



## NATIONALISM: THE EVEN GREATER RISK OF THE COVID-19 CRISIS

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Recent global trends suggest we could face an even greater challenge in the foreseeable future, rendering COVID-19 the mere precursor to the burning fire. Philanthropic action is needed if we are to put the fire out: not only in the sense of giving money or even helping more immediately with the COVID-19 crisis, but more fundamentally.

Humanity is undoubtedly going through one of the biggest crises in recent human history. While the death toll of the COVID-19 pandemic is (so far) [small when compared to some of the other pandemics](#) that humanity has faced, the world has come to a near standstill with countries shutting down one-by-one, and then asking their people to isolate themselves at home. Supply and demand have stopped simultaneously, and stock markets have plummeted in unprecedented ways with the [Dow Jones Index witnessing its biggest one-day point loss ever](#).

The robustness and contingencies of countries' healthcare systems are being tested to the core. Healthcare workers are left feeling alone and helplessly overwhelmed by the situation. China's response was one of [quick and decisive action](#), locking up entire regions and creating a new hospital in a matter of days, resulting in a highly regional phenomenon in the country. Reactions elsewhere, in particular in European countries and the US, have been much more indecisive.

Of course, a few weeks ago the western world was watching from a safe distance. Back then, shutting down Hubei province seemed radical. Westerners are not happy if the government tells them to stay at home or if they see a wall being put up in front of their faces; understandable, perhaps, in the context of history and particularly the effects of the Berlin wall.

As a result, not only are we seeing the virus spreading quickly within countries, but also the beginning of the collapse of healthcare systems. [Italy has been most affected](#) to date, but other countries' healthcare systems will unfortunately follow suit.

The exponential spread of the COVID-19 virus is keeping all of us busy on a daily basis, with media and the internet providing us with more than enough sources of information (with one of the more useful [Johns Hopkins University](#)).

### **The silent rise of nationalism**

While the spread of the virus clearly represents a massive challenge for countries, companies and people, the walls (physical or otherwise) popping up everywhere are even more worrying. Individuals and entire countries are starting to behave in very selfish ways.

It started with [Asians facing racism](#) everywhere around the world back in January and February, which then extended to other nationals as we moved into late February, Iranians and Italians among them.

Just a few days later, the crisis has moved one step further, after a truck filled with medical supplies was stopped at the German-Swiss border, after German chancellor [Angela Merkel allegedly banned most exports of protective medical equipment](#). A diplomatic spat between Germany and its neighbors Austria and Switzerland ensued.

Both countries, relatively small in both size and population, lack any major domestic production of medical equipment and their healthcare systems are therefore pretty much dependent on imports.

A further dispute between countries erupted [after President Trump attempted to persuade CureVac](#) – one of the leading firms in trying to develop a vaccine against COVID-19 – to move from Germany to the US. This led to fears among the German government that the US was trying to get exclusive access to a possible treatment.

We then witnessed flight bans (initially flights from China, but quickly adding other countries to the list, including last week's travel ban from the Schengen region to the US). The next step of evolution in restricting people movement was a stark increase in border controls within the Schengen region, trying to limit people traffic across borders.

What started as a recommendation and a request to the people has resulted in [borders between neighboring countries literally shutting down and being barred up](#). This leads to the paradoxical situation that I, sitting in Switzerland, could possibly not be able to visit my family, should something happen to them, just 70km away in Germany. That is an unsettling feeling – being so close and still so far away, and it is one that most of us are not used to.

The latest step in the developments is that countries across the globe are declaring the situation a national emergency, resulting in political speeches that haven't been used since the second world war.

The coronavirus is no longer merely a health crisis, but “a question of national security,” Horst Seehofer, German Interior Minister, said on Sunday. It is up to the government, he said, to ensure not only the security of its borders and its food supply, but also “our medical products and our medicines.” Emmanuel Macron went so far as to say yesterday “[We are at war \(against the virus\)](#).”

We are not only witnessing a divide between countries, but also a divide between “classes”. We are all asked to be mindful and embrace the concept of social distancing. While this is great and absolutely feasible for some of us, this is absolutely impossible for many others.

[Social isolation is the privilege](#) of those with better jobs, higher salaries, bigger apartments or houses with separate rooms for work. Those who have a nanny at home taking care of their children while they work from their home office will find the situation less of a strain than those who do not.

At this time, we mustn't forget that we are all humans, and all equal. While the current developments can still be regarded as logical and rational steps in trying to slow down the pandemic, it will be difficult to draw the line and to decide at what point this is no longer just about the virus, but about building up walls to “protect your own people” vis-à-vis “the others”.

If intensive care units are running at maximum capacity and doctors are facing having to decide who to treat — like they had to [for isolated cases in Italy](#), turning down very old patients — will we soon be seeing the preferential treatment of citizens over foreigners?

Last week, [China sent doctors and urgently needed medical supplies to Italy](#), in a bid to help them get the crisis under control. What used to be the role of the US in the post-second world war period, is slowly but surely becoming that of China: a global supporter in times of crisis.

And yet, is this purely altruistic behavior? Maybe, maybe not. There might be greater strategic interests behind these actions. Nonetheless, they are still the kinds of acts of solidarity we need right now, and globally.

If there is anything we can learn from history, then it's that extreme forms of nationalism are not a viable solution for humanity. This is a time where, around the world, we all need to grow closer and not further apart. We need to embrace the true meaning of philanthropy – “a love of humanity”.