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What world to expect after the Covid-19 crisis?¹

The COVID-19 crisis has a global character and impact, and responses to it are local and uncoordinated. As well as in many other crises and disasters – such as the effects of the wars, tens of millions of refugees worldwide, global climate change, permanent pollution and environmental destruction in parts of the world, the discharge of wastewater and the dumping of non-degradable waste into rivers and seas, among many others harmful things – we have a distinct disharmony between security risks, threats and consequences, and available and timely mechanisms and responses. Why is the world behaving like this? Who is responsible for these conditions? How to change it? This and many other questions are asked by millions of people around the world every day. We can observe, research and describe the situation from numerous discourses, perspectives and theoretical patterns, and seek answers within the various scientific disciplines.

One of the key features of the Covid-19 crisis response is the prominent role of states in many areas – from crisis management, intervention to rescue vulnerable sectors of the economy, the introduction of restrictions on movement and behavior of citizens, to the closure of borders, conditional self-isolation and very limited cooperation with other countries. In this situation, even the European Union, as a powerful and well-networked organization, seems confused, as almost all Member States have closed themselves and each one pursues its own policy, starting with the question: how to protect ourselves and to deal with as little harm as possible.

This paper has three goals. First, to try to explain the current situation in the discourse of realism theory of international relations. Second, to analyze some of the key elements of COVID-19 crisis management, based on the insights from the first part and the observation of

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the current situation. Third, with respect to the elements of the first two parts of the research, propose recommendations for the post-crisis world and how to shape a new reality.

Based on these goals and the discourse of research, the main thesis of this paper is this: the world after the COVID-19 crisis will depend on how the crisis was handled. The post-COVID-19 reality is being created right now, therefore, it is important to research and analyze the current situation and to anticipate post-crisis scenarios in order to influence certain decisions immediately, where possible. Bearing in mind this, it is also important to emphasize that the time period in which the analysis is written is always significant, whether before, during or after certain events, as this conditions the availability of information and insight into the situation. This research comes at a time when most countries have yet to cope with the peak of the coronavirus pandemic and where many things are still a great unknown to us all.

States are currently in the phase of shifting their primary focus to issues of national interests and needs, the activities are focused on developments within national borders, while they look at the sphere of international relations through monitoring the pandemic of the virus. In the meantime, the strength, power and influence of international organizations weakens and is only reduced to providing recommendations and attempting to coordinate, or, in the case of the EU, seeking out areas where it would invest billions of euros in order to alleviate the current crisis. We return to traditional international relations patterns and national security models.

To be able to think constructively about the real world, as Samuel P. Huntington put it, we need „pure logical categories“ and are forced to „generalize phenomena that never act according to the laws of human reason.“ In such a world and the set things, realism is the most appropriate of all theories of international relations for the interpretation of the current state of affairs, because it focuses on insisting on the importance and influence of states. Realism focuses on explaining the actions of states more than any other theory and seeks / has its stronghold in political practice. In realism, the primary discourse of the state is security, how to achieve and keep it. It is through the COVID-19 crisis that states seek to maintain existing levels of health, economic, financial and human security, and those who govern the state believe that this will be achieved precisely through government action. For classical realists like Hans Morgenthau, the answer lies in the human nature, for offensive realists like



John J. Mearsheimer the great powers represent the main actors of international politics and states can never be sure of the actions of other states, while defensive realists like Kenneth N. Waltz see the explanation in the treatment of states within the structure and dynamics of the international system of states.

Perhaps it is precisely the approach of defensive realism that is most relevant to the moment, as its focus is on the survival of states through increasing their own security. This approach is an inherent defensive stance of states and their endeavor to implement moderate strategies and policies towards a targeted security state. At the moment, we have such a global state of affairs among the states, where they have overwhelmingly set all other interests and goals as lower level priorities, and are dedicated primarily to themselves and their security. In the background of this approach is the fear that greater cooperation with other countries would increase the risks to their own security, and the need for the states to trust themselves in their own capacities and capabilities.

The question arises: is a state-centric approach appropriate for interdisciplinary crises with distinct transboundary causes and consequences? During the great refugee-migrant crisis of 2015 in Europe, states were also the primary decision-makers on crisis management, and many decisions were made in response to the reactions of another country, not unified. The EU and individual countries have learned a bit from this crisis, but certainly not enough. The Union has isolated itself from external migration, as all Member States have individually closed within their borders. We see the absence of a comprehensive European policy on this issue, as well as the lack of a common answer. Here, through defensive realism, we can see that security-seeking states behave irrationally and close within their borders, but this approach is not sustainable in the long run in the face of complex crises that have transboundary impacts.

