

This is a report of the mass zoom call organised by The World Transformed, Momentum and the Rosa Luxemburg Foundation on Tuesday 28st April entitled '**Coronavirus: European states of emergency**'. Over 300 people attended the call and the speakers were: Panagiotis Sotiris, Gracie Mae Bradley, Filip Balunovic, Marcin Antosiewicz, Malena Reali.

Over the coming weeks we will be hosting weekly Zoom calls on Tuesday evenings which will facilitate input from all parts of the movement, so we can work together to put pressure not just on the Government and employers, but on left wing political leaders, the Labour Party and trade unions to shape their response to the Covid-19 crisis.

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## Introduction

This week, we want to look at the dangers that stem from the actions the Government *has* taken.

While some measures of physical distancing are essential in order to slow the spread of infection and relieve pressure on care workers and hospitals, governments across Europe have introduced legislation which severely cuts back on the rights of civil society.

Interventions such as:

- The shutdown of borders and educational institutions
- enhanced police powers
- and the prohibition of demonstrations and free movement

are repressive, often anti-democratic and represent significant infringements on our civil liberties.

Should we be concerned that governments are exploiting this pandemic to further their political agenda?

These concerns, and indeed this crisis, are by no means confined to the UK. As of today, there are over 3 million confirmed cases of coronavirus worldwide and, tragically, over two hundred thousand deaths. Over half of these deaths have been in Europe.

While almost all of Europe has seen restrictions imposed on normal life, there are big variations



in the conditions and effects of lockdown between countries. In some cases, authoritarian governments have explicitly used the crisis as an excuse to consolidate power. The most extreme example of this is in Hungary, where at the end of March Victor Orban gave himself powers that would make him a quasi dictator, with the power to jail anyone deemed to be “spreading misinformation”. We wanted to invite a speaker from Hungary to this call but found that people were reluctant to speak up about the situation for fear of being persecuted. Leftwing Authors are publishing anonymously on the situation because they fear prosecution.

But we are very pleased to be joined by speakers from five other European countries today. They will help us understand more about how the pandemic has affected people in different political circumstances. They’ll provide an insight into how their own governments have responded, and what threat this poses to civil liberties and democracy in their country.

The UK was slower than a lot of countries in Europe to issue a lock-down and the conditions of the lock-down we are seeing here are still less severe than in some other European states. Unlike some of our European neighbours, most public spaces remain open and we do not require documentation simply to leave the house.

While one might think of the UK Government as relatively liberal in comparison to more explicitly authoritarian states, it’s important to remember that the boundaries between mainstream conservatism and rightwing populism and extremism have been blurring for some time now, both in parliament, and in the mainstream press.

We know, for example, that Johnson already supports racist ‘stop and search policing policies. We’ve seen examples of the police, on the news and on social media, using their new powers over-zealously and inconsistently, and we know that it is people of colour who will bear the brunt of this.

The endless Brexit confrontation has already proved that the current leadership are more than willing to seize a political crisis and use it to further their own agenda. In suspending parliament in September last year, Johnson showed a total disregard for democratic process, and we know that his government is keen to push through policy that will suppress votership among marginalised communities.

But, as businesses and Tory MPs call for an end to the lockdown, and even the Labour Leadership directs most of its effort towards demanding an ‘exit strategy’, the left finds itself in the unusual position of having to call for the continued restriction of people’s freedom. We need to be critical of the nature, scope and timespan of the measures being introduced. But at the same time, we cannot support calls for ending physical distancing before it is safe to do so.

Tonight we’ll be asking how the left can reconcile this tension between public health and civil liberties. How do we both demand that governments act to protect people, while at the same time ensuring the crisis is not used as a reason to bypass the usual checks and balances on government power?

To help us think through these issues we have an amazing range of speakers from across Europe.



## Speakers

**Panagiotis Sotiris** (journalist, academic and activist based in Athens, Greece)

On theory of state of exception, and why we should be concerned about its long-term effects.

