

**POLITIČKE POSLEDICE PANDEMIJE**

POLITICAL CONSEQUENCES OF THE PANDEMIC



Udruženje za političke nauke Srbije  
Univerzitet u Beogradu – Fakultet političkih nauka

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of the Pandemic

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# The impact of the coronavirus crisis on climate action: lessons learned for the governments

## SUMMARY

The article presents theoretical-descriptive analysis of lessons learned for the governments due pandemic caused from Covid-19 that has impact on climate change. The world is living through the biggest pandemic and carbon crash ever recorded. During the quarantine period in 2020, traffic has almost disappeared in many cities around the world. Multiple sources indicate that the Earth and

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the state's overall is now living through an unrivalled drop in carbon output. The global response shows that states can take immediate, radical emergency measures to protect the human lives and well-being of all.

Many climate researchers are optimistic that this deadly pandemic has taught governments some critical lessons that they can apply to the problem of rising temperatures. The article points out the lessons learned around global cooperation during the Covid-19 pandemic, that have to be applied to urgent global efforts on climate action.

KEYWORDS: *Covid-19, climate change, states, challenge, measures, recovery*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Climate change is not only a modern term that is constantly used in international politics to show awareness about this significant issue in the world media, or as a subject that states have to consider as important in the future when the world will be politically and economically more stable. Climate change has become a global political and environmental challenge for humanity over the last decades. Therefore, coordinate approach of the countries and international strategy for disaster risk reduction and multiple actions on climate change is more than needed. At the same time, climate change policies cannot be developed in isolation from the overall development context (Stojanovska-Stefanova & Vckova 2016). At the beginning of April 2020, about a third of the world's population was subject to measures intended to slow down the spread of the novel coronavirus (SARS-CoV-2) which leads to infection with the Covid -19 disease (Johns Hopkins Coronavirus Resource Center 2020). These measures range from mild restrictions, such as bans on large events, to very severe ones, such as confinement at home, travel restrictions and closure of schools and non-essential businesses. These measures lead to significant reductions of mobility and economic activity, with a corresponding drop in energy consumption and greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions. The global response to the Covid-19 pandemic has led to a sudden reduction of both greenhouse gas emissions and air pollutants.

The coronavirus pandemic continues to unfold at a staggering pace, decimating lives, livelihoods and the normal functioning of society, as well as interrupting energy demand and CO<sub>2</sub> emissions. Previous Carbon Brief analysis showed that the crisis temporarily cut CO<sub>2</sub> emissions in China by 25%, with emissions still below normal more than two months after the country entered lockdown. The Earth's average temperature is about 15C but has been much higher and lower in the past. There are natural fluctuations in the climate but scientists say temperatures are now rising faster than at many other times. This



is linked to the greenhouse effect, which describes how the Earth's atmosphere traps some of the Sun's energy. While Covid-19 has shaken much of human society, the threat posed by global warming has not gone away. Human activities have increased carbon dioxide emissions, driving up temperatures. Extreme weather and melting polar ice are among the possible effects. This is linked to the greenhouse effect, which describes how the Earth's atmosphere traps some of the Sun's energy. Scientists believe we are adding to the natural greenhouse effect, with gases released from industry and agriculture trapping more energy and increasing the temperature. This is known as climate change or global warming. The world is about one degree Celsius warmer than before widespread industrialisation, the World Meteorological Organization says (WMO 2020). The 20 warmest years on record all occurred in the past 22 years, with 2015–18 making up the top four. Across the globe, the average sea level increased by 3.6mm per year between 2005 and 2015. Most of this change was because water increases in volume as it heats up. However, melting ice is now thought to be the main reason for rising sea levels. Most glaciers in temperate regions of the world are retreating.

Also, British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) presented that the satellite records show a dramatic decline in Arctic sea-ice since 1979. The Greenland Ice Sheet has experienced record melting in recent years. Satellite data, also shows the West Antarctic Ice Sheet is losing mass. A recent study indicated East Antarctica may also have started to lose mass. The effects of a changing climate can also be seen in vegetation and land animals. These include earlier flowering and fruiting times for plants and changes in the territories of animals (BBC 2020).

## **2. LOCKDOWN VARIATIONS IMPACT ON CO2 EMISSIONS IN THE STATES: CORONAVIRUS SET TO CAUSE LARGEST EVER ANNUAL FALL IN CO2 EMISSIONS**

Governments are taking a wide range of measures in response to the Covid-19 outbreak. This tool aims to track and compare policy responses around the world, rigorously and consistently.

