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## HOW TO DEAL WITH THE CORONAVIRUS?

*Marian Gorynia (Poznań University of Economics and Business, Poland)*



*Please let go of hopes that this text will describe the invention of a vaccine, cure, or at least a fast, reliable, and cheap test. I think we all agree that the sudden and unforeseen arrival of the coronavirus has caused such a huge flood of information, it is difficult to remain in control of it all. The influx of news is overwhelming, as all of it is important – but unfortunately often tragic and terrifying. However, there is a growing need to order all the information, putting it into a framework that will allow us to see the whole and not just the residual fragmentary images of what is happening around us.*

### INTRODUCTION

The extraordinary nature of the situation that affects us is so unbelievable and overwhelming that I have to admit that – as early as at the turn of February and March this year – I felt as if it exceeded the limits of my imagination. Therefore, everyone is reminded of the images from history, religious texts, mythology, literature, film, and other fields of art – images of equally tragic and catastrophic events. Sometimes we reach for history with our thoughts and try to find a connection between what was and what is happening now. But we certainly agree that it is something different to perceive these events in the form of artistic fiction or as a reminiscence of a rather distant past than to experience it here and now.

Economists have an explanatory and useful distinction for phenomena such as the coronavirus: probability and uncertainty. The former is when a person can calculate and declare that such a phenomenon can occur with a certain probability. If there is no basis for quantifying the chance that something like the coronavirus will happen, it is called uncertainty. It means that something can happen, but we cannot estimate the probability. It seems that the coronavirus is unquestionably a phenomenon from the world

of uncertainty, not from the world of probability.

For me, the coronavirus is a conglomerate of interconnected and piling up of extremes and adversities, antinomies and extreme poles, which we can nevertheless gather in the form of several interconnected planes or aspects. They can be called “dimensions” of the coronavirus. The intensification of social life in modern civilization makes the power of connections between these dimensions unusual.

### DIMENSIONS OF THE CORONAVIRUS CRISIS

Of the many planes, aspects, or dimensions of the coronavirus, I would like to draw your attention to but a few. However, before I briefly discuss them, let me emphasize that the coronavirus is an extremely complex and multidimensional phenomenon. This means that these dimensions are interconnected and influence each other, leading to different interactions. The complexity of these interactions makes it very difficult for them to be known, to determine cause-effect mechanisms and possible forecasting, and even more so to manage this phenomenon on a social scale. Moreover, from the viewpoint of scientific knowledge, the coronavirus is an unusual, complicated, and poorly recognized phenomenon. Therefore, the scientific elaboration of all its aspects requires the creation of large, strong, competent, and interdisciplinary research teams, which cannot take place without considerable expenditure. However, it is important to understand that without a holistic approach to studying this phenomenon, we will have a hard time to think about avoiding the negative effects of similar pandemics in the future and, above all, about developing effective preventive measures to protect mankind from similar cataclysms.

I could begin with the philosophical-existential or metaphysical dimension of the pandemic: Where did the coronavirus come from, what is it for? What is it supposed to serve? The prevalent approaches to this problem can be captured in a few simple questions. Is the coronavirus a crime of man against man (see the rhetoric of the political dispute and mutual accusations on the American/Chinese level)? Or, is it an accident at work in the framework of the big players' technological race (see reports of the virus accidentally "escaping" from virologist laboratories)? Is it a result of irresponsible human activity, its constant interference with the environment, and the overexploitation of the environment? Is it God's punishment (see the interpretations found in various social media, especially by followers of different religions)? Is it a coincidence, a product of the process of evolution, which in the long run affects all living organisms? Or maybe the explanation of the coronavirus phenomenon should eclectically draw on several questions at the same time?

In such a difficult moment for our civilization, we should ask and answer the above questions. It is impossible to reach an agreement and consider a single explanation as universally valid. But we probably must establish a consensus regardless of individual answers, as social space needs the adoption of a single conclusion. Besides differences in beliefs about the essence of coronavirus, we should abandon these disputes – at least in the short term – and focus on saving lives, mutual help, and solidarity. This should be the overriding value at the present moment. Our roles here are very different. The role of the doctor, the nurse and the paramedic is different, the role of the person under quarantine is different, and the role of those who are still uninfected but may fall ill at any time is different as well. The common denominator of all these roles is responsibility.

The second most important dimension is medical, sanitary, biological. In this dimension,

the most important goal is saving lives. It seems that there is no other rational option here but to obey the orders of specialists, experts, and scientists. Although opinions may sometimes vary here as well; consider the Chinese (very restrictive), Italian and Spanish (fairly loose in the initial stages of the epidemic), or British (different from the continental to a certain stage), or Swedish (group immunity) approaches. We must assume that a dissolution of social ties is an axiom on which most agree. Moreover, it is also likely that the so-called Western civilization – compared to some Asian civilizations – will pay a negative rent for the social insubordination associated with the sense of freedom strongly developed in liberal democracies. At this point, it is clear how the medical dimension of coronavirus is linked to the social or political dimension.