- This crisis exposes simple and complex questions.
- The pandemic is real, but what we experience is the result of globalized capitalism, and neo-capitalism which is also prevalent in the health sector.
- The theory of the state of exception comes from political philosophy. It means the suspension of basic democratic liberties in times of emergency.
- Looking at international experience, we see lock down measures have blind spots: high rates of deaths in nursing homes and hospitals or care facilities.
- obvious too is the social determinants of health and poverty, seen by the death rate of People of Color or Hispanic community in NYC for example.
- Imposition of blank lock downs: e.g in Greece, the government has taken advantage of the situation to push through important, controversial legislation e.g. environmental protection law.
- We are facing an economic recession. State of emergency justifies certain state measures.
- We have a collective responsibility to practice solidarity, to move beyond individualized fear.
- Collective struggle as important intervention. We must organize more collective efforts, politics from below: ask for more support and public assistance to come up with measures that are much more suited to the situation.
- In Athens, networks of people to care for others, offering food and basic provisions.
- State intervention should be used to channel from private sector to public to fight pandemic.
- How we organize ourselves against costs of pandemic, the loss of lives and depression, is a manifestation of the crisis of liberal government.
- Time for an alternative society.

*(Attendee question) Biopolitics: what do you mean by the term?*

- Used by Foucault in his works, to describe how around the 18th and 19<sup>th</sup> century the government took interest in the body and health of people and how it can be used productively and to exercise power.
- In social science: expansion of power associated with public health measures like vaccination and criticism of them.



- Towards a democratic biopolitics? Where we can collectively decide on action to be taken regarding our health.

*(Attendee question) How is Greece dealing with migration/refugees in combination with corona, is there access to proper health care?*

- Camps are over-crowded.
- Conditions are bad, especially in Moria.
- There is a lot of pressure from the public to reduce the size of camps, improve health care, to avoid stigmatization.
- Greek's right and far-right use the narrative that refugees bringing the virus in, employing racist rhetoric in response to the crisis.

### Resources

- Panagiotis' article on biopolitics in reference to the crisis:

<https://www.viewpointmag.com/2020/03/20/against-agamben-democratic-biopolitics/>

### Filip Balunovic (political activist based in Belgrade, Serbia)

Can you give us an overview of the political situation in Serbia?

- I am also a good speaker for Hungary, whose population has been silenced by the government, because Serbia is heading in a similar direction.
- Neo-authoritarian tendencies turn into authoritarian tradition amidst crisis.
- Different types of authoritarian rules: some are supported by the majority, in Serbia under Vucic this is not the case. He is former extreme right-wing, important in war for Serbia and a propaganda machine in the 1990s.
- He is ruling by fear and blackmailing, despite winning the election in the first round, there is a definite lack of trust towards him.
- The lack of trust in government institutions spreads to lack of trust in medical institutions. You don't know whether medical experts giving advice are to be trusted because it's unclear whether the advice is given from a political or medical perspective.
- Government was laughing at the virus in the beginning, ridiculous, but overnight they changed perspective seeing what happened in Italy.
- Political culture in the country is built up in a way that you are constantly trying to find an enemy. Now it is the virus, but they were not satisfied with just that, so for a couple of days there were attacks against people coming from abroad like Italy or Germany with Serbian citizenship.
- There is a tendency among the population to reject what the government is saying because they are not trustworthy.



- Serbia has amongst the harshest measures among European countries, but low numbers of infections and death rate.
- They have had several weeks of lockdown, weekends complete lock down, now more and more people are shouting from balconies, the noise is against dictatorship, it's a new form of resistance.
- Parliament retroactively confirmed decisions made by the government 1.5 months ago.
- Instead of talking about side effects of privatization, lack of investment in health care which has brought us to the edge and meant we're not ready for such a pandemic, the opposition is only attacking one side of medal: authoritarian condition and not the social and economic aspect of condition: there is now a complete absence of such critique, coming from only minor initiatives talking about labor conditions.
- There is a marginal party, which is socialist and trying to build a more solid base to address such issues.

*(Attendee question) Serbian population generally does not trust the government. What is the general dissemination of information, is there trustworthy media working?*

- Yes, the media situation is quite tricky. Some have national coverage but are under direct control of the government.
- One channel that covers critically 'M1', but it is under constant attack from the tabloid press.
- Whenever you make a fair point you are accused of being a Soros agent, if you are a member of a social movement you are immediately targeted.
- Huge problem for the ability of political actors to take all the things people are dissatisfied with and turn it to their political agenda.