The second part of the analysis addresses some of the key issues of managing the COVID-19 crisis. In the first part, we have argued that states take on a key role during crises by selecting strategies and tactics, where each country has chosen ways to act on its own capabilities. For this discussion it is important to focus on Croatia and analyze the current situation through the following parameters: the current amount of knowledge about the coronavirus, uncertainty, the length of the crisis and the measures being taken.



The amount of knowledge about the coronavirus is conditioned by the actions of each state in this crisis. In a situation where we still do not know everything about the coronavirus globally, each of us must decide who to trust and whose ideas to follow. The pleasant change is that websites, newspapers and TV are in this context dominated by experts, professors and doctors, as Jurica Pavičić pointed out. In our past analysis (from March 2020), we have highlighted key sources that need to be monitored in Croatia, and should be added by our top scientists working abroad, among which Ivan Đikić and Igor Rudan stand out. Each of their statements and written text is an extremely useful analysis of the health and safety challenges we face. With their hard work and knowledge they help our responsible persons managing the COVID-19 crisis in Croatia, and this is a very important realization. The amount of knowledge available to the Croatian profession in the country (Beroš, Markotić, Grba-Bujević, Capak) and abroad is sufficient to successfully manage and end this crisis.

There are several levels of uncertainty, all of which are interconnected. The first level concerns the health image and the ability to project the spread of the virus. Đikić believes that coronavirus is „a milder form of the disease that appears but is dangerous because it can be spread from people who do not have any symptoms. This uncertainty, spreading around us, makes this virus dangerous.” Likewise, any real-time data collected should be taken with a certain amount of caution, since it can sometimes be incomplete or even false, but in times of crisis you are forced to work with what is currently available. This brings us to the second level of uncertainty, namely the pressure on decision-makers within the Crisis Headquarters of the Ministry of Health and the Civil Protection Headquarters of the Republic of Croatia – who are in very unenviable circumstances, where they have to make daily decisions and take health and safety measures that have far-reaching consequences. The third level relates to the uncertainty that accumulates at the highest political level – with the Croatian Government, which must take into account the previous two levels of uncertainty and make strategic policy decisions that affect all vulnerable sectors and the whole country. At this level, the responsibility and political severity of the crisis is the greatest.

No one can predict the length of the crisis with great certainty. The most optimistic believe that in a month or two crises will be over and that we will return to normal. German scientists expect an end to the pandemic in Germany in August or September this year. The British,



however, believe the crisis could last until the spring of 2021. As for Croatia, Rudan and Đikić are very optimistic, but they always urge caution, because „even if the intensity of the infection drops, the virus will not completely disappear“ (Đikić), and „we can only fight the epidemic together“ (Rudan).

We cannot expect a quick end to the crisis, especially knowing that Croatia has not yet reached the pandemic's peak at the moment, and we are currently in the most critical period of crisis management. Now any subjective or objective mistake, omission, greater disregard for the introduced measures can be very harmful to all the efforts so far and to the continuing of the crisis management. That is why we all need to show more solidarity and patience to make effective crisis management work.

The measures taken in this crisis depend primarily on the development of the situation, the day-to-day analyzes, assessments and decisions of our healthcare professionals. Others in this health and security situation ensure the implementation of these measures. All relevant services available are involved in the implementation of the measures, all of our capacities are involved in resolving the crisis to the required level. According to a recent poll by Dnevnik Nove TV, the vast majority of our citizens believe that the Government and the relevant services are taking appropriate measures regarding the health and safety aspect of the crisis. Likewise, most respondents felt that Croatia was better at managing the COVID-19 crisis than the European average. On the other hand, it is worrying that (although these are small percentages) some respondents are not aware of the measures being implemented, some respondents state that they do not adhere to the instructions at all. It is in this category of poorly informed citizens that our overall activities for reducing the crisis are at risk. In addition, it should be noted that Croatia is approaching the crisis in a way that avoids the worst-case scenario, so according to some studies such as Oxford University, it appears that it is implementing the most restrictive measures in the world to combat coronaviruses in relation to the number of people infected in the country.

The third part of the analysis deals with recommendations for the post-crisis world and how to shape a new reality. It is important to emphasize here that the key to acting is to choose the priority we will address. On the example of informing about the crisis we see a good pattern – on a daily basis we are looking for reliable, realistic information from quality sources. One of



the priorities for the future should also come from numerous statistics, referring to several credible portals that monitor, compare and publish real-time data on the most common causes of mortality on a global level. According to them, from the beginning of this year until the end of March, mortality from coronaviruses is relatively low so far. In the same time period, five times more people died from seasonal influenza, eleven times more from malaria, eighteen times more from HIV, 55 times more from the effects of smoking, and 113 times more deaths from starvation worldwide. This is to illustrate how the coronavirus – which is dangerous but not extremely deadly – has stopped the whole world, and how we do very little and not enough regarding other „pandemics“ that are constantly happening. That is why we believe that the issue of coronavirus has too rapidly – from the health field, through securitization – become a first-class political-security issue. This speed and scale are worrying, especially when we look at the neighboring countries of Serbia and Hungary. In addition, the question arises of the place and role of the armed forces in the health crisis.