The medical dimension encounters the economic dimension: Do we save lives or the economy? Is it better that a part of the population will die and be sacrificed so that those who remain do not lose too much from the epidemic? Or is it the other way around, as the economic costs do not matter, and we must fight to save every life at all costs? It is difficult to write such words. One could say that the health service faces similar dilemmas on a daily basis, even in normal times. We are treated in a way that depends on the level of prosperity achieved in the social and individual dimension. Saving human life and health is always hampered by the need for resources, and all governments without exception hear calls for increased investment in health care. But in this dimension, the situation is also extraordinary and requires a different approach than in routine long-lasting socio-political agreements about the amount of funding allocated to health care in the state budget. An extremely important dilemma arises here: In what proportion should the funds to remedy the pandemic be divided between expenditure on saving human life and health and expenditure on counteracting the threat of economic collapse? Social

mobilization and prioritization of the struggle with the coronavirus seem necessary, which is accompanied by the element of time, as important as the amount of mobilized funding. Often faster is more important than more.

Regarding the economic dimension of the coronavirus, we are bombarded by reports about the amount of funding that governments allocate to fight a pandemic. We already know the decisions taken in the USA, Germany, Italy, Spain, France, the UK, and in Poland. The axiom seems to be the speed of support, and then a gradual approach to its development, correction, and extension in time. This approach seems reasonable in view of the fact that we do not know how long a pandemic will last. Blind distribution of excessive funds runs a high risk of missing some of the effects of the pandemic, which would be a waste of public funds. We must help, protect, support, but we should do it carefully. And consult individual actions with social partners.

What is also extremely important is the material and financial dimension, closely related to the medical and economic dimension. It turns out that, in principle, all countries affected by the pandemic are missing something. The scale of deficiencies, of course, differs between countries at different levels of socioeconomic development. Deficiencies in measures to protect people, including medical personnel, from the virus affect even the richest countries. This is not an attempt to justify anyone, but there appeared the effect of surprise, which led to shortcomings due to some level of supply line inertia.

At the same time, it appears that the coronavirus also has a political dimension. The pandemic develops in all affected countries in the background of political rivalry, or rather, political struggle continues in the background of the pandemic. The fight against the coronavirus is certainly difficult in countries characterized by the high intensity of political dispute or the current government's low

legitimacy, which in the face of the danger may radicalize its attitudes, in particular in the event of a parliamentary, local, or presidential election falling during the pandemic. Some level of political dispute is needed even in such difficult situation as the current one, but it simultaneously cannot paralyze the activities of the administration, in particular the functioning of the state. As I mentioned, it is not uncommon to view liberal democracy as not the best system for the coronavirus crisis. Political solutions that incline toward authoritarianism seem to be more conducive to the necessary and demanding discipline of the sanitary regime during the pandemic. Therefore, in the political dimension, the conclusion is that at least some human rights should be suspended due to the superiority of the public interest in a difficult period.

The social/sociological dimension of the pandemic is equally important. In a short time, a significant part of relationships and social activities were broken; many constituted the sense of life for us, such as work, culture, education, political life, tourism, religious life, but also fragments of family and social life. Other social aspects of the coronavirus, which show the actual level of our social integration (or its lack), are the matters of compliance with quarantine, help for the weaker, collections for the purchase of medical equipment, and – on the other hand – the penalization of anti-social behavior in the event of non-compliance, the appearance of online fraudsters, or a tendency to speculative behaviors. Thus, the pandemic tests our social maturity.

The mental/psychological dimension of the pandemic goes hand in hand with the social/sociological dimension. It is a difficult period for us. We fear losing our own and our loved ones' lives, we fear illness, we stress about the inability to perform work – which for most of us was an occupation that fills every day – we feel threatened by the potential loss of income and work, we fear the possible lowering comfort of life, difficulties with

finding a job, and fulfilling free time. In the long run, the consequences of a pandemic trauma can be serious. Here, too, there are demands for solidarity and responsibility toward the loved ones who may be seriously affected by such problems.

We cannot overlook the international, global dimension of the pandemic. The intensity of connections among people from all countries and continents has reached unprecedented levels. This is rightly attributed to globalization, which offers many benefits that outweigh some of its disadvantages. The rate of disease spread is the result of the great civilizational achievement, which is the freedom of movement of people. However, the fact that a pandemic has emerged does not exclude this achievement, and I am convinced that humanity will return to its previous interconnected state right after the global community vanquishes the virus. In the long run, we may anticipate that globalization – with some adjustments – will again become the leading global cooperation mechanism. However, we will need to develop more mature, global, and predictive institutional mechanisms for the detection of similar threats to the one we are facing now. In the current discussion about the causes and possibilities of resolving the pandemic, we should emphasize that it exposed the inability of elites and establishments around the world to elaborate preventive and supportive measures. The elites failed. In the global dimension of the pandemic, what will be extremely important is the help of rich countries that should go to poor countries, unable to cope with the coronavirus alone. So far, there are only weak signals about the common awareness of this circumstance, and equally weak about the political will and ability to act.