## Resources

- Filip Balunovic on the maltreatment of workers during the pandemic - <https://www.brexitblog-rosalux.eu/2020/04/16/the-maltreatment-of-workers-in-serbia-during-the-pandemic/>

**Malena Reali** (editor at Le Vent Se Lève based in Paris, France)

On the policing measures in France and why we should be concerned

- Currently France is in a state of emergency.
- There is a completely new regime to provide containment, which allows executive to make decisions by decree even if they're restrictive.
- Confinement of population has been prolonged, people stay at home until 11 May, and go out only with exception.
- People need a sworn declaration on why they're outside, and can be stopped any time by police and investigated.
- There is a risk of fines, after 3 repeated fines you can be put in custody.



- Police have been harsher on some than others- this is probably not particular to France.
- Hangover from responses to the War on Terror. What was supposed to be temporary measures in 2015 lasted longer than, was repeatedly voted in and lasted until 2017. 2 years of temporary measures, of a state of exception where the balance of powers was completely thrown off. Some of these measures were put into permanent law.
- It allowed authorities to undertake measures that were discriminating and violent.
- The balance of powers was thrown off, checks and balances were not respected, which shows the danger of measures being in place.
- So, the concern about civil liberties has a history in France.
- How the left should respond: left wing parties do not have a unified response.
- The Green Party is silent, Melenchon / La France insoumise has been vocal and critical of the government. The socialist party has also been mostly invisible.
- A unified response and common strategic goal of left is needed.
- The left should have a strategy of responsibility: this is lacking in government - left should be the most responsible option.
- Loss of support of France insoumise: people need reliable parties whom they can trust
- We shouldn't go against general consensus, we should have a strategy and positions not only as critical opposition but as vital and a safe alternative for the future.

*(Attendee question) How is the crisis interacting with unions or actions; are they doing something on safety of workers and housing ? What is the response of the yellow vest movement?*

- Unions have been visible during pandemic, active on pensions, have expressed concern over the fact that laws were passed for flexibilization of work conditions and work contracts, to save companies, to make sure economic impact is not too strong.
- Yellow vest was already losing impact when it happened, not as present in the political sphere when the crisis struck. Police brutality became more severe during protests of yellow vest, this is something which probably has continued until now, seeing violence and police enforcement especially affecting particularly people of color.

## Resources

- Le Vent Se Lève: <https://lvsl.fr/>

**Marcin Antosiewicz** (journalist and political scientist based in Warsaw, Poland)

- In Poland there are planned elections for May 10. It is very dangerous and difficult to hold elections, but the government still sticks to it.
- People can go out for exercises and shopping and work.
- People must keep distance, and wear face masks.
- The restrictions are a huge problem because they mean people can't protest.



- The government took control over public media 5 years ago, there is only government propaganda, all critical questions from journalists are not answered.
- Ruling party politicians ignored the virus at the beginning, that has now completely changed after realizing the situation is serious.
- If a journalist sends a list of questions to the government, there is no answer.
- We are very divided, trust is a huge issue as in Serbia, we should have common ground to understand each other but this is not the case in Poland.
- We have elections in 12 days, and the opposition asks to not hold elections because it's dangerous for the public, but so far the government refuses to postpone.
- They want postal voting, but would need to change legislation for that, which is now in discussion in senate. On may 6 is decision. Law from the upper House (Kammer) needs to pass to the lower House (Kammer) where PiS has a majority.
- We have health problems, we have legislative problems.
- There is no time for the opposition to make a rally and have a meeting to have an election campaign.
- The media shows only the current president, blaming the opposition, saying they are traitors because they are cooperating with Germans and the EU, they're not patriotic.
- Poland not yet Hungary, we have independent media, but the country is very divided.
- Polish constitution has 3 types of states of exception: martial law, natural disasters like a pandemic, state of emergency. Last type is very dangerous because the government can close the media and opposition.
- If the state calls out the state of natural disaster, the election will be postponed to September.
- If they hold it and win the election nevertheless, the country will be even more divided which will be very problematic for independent judiciary and media.

