WHO's in Charge? Legitimacy of Global and Regional Institutions in the Aftermath of the COVID-19 Pandemic

Inbar Noy and Naama Lutz[*]

As the COVID-19 pandemic spreads, reactions from global and regional institutions have been lagging. The missed opportunities of leading cooperation and coordination between states in the handling of the crisis puts the future legitimacy of these institutions in question.

At the global level, as the novel coronavirus pandemic is a global challenge, global institutions were expected to coordinate and lead the treatment of the pandemic. Similarly to the Ebola crisis, the current crisis provided an opportunity for international institutions – such as the World Health Organization – to lead the management of the current crisis, thus proving their legitimate role in maintaining the security and health of the international community.

The WHO, however, has been slow to react and its decisions appeared to be too politically tainted. The WHO's declaration of the situation as a global pandemic only came in mid-March 2020, when the virus had already been reported in 114 countries. The suspicions that the delay in its declaration of the COVID-19 as a global emergency was caused by political considerations surrounding their decision, cast doubts regarding the organization's role in managing global health emergencies. Even when the delayed response arrived, the organization adopted a problematic approach- Rather than working with states in order to coordinate a solution, the WHO's recommendations are used largely to criticize states' actions (or lack thereof), using shaming mechanisms rather than proactive cooperative measures.

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[*] The authors are PhD Candidates in the Hebrew University's International Relations Department and the Leonard Davis Institute for International Relations. Inbar Noy is writing her doctoral thesis about the social construction of peace. Naama Lutz is writing her doctoral thesis about naming and shaming of transnational advocacy networks in international relations.

This has led to a backlash of criticisms of the WHO, its effectiveness and its legitimacy. The most vocal and influential of these criticisms is coming from the US administration, which decided to [cut WHO funding](#) over claims of its mismanagement of the COVID-19 crisis. Whether or not the WHO will overcome this backlash of criticism in the aftermath of this crisis, it will need to reevaluate its mechanisms in order to regain its undermined legitimacy to deal with future crises.

At the regional level, regional institutions also seem to have missed so far the opportunity to lead the management of the current crisis. This is especially clear in the case of the European Union, the "poster child" of regional integration. Despite the existence of tight coordination and regulation on many other matters, and an awareness to the ramifications of open borders, the uncoordinated efforts on the COVID-19 front were especially dangerous as the disease spread across the open borders and became frustratingly difficult to contain for local governments, until eventually, one by one, the states broke away from the union's principal of open borders. While some coordination and cooperation continued to take place, and some help was offered between the states, the [lack of management](#) of the crisis on a regional level left each state fending for itself, with some even accusing states of hoarding essential equipment.

Beyond their functional value, regional institutions play an [essential role in creating regional consensus](#). Given the power of states in the international system, the ability of regional institutions to play an effective role in promoting cooperation depends to a large extent on a sense of solidarity – a ["we-feeling"](#) as a basis for their legitimacy. It seems that the European Union missed the opportunity to create a unified policy in managing the current crisis. The missed opportunity to demonstrate its authority as a regional voice in the time of such a crisis, especially when the crisis was so heavily affected by the policies initiated and managed by the regional institution such as the open borders, raises difficult questions about whether the sense of solidarity and the trust in the integration will hold as strongly in a post-coronavirus Europe.

Times of a global crisis that require dealing with a transnational threat should be the ultimate test cases for the value and power of international institutions, their ability to lead and their ability to work with states. It remains to be seen whether the current failure to do so will undermine these institutions' future role, both in terms of their functional effectiveness and in terms of their international legitimacy. These two dimensions, in turn, are closely intertwined. WHO is leading? Well, not the relevant international organizations.