

# RESEARCH STUDY

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## **EICTP Expert Paper**

**Impositions of solidarity during COVID-19.  
Government action in a post-heroic society.**



**E·I·C·T·P**

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Solidarity is not a deal among equals who are helping one another with what they might need. Solidarity is something fundamentally different compared to anything we relate with market activities where deals or rather exchanges are – at least in principle – mutually beneficial. Under the hegemony of neo-liberalism, the idea of solidarity as a sort of investment with no exact deadline or mode of reimbursement has prevailed throughout the past years. This means that in the common understanding it has become an incomprehensible mix of risk investment and insurance, an expenditure you might get nothing back for in return or maybe more than what was initially spent. Solidarity became connected to the expectation of receiving help if needed, precisely because one had provided help before themselves. This way, the whole concept of solidarity which actually rooted in a pre-individualism era was made attractive to a highly individualized society.

In addition to this integration of solidarity into the market world, it was adopted by the language of politics. Political linguistic fitness has been in use before regularly, for example for justifying pending tax increases that would burden some somewhat stronger than others. As soon as a government action did not concern the whole society in a universal and linear way, "solidarity" as a generalized term came into play and served as legitimization of such action. Of course this was not lived solidarity but a forced, paternalistic one. A caring "father state" was taking care of the compliance with certain social and moral standards by the citizens who, in this scenario, had turned into children.

Both ideas of solidarity – the rational one in conformity with market conditions and the other characterized by paternalistic solicitude – have little in common with the original concept of solidarity. This concept descends from the idea of a "brotherhood" that aimed at overcoming social, regional and confessional limits and at achieving a state of equality which had to be reached from the bottom

and defended against the top, as well as intrusions by the state or the gradually evolving market society colored by the "each for himself" trend. Although this solidarity idea was most prominently reflected in the slogans of the third French revolution – *fraternité* – it soon split into two major blocks: patriotism or the willingness to make sacrifices for the fatherland, and the workers' brotherhood which was characterized by a strong cohesion in class struggles. Both blocks culminated in the imagination of a "hero" or someone willing to sacrifice himself for the community. Heroes of the war, heroes of the work – heroes were highly relevant in nationalism and socialism like nowhere else. Solidarity and heroism went hand in hand, and at times their connection grew particularly close. In this sense it is no surprise that the development of post-heroic societies in the Europe of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (the second half) also concerned the specific shaping of the solidarity concept. The growing individualization of society was adding to this development. The appropriation of solidarity ideas through political paternalism can be, just like the logic of the trade market, considered an indicator for their weakening. As a result thereof, these ideas have fallen victim to be used as scraps by both the state and the market.

The measures taken to counter the COVID-19 pandemic, including the closing of borders, movement restrictions, the shut-down of all social and economic lives, were accompanied by a true firework of calls for solidarity which took quite some effect at first, at least as long as the whole lockdown had an immense "event character", the restrictions primarily served as self-protection and everyone had a feeling of doing something good. Thus, people were glad to act in solidarity at first.

However, naturally this would not be a lasting disposition. As soon as the first

demands to ease the lockdown were voiced, solidarity with the risk groups quickly became an imposition for major parts of society who soon tried to opt out of their responsibilities. Young people in particular started to disobey the state-imposed limitations and also to neglect the recommendations for self-isolation and self-restriction, and they increasingly began to resume the lives they had had before COVID-19. This behaviour was even more encouraged by those statistics that showed that the demographic segment of over-70-year-olds and people suffering from previous illnesses were particularly affected by a severe disease progression – or even a fatal outcome. In conclusion, there was a particularly unequal risk distribution among society.