With dozens more countries enforcing lockdowns in response to the pandemic, a wide range of indicators show how transport use, electricity demand and industrial activity are being cut. Yet there have been few attempts, thus far, to quantify the consequences for global CO<sub>2</sub> emissions (Carbon Brief 2020). Many climate researchers are optimistic that this deadly pandemic has taught governments some critical lessons that they can apply to the problem of rising temperatures.

The big challenge is to ensure the recovery has a green focus. According to statement of Prof. Gail Whiteman from Lancaster University, UK, for BBC "it

was almost impossible to believe that governments around the world, when faced with a health emergency, would put humanity ahead of the economy. But they did.”.

Government responses vary significantly from one country to another and from state to state, and like any policy interventions, their effect is highly contingent on local political and social context. The Covid-19 Government Response Indices, like all aggregate indices which combine different indicators into a general index, should not be interpreted as measuring the appropriateness or effectiveness of a country's or a state's response (University of Oxford, Blavatnik School of Government 2020).

While some governments consider that ambitious programmes like the European Green Deal will hinder economic recovery after the crisis, the European Commission and others maintain that the European Green Deal is the growth strategy that can help Europe's economic recovery while at the same time addressing the global climate emergency (European Parliament 2020).

The pandemic is a cataclysmic event so big and disruptive that it can be measured in the planetary metrics of climate change. As many as 2.6 billion metric tons of carbon dioxide emissions, about 8% of the estimated total for the year, will never be emitted into the atmosphere, according to estimates by the International Energy Agency. Pick any world-shaking event from 20th century history—none has produced a bigger decrease in emissions.

It took weeks, not years, for skies in polluted cities to clear as emissions dropped. The coronavirus lockdown in Europe is leading to a drop in pollution that can be seen from space. People in smog-choked towns in India shared photos of the suddenly visible Himalayas, which had been obscured by pollution. Power plants responded to the lockdowns almost immediately, to the point that it's been possible to trace the spread of the virus from the Chinese province of Hubei to Central Asia, Europe and the U.S. just by looking at grid activity. A pickup in power in Hubei in recent weeks is an indication that activity there has resumed after the lockdown ended. To see Europe's emergence from lockdowns, simply note the recently shrinking gap between energy demand this year and last (Bloomberg 2020).

Global climate change has already had observable effects on the environment. Glaciers have shrunk, ice on rivers and lakes is breaking up earlier, plant and animal ranges have shifted and trees are flowering sooner. Effects that scientists had predicted in the past would result from global climate change are now occurring: loss of sea ice, accelerated sea level rise and longer, more intense heat waves (NASA Global Climate Change, Vital Signs of the Planet 2020).

Despite the impacts of the coronavirus pandemic, the world mustn't forget the “deeper environmental emergency” facing the planet. That's the view of the UN Secretary General, Mr. Antonio Guterres, in remarks released to celebrate Earth Day. Mr. Guterres says, that “The toll taken by the virus is both: im-

mediate and dreadful". But the crisis is also a wake-up call, "to do things right for the future," said the Secretary General (BBC 2020):

Since the Spanish flu killed millions over 100 years ago, the global expansion of emissions of CO<sub>2</sub>, from the use of oil, gas and coal has risen massively. Over the past 100 years a number of events have shown that dramatic falls in carbon are possible. This is much smaller than the fall in CO<sub>2</sub> in the aftermath of World War II, which saw a drop of around 800 million tonnes. Much is made of the financial crash in 2008–2009, but in reality, carbon emissions only fell by around 450 million tonnes between 2008 and 2009.

So, there is dilemma, will the pandemic's big hit on carbon mean that last year, 2019, becomes the year the world reached a turning point? According to evidences and experts' opinion: not so fast.

The Global Carbon Project emphasizes that the carbon emissions drop that followed the recession in 2009 was followed by a sharp rise of almost 6% in 2010. Something similar could happen over the next couple of years. Back in 2008, the European electricity industry was hit badly by the global financial recession and demand for power fell sharply. But when that demand picked up again, it was solar and wind that were by then large enough to supply all the growth. Europe's use of fossil fuels to produce electricity never returned to the level it had been at before the crash.

