>10</sup> While the total number of ongoing violent conflicts did not significantly change, the pandemic did affect the manifestation of conflict, with a shift to confrontations between non-state and state actors.

*Protests turning violent*

Both economically well-developed and developing countries are severely hit by the global pandemic. The International Labour Organization’s (ILO) previous prediction that global economic activity would plunge by 14 percent (relative to the fourth quarter of 2019), equivalent to a

loss of 400 million jobs, has now been adjusted to a global decline of 17.3 percent, or 495 million full-time equivalent (FTE) jobs.<sup>11</sup> Both within the EU and on its periphery, the economic downturn produced by the COVID-19 measures is accompanied by widespread social unrest. Protests and strikes against lockdowns have tak-

*The pandemic has fueled interstate discord and intensified competition between states, amplifying already existing zero-sum dynamics in interstate relations*

en place in at least 27 countries. In Syria, Lebanon, and Iraq, among others, but also in Western countries such as the US, Germany, France, and Poland, political unrest has developed or worsened as a result of the growing economic crisis. The protests in Curaçao that erupted in June were the result of the growing discontent about rising unemployment rates and economic stagnation. As

these protests turned violent, with demonstrators looting stores and storming government property, Dutch forces were deployed to Curaçao to support local police. Likewise, in Serbia, a large number of protesters stormed the parliamentary building. Considering that the COVID-19 virus is projected to recur, and mitigation measures are required until the implementation of an effective vaccine has been realized, such widespread manifestations of discontent and social instability are likely to return in the period to come.



Figure 2: The pandemic's impact on political violence and protest around the world (source: Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED))<sup>12</sup>

#### Internal violent conflict on the rise

On the fringes of Europe, the socio-economic consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic and the resulting societal unrest generate widespread security implications. In Iraq, Lebanon, and Syria, critical drivers for social and political unrest – rising food prices, high unemployment, and economic inequality and stagnation – existed even before the COVID-19 outbreak. Political unrest is (again) rising in Iraq and Lebanon, and military hostilities by non-state armed groups are intensifying again in Syria. The escalating social and political instability in these countries will produce extra-regional security implications. Renewed intensification of intra-state conflict in the Middle Eastern countries is likely. Based on a statistical simulation with political, economic, and social development indicators, Collin Meisel and Jonathan D. Moyer project in a piece in *Foreign Policy* that thirteen additional countries are vulnerable to the outbreak of conflict due to the COVID-19 pandemic – a 56 percent increase compared to forecasts before the global pandemic. These countries are primarily located in East, North and West Africa, Central America and the Middle East and North Africa region (see Figure 3). These trends will remain of concern for European security in the coming years, with the recent increase of refugees fleeing the MENA region being a potential bellwether of things to come.<sup>13</sup>

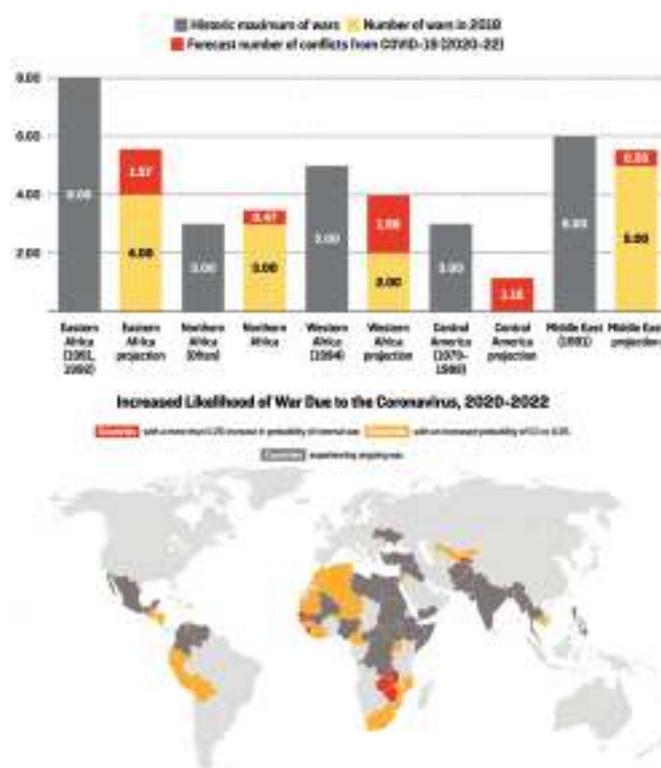


Figure 3: The increasing risk to internal conflicts due to COVID-19 (source: Foreign Policy)<sup>14</sup>

#### WHAT DOES THIS MEAN FOR EUROPE?

The COVID-19 pandemic is an accelerator, an exacerbator and a catalyst of prevailing security dynamics. The ongoing crisis further fuels existing socio-economic and political rifts that lead to widespread social protests. Democratic norms and procedures are under pressure. The protection of human rights, including freedom of speech, internet freedom, and independent journalism, is seriously threatened, not only on Europe's fringes but also in some countries within Europe. The attempts of regimes in illiberal democracies to try to consolidate their grip on power may spur increased political instability, including in Central and Eastern Europe. Further deterioration of political stability in the ring of countries surrounding Europe can directly affect European security. In addition, Sino-American geopolitical competition in conjunction with Russia's continuing assertiveness affects not only Europe's security but also its prosperity. It is in this context that the European Union and its member states have to reconsider their position in the global political and economic arena and recalibrate their policies accordingly.

To deal with the security implications of the COVID-19 pandemic, it is first and foremost important that European states continue efforts to develop a COVID-19 vaccine that is available to everyone in parallel with efforts to strengthen global capacity to manage future pandemics. These efforts should include increasing the response



Demonstrators clash with riot police on the steps of the parliament building during an anti-government protest amid the spread of COVID-19 on July 10, 2020 in Belgrade, Serbia (photo Marko Cvetkovic/Shutterstock.com)

capacity of health sectors, boosting R&D capacity to develop and produce vaccines, and improving international early-warning capabilities. Against the background of increasing grey-zone competition that is unfolding over a greater number of domains, it is important to continue to promote international standards and rules governing state behavior in the realm of security, trade and technology standards, and health. In addition, it is important to stay the course and reinforce commitments to democratic standards, good governance and the protection of human rights, precisely when they are under pressure. Finally, in light of the expected continuance or resurgence of violence on Europe’s periphery, it is important to sustain efforts in conflict prevention, conflict mitigation, and conflict stabilization. In line with the adage to never waste a good crisis, Europe can in fact emerge stronger from this trying period so that it is better prepared for the next one.

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**Would you like to react?**

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