The conclusion drawn from that by many was that the lockdown restrictions primarily served for the protection of a specific population group and unreasonably limited all the others, at least if the situation was to go on for a long time and would ultimately lead to great economic loss that would greatly concern the younger generation. They would then have to pay the government debts too, caused by the economic standstill. Resistance against the lockdown began to stir not only among supporters of conspiracy “theories” and did not manifest itself in the refusal of following orders and recommendations only by individuals, but also in demonstrations against the restrictions. The time of solidarity-spirit expected from decision-makers at the top was coming to an end. Looking back at spring 2020 we can already say that solidarity in post-heroic societies is a limited, social-moral resource that works only under the condition that its end is imminent. It’s a resource that can not be provided on a long-term basis.

It is clear that we must expect similar crises in the future. This means that our societies – meaning Western and Central Europe – must be strategically

prepared for such challenges. We will need to respond to the challenges of a second or third wave of the coronavirus, a lack of effective medicine or vaccines, a mutation of the virus which will quickly adapt and not be controlled by available medications, or to the rise of global illnesses which can turn temporary crises into a permanent state. In these cases, lockdowns as models of reaction will not be no option anymore, because all financial resources for the recovery of the (global) economy have been used up, and "borrowing resources" from our future is simply not possible. Of course this is a worst case scenario that does not necessarily happen as described above, however both politics and society are well-advised to adjust on time and make appropriate preparations. And what might these preparations look like?

Some governments – the U.S. and the Brazilian governments in particular – have counted on heroic posing by notoriously ignoring or talking down the situation, and their societies have paid a high price for this kind of behaviour. Measured by their scientific and economic possibilities, the United States demonstrated a considerable efficiency deficit that widely damaged the country's international image of a role model. Even though this does not concern their current President, it does in fact reduce the "soft power" of the U.S. which is, in fact, the cheapest form of political influence. One can assume that relevant political players are not going to follow the U.S. example during the next crisis (referring to likely candidates such as China or some European countries) and it seems evident that the United States or their President himself will choose another approach for dealing with future situation, too. Heroism is useless for combating viruses anyway because it is ineffective and just a mere act or figure of speech when it comes to the care of sick people.

Strategically, the deficit of heroism of our society is not an impairment when it

comes to reacting to the pandemic – at least when we assume that there is simply no way of heroism changing into sustainable and lasting solidarity.

In principle there are three different approaches or strategies for precaution measures, and they all point towards more differentiation between the members of a society: a regional strategy, a strategy oriented toward generation models and a radical-individualized strategy. They all share the advantage of reduced solidarity impositions, however they do not manage without a minimum of solidarity – meaning that they require a “behaviour” that does not serve a short-term personal interest or need. At the same time these approaches raise solidarity expectations towards more defined, smaller groups, which means they are definitely more selective. The decisions by politicians between these three models will be made according to opportunity aspects. It can be assumed that they will not exclusively decide upon one model only but a combination of elements from all three approaches, adapted to the respective challenges of a situation. The three different approach models need to be worked out separately in a political, administrative way in advance, in order to be able to use them properly. The more comprehensive and diligent this preparatory work, the more options for action will actually be available to politicians and the more flexible they can be in order to react.

Let’s start with the regional differentiation: When COVID-19 began to spread in Europe and elsewhere, the “re-opening” of old state borders in order to stop mobility was a panicky reaction rather than a smart one. Regarding the spreading of the virus, state borders are actually “silly” borders, because they separate areas with strong economic ties from each other and at the same time enclose other zones that are affected by the infection and the economic restrictions that go with it in very different ways. Metaphorically speaking, they

are working things with a jackhammer when instead the finest cutlery would be more adequate. However, demarcations are effective tools for the control of an epidemic – but only if by introducing a *cordon sanitaire* the spread of the disease can be significantly slowed down, as by restricting the mobility of people the “mobility” of the virus is restricted, too.