Experts now believe something similar could happen with the coronavirus pandemic. "In about half of the world, we've already seen peak demand for fossil fuels," said Kingsmill Bond, from independent financial think tank Carbon Tracker. "At this point, we do not see any clear signs that the pandemic and our societal response to it will lead to significant and permanent changes in the path of future global emissions," said Robbie Andrew from Cicero (Global Carbon Project 2020). – Global carbon dioxide emissions from fossil-fuel combustion and cement production grew 5.9% in 2010, surpassed 9 Pg of carbon (Pg C) for the first time, and more than offset the 1.4% decrease in 2009. The impact of the 2008–2009 global financial crisis (GFC) on emissions has been short-lived owing to strong emissions growth in emerging economies, a return to emissions growth in developed economies, and an increase in the fossil-fuel intensity of the world economy.

Preliminary estimates of global CO<sub>2</sub> emissions from fossil-fuel combustion and cement production show that emissions grew by 0.51 Pg C (5.9%) in 2010 and reached a record high of  $9.1 \pm 0.5$  Pg C (Supplementary Methods). This is the highest total annual growth recorded, and the highest annual growth rate since 2003 (and previously 1979). The 2010 growth overcomes the 1.4% drop in emissions recorded in 2009, which was due to the GFC, putting global CO<sub>2</sub> emissions back on the high-growth trajectory that persisted before the GFC. Thus, after only one year, the GFC has had little impact on the strong growth trend of global CO<sub>2</sub> emissions that characterized most of the 2000s (Nature Climate Change 2020).

The Earth's climate has changed throughout history. According to NASA in the last 650,000 years there have been seven cycles of glacial advance and retreat, with the abrupt end of the last ice age about 11,700 years ago marking the beginning of the modern climate era — and of human civilization. Most of these climate changes are attributed to very small variations in Earth's orbit that change the amount of solar energy our planet receives (NASA Global Climate Change 2020).

Earth-orbiting satellites and other technological advances have enabled scientists to see the big picture, collecting many different types of information about our planet and its climate on a global scale. This body of data, collected over many years, reveals the signals of a changing climate.

The heat-trapping nature of carbon dioxide and other gases was demonstrated in the mid-19th century. Their ability to affect the transfer of infrared energy through the atmosphere is the scientific basis of many instruments flown by NASA. There is no question that increased levels of greenhouse gases must cause the Earth to warm in response.

UN Secretary General Mr. Guterres said that "money must be used to make people and societies more resilient to climate change". Also, he says: "Public funds should be used to invest in the future not the past". Fossil fuel subsidies from governments is a theme that Mr Guterres has highlighted many times. These must end he says, and polluters must pay for their pollution (BBC 2020).

According to UN Secretary General Mr. Guterres the world will need to work together and climate risks will need to be factored into the financial system and be at the heart of all public policy.

### **3. COVID-19 COMBAT APPLICABLE TO CLIMATE ACTION**

Climate change is a global challenge that demands a global response. Therefore, at the Paris summit in December 2015, 196 countries will meet to sign a new climate change agreement. This Climate Change Summit in Paris (to be held after the coordinated terrorist attacks occurred in Paris and its northern suburb, Saint-Denis, on the night of November 13 2015) is meaningful and will make a real difference to climate action on the ground. With the right political leadership, it can lead to ambitious outcomes that will have a real impact on tackling climate change (Stojanovska-Stefanova & Vckova 2016). The Coronavirus outbreak has also prompted a wide range of responses from governments around the world.

In this context, UN Secretary General Mr. Antonio Guterres said: "To combat the Covid-19 pandemic and the looming existential threat of climate disruption, the only credible response is brave, visionary and collaborative leadership anchored in multilateralism" (United Nations 2020).

Scientists have been ringing the alarm on climate change and its inevitable impacts on our future for equally as long. The vast majority of climate scientists 97% agree that humans are causing climate change, with the data explicitly backing up their beliefs. “The science is clear: The science is unambiguous. The politics has made it difficult to respond to the science,” climate and water expert Dr. Peter Gleick said (Lassman 2020).

Having in mind the experience from the past, world can make many smart investments to avert another outbreak. Federal, state, and local agencies can support public health leadership and science, we can provide more funding for needed research, early response to outbreaks, and supplies for testing. And we can do much more to control the illegal wildlife trade.

Experts say that in many cases, climate solutions are in fact pandemic solutions. The states all over the world, also need to take climate action to prevent the next pandemic. For example, preventing deforestation – a root cause of climate change – can help stem biodiversity loss as well as slow animal migrations that can increase risk of infectious disease spread. The recent Ebola epidemic in West Africa probably occurred in part because bats, which carried the disease, had been forced to move into new habitats because the forests they used to live in had been cut down to grow palm oil trees. Rethinking our agricultural practices, including those that rely on raising tens of millions of animals in close quarters, can prevent transmissions between animals and spill over into human populations. Reducing air pollution caused by burning fossil fuels like coal, oil and natural gas also helps keep our lungs healthy, which can protect us from respiratory infections like coronavirus.