The overall public space of available information, public information and topics that we deal with as a society should also be considered. In the example of Croatia, we see that our information space is quite predictable and one-sided. In the last month or more, all the media services have been dominated by the coronavirus and the COVID-19 crisis (including the aftermath of the earthquake in Zagreb), as if there were no other significant news, activities and events that should interest us. Shortly before that, for days, whether we like it or not, we were bombarded with the story of the Freemasons in Croatian society and among the elite. Previously, for weeks, there was a very up-to-date story and reporting on migration and whether a migration crisis like the one in 2015 would happen again, etc. But in the COVID-19 crisis all the topics that are relevant and irrelevant disappear from the information space and as if they are not current. We need to significantly improve the area of informing our citizens in order to emerge from this crisis as a better society.

The crises will be increasing in the future, this is inevitable, and we all have systems and institutions predominantly built for the times already behind us. Therefore the current crisis is a good test of the ability for different systems, their processes and procedures, and to see what matters when situations like this happen to us. Furthermore, it is important to emphasize that the crisis shows that many things do not matter, and that using technology can solve things



faster, more efficiently and at the most cost-effectively. The crisis is also a great indicator of what areas we should invest in, what we really depend on, and which areas are not a priority of our society.

The crisis has largely confirmed what we knew before, but it has shed more light on a number of shortcomings. One of them is that our collective security awareness and security culture in Croatia are at a low level. Awareness of this also presents a chance to build more resilient communities and individuals through formal and informal education and training. Raising awareness of the risks we face and live with, working on prevention and preparedness, crisis and disaster risk reduction policies should become national activities and real priorities. Only through knowledge, prevention and through the building of targeted capabilities will we be able to successfully cope with new crises that will occur more and more frequently.

Furthermore, we have not been successful in „learning“ from our crises so far. The last two major crises that we have faced nationally – the huge floods in eastern Slavonia in 2014 and the refugee-migrant crisis in 2015 – have both been of high quality in the phase of direct reaction (the debate on prevention and preparedness requires a new analysis that goes beyond the scope of this research) but there was no comprehensive cross-sectoral analysis. We must not repeat this in the current crisis. The process is very simple and has three key steps: observations (which we all make daily), lessons identified, and lessons learned.

It is now necessary to designate a national level body that will collect all observations – it is best to have a body close to the COVID-19 crisis management center, which has insight into all processes and activities but is not directly involved in them to maintain the necessary objectivity. This body should collect observations from a number of sources. After collecting the observations, their evaluation is made, the quality, objectivity and reality of the observations are evaluated, the selection is made, and the observations that need to be implemented in changing procedures, procedures and modes are distinguished. Then those observations become identified lessons, because they have been accepted by the authority as valuable suggestions from which we make an improvement plan. In addition to forming a plan, it is also necessary to develop an action plan for the bearer of each activity (including the names of the responsible persons in front of each institution) and to set deadlines and control mechanisms. Ultimately, when the observations formed within the identified lessons



are put into practice – as new or amended laws, better public procurement systems, better equipment, more knowledge – then we are talking about lessons learned.

In conclusion, what kind of world to expect after the COVID-19 crisis – the same, better, worse? Based on the goal, the discourse of research and the main thesis, after the COVID-19 crisis the world will represent a mirror of current crisis management. First, viewed through the theory of realism, states will continue to act primarily in pursuit of their own national interests. Currently, there are no indications that countries want to try to solve this global crisis jointly at the global level, but are closing in on their borders spatially, practically and intellectually. Second, the key elements of crisis management are nationally set, leading to some countries (depending on a number of factors) coming out of the crisis sooner and later (some with minor, some with significant detrimental effects). Therefore, we expect a higher level of inequality after the crisis than we had before. Third, every crisis is also an opportunity – its outcome will determine what we will get out of it, and it depends on the learning process during the crisis. And right now, not after the crisis, it is important how we signify the priorities and that we start directing them. Summarizing all three perspectives, we can expect the post-crisis world to look very much the same as before, while our path as states, societies and individuals depends on the steps and priorities we choose and currently deal with in this crisis.

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