An extremely important aspect of the pandemic is its information-media dimension. When it comes to the speed of information, the situation is also unprecedented. Unfortunately, the large amount and remarkable speed of

information travel time does not equal its quality. We must be careful as fake news, political rivalry, and hybrid wars are just examples of misinformation, which is the dark side of the coronavirus pandemic. The great impact of the media means that the priority here is media responsibility, on the one hand, and the maturity of recipients on the other hand. As part of the latter, we should identify and eliminate disinformation senders from circulation (by ignoring them).

The last dimension of the pandemic I wish to mention here is the probably positive side effect – not everyone will share this assessment – that coronavirus seems to further accelerate the digitization of many spheres of our lives. During the pandemic, the digital revolution is quickly accelerating, and we meanwhile discover the painful inadequacy of our solutions in comparison to what modern technologies offer. This applies, for example, to broadly understood education, scientific activities, administration, and working from home. We simultaneously find out about the usefulness of electronic banking, for example, online commerce, and remote access to culture. However, let us hope that the next phase of the accelerated digital revolution will not thereby hinder the reconstruction of traditional interpersonal relationships when the coronavirus pandemic disappears.

Finally, we should ask: When will we defeat the coronavirus? What will be the distribution of its later waves in different places around the globe? When will it begin to weaken? When will it subside? And, when a return to normality will be possible (that will anyway be a different normality)? The works of epidemic specialists, the statements of experts and authorities, along with my intuition, make me believe that we should probably start to rebuild broken bonds in Europe in most of the above-mentioned dimensions in May. The most important after the resolution/reduction of the medical threat will be a return to rebuilding the economy. Today's divination of what decline in GDP should we expect are mathematical exercises that must not only be prepared (possible scenarios) but also constantly



modified due to the unknown dynamics of the pandemic.

## FINAL WORD AND FUTURE DIRECTION

In my opinion, we will do better with the coronavirus if we examine it multi-dimensionally and try to see and understand the interactions between the dimensions. Only a holistic and systemic approach can free us from falling into one-sidedness. After some time, when the climate of danger and struggle passes – a period difficult to predict today – the search for those guilty will begin, but not those who made the coronavirus appear but rather those responsible for the fact that the world was, in principle, completely unprepared for its appearance. What can we say here?

I think that the following few theses of a diagnostic and postulative nature will not cause much controversy:

- The coronavirus appeared suddenly and surprised all of us, including economists (I mention this professional group because of my profession).
- The coronavirus will probably significantly affect economics, among other fields, but certainly also other areas of life and science (although I believe that at least some predictions about the virus's influence on our future life-world are exaggerated).
- Research on the consequences of coronavirus becomes urgent and needed, and will definitely affect how we do economic sciences.
- Apart from general observations, today we cannot formulate anything more serious than the statement that the role of the systemic and interdisciplinary approach to all civilizational issues will certainly witness a renaissance.

Allow me to end as I began: the coronavirus surprised us all, without exception. This time even, say, Nouriel Roubini [I just have to write it: well, maybe except for a few scholars who wrote that we must be careful, because there can be epidemics and, thus, you can say that they predicted everything]. The coronavirus

surprised the elites, the establishments, and all of humanity. That we can now find virologists who said it could happen is not relevant at this moment in time. The fact that an economist wrote something like this could happen, but no one knows when and where, also adds nothing to the discussion. We failed as a civilization, because we were unable to prepare a systemic response to the threats mentioned by few. In other words, we were unable to implement proper countermeasures or introduce the best prevention. This situation teaches humility and shows that the so-called science is not true or perfect enough. But this does not mean that science is unnecessary. It is very necessary, but imperfect. It will always be as if we put insufficient effort. Hence we must toil, but without illusions or pride.

Perhaps some readers will dislike the very personal and emotional overtone of this text, although I believe that it also holds a rational element. I would like to take this opportunity to declare that I do not intend now to begin perennial self-criticism of the fact that economists could not predict the arrival of the coronavirus and “protect” us from its effects (as it happened during the financial crisis). We do as much as we can; we are imperfect (it turns out that not only we are). Such is the dynamics of this world's development. But we must try. Besides, I believe that this approach is also good from the viewpoint of mental hygiene. ✕

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### \* AUTHOR'S NOTE

This text is an emotional record of my reflections, which appeared at the beginning and during the development of the COVID-19 pandemic in Europe and Poland.

The text is based on two articles written during the third week of March 2020 and published in early April 2020 in the daily *Rzeczpospolita* (*Jak poradzić sobie z koronawirusem?* *Rzeczpospolita* 2 kwietnia 2020 – <https://www.rp.pl/Opinie/304019879-Marian-Gorynia-Jak-poradzic-sobie-z-koronawirusem.html> oraz *Koronawirus niejedyn ma wymiar?* *Rzeczpospolita* 8 kwietnia 2020 – <https://www.rp.pl/Opinie/200409383-Marian-Gorynia-Koronawirus-niejedyn-ma-wymiar.html>).

An indication of when these overviews were created is important. The pandemic attack was so unexpected and striking in its magnitude that some assessments may seem exaggerated in retrospect.