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Editorial

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HUMAN RIGHTS AND CIVIL LIBERTIES IN THE TIME OF COVID-19

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We've seen that living in a pandemic time is not easy at all. We had to stop our everyday lives, change the way we worked before, stay physically, but not socially distant to others, to postpone travelling for better times. Also, measures taken by states around the world, to slow the spread of the coronavirus, have shown that guaranteeing human rights and civil liberties during these times is and will be a challenge. The ongoing health crisis asked for extensive lockdowns, becoming also an economic and social crisis. It opened even deeper economic and social differences, affecting vulnerable social groups differently. States should use maximum action to save lives and slow the spread of the coronavirus, but should also minimize the negative consequences. Namely, they should not do harm, preserve humanity and dignity of their citizens, and only limit

human rights and civil liberties to the level that is necessary to fight the COVID-19 and to preserve public health. The feelings of fear, because of the current situation, but also the economic and social instability and unknown future, as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, are opening another concerns, such as discrimination against certain groups, hate speech, hate crimes, xenophobia, violent attacks, forced returns and mistreatment of refugees and asylum seekers, sexual and gender-based violence, limitation to sexual and reproductive health and rights, strengthening of authoritarian and undemocratic regimes worldwide etc.

It all begins with the censorship by Chinese authorities of Li Wenliang, the doctor who first discovered the ongoing coronavirus epidemic. The death of the whistleblower Chinese doctor Li Wenliang has aroused strong emotions across China.

The Chinese government has tried to tackle the epidemic by brutally violating one of the basic human rights - freedom of speech - in order to protect the sanctity and infallibility of the ruling party and official state ideology, without taking into account the fact that it has allowed the rise of the ideology of lies, manipulation, and authoritarianism that threaten the world today, in parallel with the biological consequences of the coronavirus pandemic. Unfortunately, China does not appear to have learned lessons from the SARS epidemic. Despite the flourishing of social media, information is more tightly controlled in China than ever.

In 2013, an internal Communist party edict known as Document No 9. ordered cadres to tackle seven supposedly subversive influences on society. These included western-inspired notions of press freedom, 'universal values' of human rights, civil rights and civic participation. Even within the Communist party, cadres are threatened with disciplinary action for expressing opinions that differ from the leadership.

The predictable reaction to how the Chinese state has dealt with the epidemic is best rendered by Hong Kong-based journalist Verna Yu's comment, "If China valued free speech, there would be no coronavirus crisis. Unless Chinese citizens' freedom of speech and other basic rights are respected, such crises will only happen again (...) Human rights in China may appear to have little to do with the rest of the world but as we have seen in this crisis, disaster could occur when China thwarts the freedoms of its citizens. Surely it is time the international community takes this issue more seriously".

Hence, the Covid-19 pandemic has not only undermined the foundations of world public health progress, but also worsened the human rights situation around the world, especially in countries whose governments ignore basic human rights and civil liberties.

The pandemic 'sucked' the geographical partiality, and the whole world became one in the problem, but no more solidarity in terms of dealing with the coronavirus. Otherwise, the countries that now accuse China of untimely submission of information can not justify the delay in implementing the necessary measures, especially the United States, Great Britain and France. The information provided to the World Health

Organization (WHO) and the international scientific community during the first two weeks of January 2020, should have been sufficient to encourage these countries to take preventive measures, as well as to procure the necessary protective equipment (disinfectants, masks, gloves, etc.) and medical equipment.

The pandemic marked the boundary between autocracies and liberal democracies. It marked the beginning of a new Cold War between the new ideologically antagonized parties - liberalism *vs.* illiberalism, but in a rudimentary form. The ideological dimension now prevails over the facts, blaming the Chinese political system, regardless of the reality of the situation. For US and European leaders, who have shown their shortcomings in governing, China can serve as a scapegoat.

With the onset of the pandemic, China's rise has already been confirmed. This marks the consecration of the new dynamics of power in the coming period. Or, as Dominique Moisi concluded, the coronacrisis has taken on the role of an 'accelerator of power'.

The international institutions have entered a phase of weakening, partly as a result of the US withdrawal and partly as a result of the rift between the major powers. The WHO has not played a major role in tackling the coronavirus crisis. The WHO has created a sense that the 'Chinese narrative' dominates the fight against the virus. China has reaped the benefits of the investment it has made in the UN system in recent years. Consequently, the space they are taking over is beginning to increase and will begin to dominate China and Asia on the world political scene.

Hence, the pandemic destroyed the credibility of organizations like the WHO. The steps taken by the organization, such as the exclusion of Taiwan from the emergency meetings, but also the praise for the success of China's policies to combat the coronavirus, made the WHO look like a spokesperson of Beijing.

China today is rebuilding its economy at a time when stock markets in the West are falling apart. At the same time, she fights against the xenophobic insinuations of Donald Trump in the absurd battle over misinformation, and at the same time acts as a savior for Italy or Serbia, partly because of the clumsiness and irresponsibility of their European partners. In the nascent world, China is emerging as a power that can contribute to advancing international relations, once the role of the United States.

The pandemic has also given rise to the legitimacy of autocracies and stabilocracies as 'successful' models for tackling the coronavirus. We are witnessing authoritarian leaders deepening their control over citizens and redefining sovereign command. China is already exercising even greater authoritarian control over its citizens under President Xi Jinping.

In the United States, Trump is using the crisis to draw more national attention to his upcoming candidacy, projecting himself as a 'military president' and continuing to pursue a xenophobic identity policy.

The debate over authoritarianism, populism and liberalism has revived in European countries. Some even, inspired by sovereign ideas, claim that the European institutions have proved to be pointless, and therefore the time has come to establish border controls, i.e. to abandon the Schengen agreement etc.

The UN Secretary-General António Guterres stated: “The pandemic has paved the way for an economic and social crisis and has rapidly turned into a human rights crisis. Let’s not forget that the threat is the virus, not the people”, stressing that human rights are not a topic that can be set aside during the crisis, but man must be at the center of everything. He said that at the height of the pandemic, hate speech had intensified, that unprotected groups had been hit and that stricter security measures were being taken. Populism and authoritarian rule “have intensified, respect for some human rights has diminished and repressive measures have been introduced under the guise of a pandemic. Governments must be more transparent and sensitive than ever before. Civil society and media freedom are crucial (...) At the height of the fight against the pandemic, we call for human rights to be protected”, Guterres emphasized.

In the meantime, Michelle Bachelet, United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights stressed that in countries with poor marks for human rights coronavirus pandemic further exacerbates the situation in this sphere. Bachelet believes that action based on rights should be part of the recovery from the crisis. She also noted that: “With Covid-19, the rapid and global health crisis has been met with much slower and intensified political, social and economic crises around the world (...) The multiple fundamental violations that have made us more vulnerable to this virus stem primarily from political processes that exclude the voice of the people and create gaps in the protection of human rights”.

Aren’t these times a moment to fight the virus, but by respecting everyone’s rights and place into society? Shouldn’t we learn from our mistakes and use this time to improve human rights? To reconstruct relations between people, achieve global stability and solidarity? Should freedom be placed before security or security before freedom? Should the law really be silent in a pandemic?

This is what we might have to face in the future. 