Still, a three-stage system of mobility restrictions should be preferred over state borders, consisting of a first external line of defence which also includes a multilevel area (like the Schengen area), a series of inner lines enclosed around economically connected, often transnational areas that are marked out against their environments, and a microstructure of mobility restrictions oriented at districts or towns with high or low case numbers. The latter option – the microstructure of restrictions – provides the most flexibility and can be changed within just a few days if needed. The last option, however, is designed for more endurance. This external defence line can only function if the enclosed area has a buffer and enough stocks that allows self-support for a longer period of time. The enclosed area must be able to survive without its global dependencies over a certain period of time. Such areas do not exist by themselves yet but must be prepared accordingly.

In contrast, the generation model is oriented towards the age of people as well as their corresponding previous illnesses, and it generates clusters that are restricted in a sense that they do not affect the “rest” of society, which is the large majority in this scenario. Their risk of infection is being accepted, because the general assumption is that any disease progression is less lethal and risky for this “rest” group. By allowing the virus to spread among large parts of the society and counting on a slowly building immunity in doing so, it is necessary to isolate risk- and high risk groups even more from society, and most likely for a



longer period of time. This was done, for example, by issuing a general visiting ban of nursing homes, even though it came obviously too late. Two problems linked to this have arisen that require a solution rather urgently: one, the question of care and supply of people isolated from society and its related organization of "channels" for nursing staff, because they need to be able to enter isolated environments and must not be "used" by the virus for further spreading in already isolated areas; and two, the legal protection of such isolation, which can be compared with imprisonment in many respects. Any court is not going to reduce such measures if there is no one taking legal action against it. Therefore, this is a case of reversal of solidarity, where solidarity impositions are inflicted upon the weak to the advantage of the strong, meaning that the more vulnerable groups must remain in isolation in order for the others to continue with their lives without any major restrictions. The generation model is a more theoretical model than a politically manageable one. The social exclusion of risk groups will rather remain an exception with clear time limits than become the general rule.

Finally, there is the highly individualized process of warning via the so-called coronavirus app. This tool allows people who have become infected to communicate their infection and subsequently it permits tracing back the infection paths (how they became infected themselves and with whom they have had contact with since the time of infection), so that early warnings for testings can be sent out to likely infection cases. The effects of this app depend on its legal form, as it will be necessary to determine whether there is an obligation to download it and if such obligation is legally binding or on a voluntary basis. Certain gratifications or sanctions that come with its download or non-download will need to be determined, whether one can visit restaurants or book restaurant tables or visit events only when using the app, and what kind

of influence employers will have regarding the download. All these are legally delicate questions since any gratification or sanction results in the obligation to own and carry along a mobile phone. Adding to this, the usual data protection aspects must also be considered.

Such an app is a useful tool for societies that already live in a surveillance state. However, it seems highly doubtful that it would be an effective prevention method in constitutional states. Even if only a certain share of the population downloads the app it would facilitate a better traceability of infection paths, but at the same time, these apps have gaps which make any defence system solely based on it highly permeable. It can be assumed that such an app-supported pandemic defence system can only be used in addition to other measures. The expectations toward solidarity basically consist of the assumption that as many society members as possible will download the app. Naturally, solidarity is in competition with other moral values but must be socially preferred in this case.

Any of these models described above, as well as a combination thereof, will depend on whether the majority of society is convinced of their effectiveness and whether the measures are bearable. Of course this counts for free, democratic societies where governance is based on the rule of law and the constitutional ground rules, and where independent courts closely observe the compliance with both legal prerequisites. However, it will be similarly important that there is willingness for solidarity at all – solidarity as a social-moral long-term resource that individualized, post-heroic societies of today actually no longer know.

## About the author

**Prof. Dr. Herfried Münkler** is a former Professor for Political Science (Political Theory) at the Humboldt University in Berlin and a member of the Academy of Sciences of Brandenburg. Most of his books are considered standard works, such as „Die neuen Kriege“ (2002) or „Die Deutsche und ihre Mythen“ (2009), which was awarded the Prize of the widely acclaimed Leipziger Buchmesse. Prof. Münkler is a regular commentator on global affairs in the German-language media and a renowned expert of history, political ideas, state-building and the theory of war.



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