To combat climate change, we need to drastically decrease greenhouse gas emissions. Generating electricity from low-carbon energy sources like wind and solar decreases harmful air pollutants such as nitrogen oxides, sulphur dioxide, and carbon dioxide that lead to more heart attacks and stroke as well as obesity, diabetes, and premature deaths that put further strains on our health care systems.

Preparation for pandemics is also about keeping people healthy at baseline. If we have a population in the U.S. where a third of our population are obese, and 5–10% of people have diabetes, we’re going to be immensely more vulnerable. And if you look at why people in the U.S. are not healthy at baseline, it has to do with our diets, pollution, and climate change. We have an opportunity here to recognize that prevention is by far the best approach to protecting health.

In an analysis of 3,080 counties in the United States, researchers at the Harvard University T.H. Chan School of Public Health found that higher levels of the tiny, dangerous particles in air known as PM 2.5 were associated with higher death rates from the disease.

For weeks, public health officials have surmised a link between dirty air and death or serious illness from Covid-19, which is caused by the corona-

virus. The Harvard analysis is the first nationwide study to show a statistical link, revealing a “large overlap” between Covid-19 deaths and other diseases associated with long-term exposure to fine particulate matter (New York Times 2020).

According to Harvard T.H.Chan, C-Change, Center for climate, health and global environment, there are many actions that can we take to prevent future outbreaks: “We can make many smart investments to avert another outbreak. Federal, state, and local agencies can support public health leadership and science, we can provide more funding for needed research, early response to outbreaks, and supplies for testing. And we can do much more to control the illegal wildlife trade”.

We also need to take climate action to prevent the next pandemic. For example, the study shows that preventing deforestation – a root cause of climate change-can help stem biodiversity loss as well as slow animal migrations that can increase risk of infectious disease spread. The recent Ebola epidemic in West Africa probably occurred in part because bats, which carried the disease, had been forced to move into new habitats because the forests they used to live in had been cut down to grow palm oil trees.

The Harvard C-Change Center highlighted that to take climate action to prevent the next pandemic, we also have to rethinking our agricultural practices, including those that rely on raising tens of millions of animals in close quarters, can prevent transmissions between animals and spillover into human populations.

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Preparation for pandemics is also about keeping people healthy at baseline. The world has a unique opportunity here to recognize that prevention is by far the best approach to protecting health.

When COVID-19 eases, and we are ready to restart our economy, we can make our workforce healthier and more climate-resilient through scaling-up our investments in low-carbon technologies (Harvard T.H. Chan 2020). According to the new Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public health Study, people with chronic health conditions, lower-income, and communities of color are disproportionately impacted by both Covid-19 and climate change, and pollution is at the heart of both problems.

The “COVID-19 PM2.5 a national study on long-term exposure to air pollution and Covid-19 mortality in the United States”, points out that African

American communities are disproportionately exposed to air pollution and we're now seeing this pollution driving higher mortality rates from Covid -19. The results of this paper suggest that we owe it to everyone to improve health, and we do that by reducing the sources of pollution that drive a large burden of disease both in the United States and around the world.

"The actions we need to take around climate change namely greater reliance on renewable energy, for our electricity and transportation, eating less meat and more plants to reduce carbon emissions there and frankly across the board," explained Dr. Aaron Bernstein, Interim Director of the Center for Climate, Health and the Global Environment at Harvard.

But none of these solutions are as drastic as the social distancing and stay-at-home orders much of the world is facing. "The collective action here around this event is unprecedented in recent US history and the sacrifices that people are making left and right go way beyond anything that would be asked of folks in any other solution sets," Dr. Bernstein added.

Like the coronavirus pandemic, much of the resistance revolves around the perceived cost to tackle the problem. Protests to reopen have been occurring around the country in recent weeks. Many are anxious to choose restarting the economy over safety recommendations. The same argument engulfs climate change. The climate scientist Dr. Katharine Hayhoe said that's actually not true. Dr. Hayhoe also said that "people don't think that there are any solutions to climate change that are consistent with our values. We think the only solutions are socialist or communist. There are some that believe the science but are fearful about the governments need to respond to it" (Climate Change 2020).