*Question: The government in Poland are using Coronavirus to push through awful anti-abortion laws. Could you tell us a little more about the resistance to them, and particularly resistance from the left party?*

- What the government is trying to do has been going on for years. They don't want to keep this security for women. They're always talking about this abortion issues.
- All they really do is talk about it because they know there's no majority to change the law.
- Abortion is banned but only allowed in 3 circumstances: if health is in danger, when pregnancy is a result of rape, or when there is a high probability of impairment of fetus. Ruling party called this euthanasia. The government has wanted to change the 3<sup>rd</sup> for years.
- This instance wasn't that dangerous because it was a citizen's proposal- when 100,000 citizens sign a proposal. Then the parliament has 6 months to debate on it.
- This was their last chance to debate on that citizen's proposal- it wasn't really connected to Coronavirus.



## Gracie Mae Bradley (Policy and Campaigns officer at Liberty UK)

- Coronavirus bill: does some good things, for example it allows NHS workers who were retired to come back to work.
- Police are using excessive detention powers- up to 48 hours if you are potentially infected.
- Police can forcibly test for Corona, a person can be compelled to answer questions, to be ordered to self isolate in whatever location, no matter the circumstance.
- The bill restricts gatherings, no exemption can be made for strike action or protest.
- Gives power to close borders and postpone elections.
- Also increases surveillance power.
- There is no time limit really on how long it will be in power. It's being reviewed every 6 months, but MPs can only say yes or no to all of it, not make amendments.
- It also allows the measures to be extended beyond 2 years time if agreed in parliament. They are really draconian measures.
- We have separate regulations for lockdown: in theory after 28 days they need to be reviewed. But until June parliament cannot review: so we're basically in a police state until then.
- We shouldn't start from a position of trust that these measures are really necessary.
- If the government had acted early, educated, protected, a lockdown policy guided by police powers would not have been necessary now.
- It's important to say that physical distance is important, but if the state had become a caring state these other measures wouldn't have been necessary.
- We need to talk about who was left behind even before the crisis: migrants, sex workers, homeless people, gig economy workers, people of color (and many more), who have been uncared for for years. These inequalities are only exacerbated now.
- The policing measures are racist. This pandemic is not a great leveller- it is massively exacerbating existing discriminations in society.
- It should be no surprise that the first person convicted under the Coronavirus act was a black woman- and she was wrongly convicted. This is what happens when police are given essentially free range to stop and search.
- The left needs to talk about surveillance and its impact on civil liberties. That can feel like an uphill battle. There's a contact tracing app being developed, the government has chosen not to build this through a decentralised system, which is worse for our privacy than other options.
- We should be worried about the NHS dashboard- lots of different private companies are involved in developing- companies like Palantir, a security company involved in the development of racist predictive policing tools, it's fuelling Trump's deportation regime in the US and complicit in gross human rights violations, are gaining a foothold in our NHS. It's not difficult to see that that will cause problems for all of us, not just marginalised people.



- We need real scrutiny on the involvement of private companies in the government's Coronavirus response.
- The left should make demands from seeds that are already planted, amazing work has been done from grassroots organisations already like IWGB , State Watch, Freed Voices, ACORN, London Renter's Union, and more.
- This is a moment in which things we didn't think would happen are pushed through by the government, now it is really about what we make of it.

## Resources

- Gracie Mae Bradley on how new policing laws will affect people of colour - <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2020/mar/31/people-colour-covid-19-laws-police-track-record>
- Liberty's work on the CoronaVirus - <https://www.libertyhumanrights.org.uk/fundamental/coronavirus/>

## Resources

- Support TWT: <https://theworldtransformed.org/support/>
- Join TWT's mailing list: [bit.ly/TWTjoin](https://bit.ly/TWTjoin)
- TWT's guide to running political education online: [https://cloud-cube-eu.s3.amazonaws.com/pupuh35gi0f8/public/documents/How\\_to\\_run\\_your\\_meetings\\_online\\_1.pdf](https://cloud-cube-eu.s3.amazonaws.com/pupuh35gi0f8/public/documents/How_to_run_your_meetings_online_1.pdf)
- Momentum's mutual aid map: <https://volunteercoronavirus.com/>
- Rosa Luxemburg Foundation: <https://www.rosalux.de/en/>