UN Secretary-General Mr. Guterres proposed six climate-related actions to shape the recovery. First, the huge amounts of money to be spent on recovery from the coronavirus must deliver new jobs and businesses through a clean, green transition. Second, where taxpayers' money is used to rescue businesses, it must be tied to achieving green jobs and sustainable growth. Third, fiscal firepower must drive a shift from the grey to green economy, empowering societies and people to be more resilient. Fourth, public funds should be used to invest in the future, not the past, and flow to sustainable sectors and projects that help the environment and the climate. Fossil fuel subsidies must end, and polluters must start paying for their pollution.

Fifth, climate risks and opportunities must be incorporated into the financial system as well as all aspects of public policy making and infrastructure.

Sixth, all need to work together as an international community, (United Nations 2020).

According to UN Secretary-General also the human rights can and must guide Covid-19 response and recovery. The recovery must also respect the rights of future generations, enhancing climate action aiming at carbon neutrality by 2050 and protecting biodiversity.



## 4. CONCLUSIONS

By the time the World Health Organization declared COVID-19 (scientifically referred to as the severe acute respiratory syndrome–coronavirus 2 or SARS-CoV-2) a pandemic on 11 March 2020, the virus had already spread from China to other Asian countries, Europe and the United States. Therefore, the Covid-19 (coronavirus) outbreak has prompted a wide range of responses measures from governments all around the world intended, to slow down the spread of the novel coronavirus which leads to infection with the Covid-19 disease.

These measures range from mild restrictions, such as bans on large events, to very severe ones, such as confinement at home, travel restrictions and closure of schools and non-essential businesses. Measures regarding the Covid-19 pandemic have led to a dramatic reduction in travel and economic activity as well. In consequence, energy consumption and greenhouse gas emissions have fallen sharply. This in turn had an impact on the prices of energy commodities and emissions allowances, which have also dropped rapidly.

Thanks to lessons learned after the 2009 economic crisis, which caused a massive surplus of carbon emission allowances in the EU Emission Trading System, a market stability reserve was put in place in 2019 to automatically adjust the supply of allowances to actual demand and prevent a collapse of the carbon price.

The handling of the Covid-19 crisis had already led to an economic downturn, reduced tax receipts and increased government spending to support companies and citizens. Stimulus programmes are considered necessary to re-launch the economy after the crisis. While some governments consider that ambitious programmes like the European Green Deal will hinder economic recovery after the crisis, the European Commission and others maintain that the European Green Deal is the growth strategy that can help Europe's economic recovery while at the same time addressing the global climate emergency.

As the EU institutions change their calendars, agendas and priorities, the restrictions on travel and large-scale gatherings may also slow down legislative activity related to the European Green Deal. Decision-making under the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, the International Civil Aviation Organization and the International Maritime Organization are also affected by the cancellation and postponement of important meetings and conferences.

Changes in infectious disease transmission patterns are a likely major consequence of climate change. Related to this, World Health Organization advises about the need of learning more about the underlying complex causal relationships, and applying this information to the prediction of future impacts, using more complete, better validated, integrated, models.

A major shortcoming of many climate change health impact assessments has been the superficial treatment of the population's adaptive capacities and



policy options. Strategies to enhance population adaptation should promote measures that are not only appropriate for current conditions, but which also build the capacity to identify and respond to unexpected future stresses/hazards. The restoration and improvement of general public health infrastructure will reduce population vulnerability to the health impacts of climate change. According to World Health Organization, the longer-term, and more fundamentally, improvements in the social and material conditions of life and the reduction of inequalities within and between populations are required for sustained reduction in vulnerability to global environmental change.

Covid-19 and climate change, both cause global disruption that transcends borders and threatens the lives of millions of people. We may conclude that Covid-19 and climate change are risk multipliers that exacerbate inequalities by disproportionately affecting the most vulnerable, each in its own way. Covid-19 and climate change pose health threats of global magnitude.

The WHO estimates that between 2030 and 2050, climate change will cause approximately 250,000 additional deaths per year from malnutrition, malaria, and heat stress. Climate change and loss of biodiversity also increase the risk of future pandemics by endangering the fragility of the world's ecosystems.

In response to COVID-19, countries have reacted with colossal emergency. The global response shows that states can take immediate, radical emergency measures to protect the human lives and well-being of all. We may conclude that similar dedication for climate change could accelerate the transition to clean and sustainable energy and reduce our greenhouse gas emissions. The governments can make drastic changes quickly and can invest in a greener future. In line with the UN Secretary General's six climate-related actions to shape the post-pandemic recovery, States have a unique opportunity to "build back better" by creating more sustainable, climate-resilient and inclusive societies. At the end, we may underline that both climate change and the Covid-19 pandemic require us to listen to experts, to unite behind the science and protect people's lives.

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