

EPIDEMIC/PANDEMIC AS NATURAL DISASTERS

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Abstract: *The aim of this research is to provide, on the basis of the historical development of epidemics and pandemics as well as the lessons learned from combating them, an insight into both the narrower and broader aspects of the issue, to highlight the creation of governmental models for their suppression and prevention, and to contribute to the improvement of efficiency and the preservation of the healthcare system and global security protection both in the context of human health and the health of plant and animal life. The research seeks to answer the question of whether responses to such emergency situations, both military and civilian, are adequate in terms of human resources, material and technical capacities, as well as healthcare capacities, in confronting emerging threats. As a problem-oriented study, its objective is to indicate the causes, identify challenges, and classify the types of bioterrorism manifested through pandemics and with the use of comparative method, historical events pointing to issues encountered during pandemics, endemics, epizootics, and epiphytotics, in order to foresee the emergence of future such events that not only end with suppression and treatment, but also with addressing the legal issues arising from them.*

Key words: Epidemic, pandemic, challenges of COVID-19, bioterrorism

1. INTRODUCTION

By defining the topic of this paper, “Epidemic/Pandemic as natural disasters”, and establishing its conceptual framework, the research problem was addressed. Throughout history, pandemics have repeatedly had devastating consequences for the global population, manifested through diseases such as cholera, plague, and influenza, thereby playing a crucial role in shaping civilizations by claiming vast numbers of lives, which is evidenced by historical examples: the plague pandemic in the Byzantine Empire in the 6th century CE, the Black Death, which originated in China and spread across Europe in the 14th century, as well as the influenza pandemic of 1918 - 1919, which began in the U.S. state of Kansas and spread to Europe, Asia, and islands in the South Pacific - it is therefore considered that, as societies become more civilized with larger urban centers, more exotic trade routes, and increased contact among diverse human populations, animals, and ecosystems, the likelihood of pandemics emerging grows significantly.

Through historical monitoring of epidemics and pandemics, as well as by employing comparative statistics and mutual comparisons, this study seeks to establish the possibility of identifying potential challenges and threats from both medical and security perspectives, more specifically, addressing subjective aspects, expressed through assessments, as well as objective ones, supported by statistical data thereby the hypothesis of the paper “*Epidemics/Pandemics as Natural Disasters*” aims to achieve a more effective level of

prevention. It can be argued that researching epidemics and pandemics as natural disasters carries multiple forms of significance, which are reflected in the following:

The scientific significance of this research contributes to opening new chapters for understanding the concept, role, and assessment of the potential emergence of epidemics and pandemics as natural disasters, resulting from the effects of natural or artificially induced forces, including bioterrorism.

The social significance of this research contributes to informing public about the far-reaching catastrophic consequences of epidemics and pandemics on human life and health, providing behavioral models, guidance for modifying prevention strategies, and approaches to mitigating and addressing their effects in the Republic of Serbia, at the same time, explicitly highlighting the vulnerabilities of the state in certain sectors and the shortcomings of strategic and operational response models at critical points in the prevention chain, including societal unpreparedness within the medical and security sectors, as well as the need to direct actions toward the economic sector and crisis communication.

In accordance with the defined subject and aim of the research, we have formulated, in addition to specific hypotheses, a general hypothesis:

General Hypothesis

Natural disasters, including epidemics and pandemics, endanger the security of human beings, living organisms, material assets, and the environment, while also threatening infrastructure and entire national security systems of states.

2. EPIDEMIC/PANDEMIC AS NATURAL DISASTERS: SIMILARITIES AND DIFFERENCES

The subject of this research is the Epidemic/Pandemic as a natural disaster. It begins with the conceptual definition of epidemics/pandemics and natural disasters, their consequences, and the possibility of their deliberate induction as forms of modern biological warfare, as well as the potential challenges posed by the COVID-19 viral infection and the establishment of specialized biolaboratories. The study examines the role of the medical, intelligence, security, and academic sectors, as well as the military and police, in combating pandemics, along with the potential involvement of the media and the development of international cooperation.

In addressing this research problem, we started from several hypothetical assumptions, one of which states: Natural disasters may lead to the outbreak of infectious diseases when they cause significant displacement of population and the aggravation of synergistic risk factors (changes in the environment, human living conditions, and vulnerability to existing pathogens) that facilitate disease transmission. These are, therefore, natural events that inflict harm on human life, however, human activity can also increase their frequency and intensity.

2.1. Causes of the Emergence of an Epidemic/Pandemic

„The causes of various types of epidemics are, in fact, pathogenic microorganisms belonging to the groups of viruses, rickettsiae, bacteria, fungi, and protozoa, while pathogenicity represents the hereditary and unalterable ability of a microorganism” (Jovic & Savic, 2004).

Historically, pandemics have most often been associated with environmental exposure, such as untreated sewage. The lack of basic hygiene in past centuries meant that people

frequently bathed in and drank from rivers and streams contaminated with fecal matter. What is well established, however, is that human-animal interaction plays a crucial role in this process.

The challenge lies in utilizing the accumulated, albeit incomplete, knowledge derived from the fundamental diseases of our past to identify practical solutions and strategies aimed at detecting and halting future threats.

2.2. Challenges in Transmission and Types of Epidemics/Pandemics

Microorganisms and the diseases associated with them represent one of the greatest health challenges worldwide. Considering the potential consequences (medical, social, psychological, and economic) microbe-induced diseases are regarded as one of the most significant challenges of the present day. This is evidenced by events such as the 2021 anthrax campaign, the SARS epidemic, the swine flu pandemic, COVID-19, and others.

„The disease-causing agents evacuated from an infected organism enter the environment and spread to susceptible individuals” (Jakovljevic et al., 2015).

In the environment, agents can spread through contact, air, food, soil, and vectors. It should be noted that today the majority of the population is supplied with, and uses, piped water - controlled and monitored for both drinking and technical purposes, thereby reducing the risk of infection, however failure to adhere to hygiene regulations can lead to contamination of tap water, contributing to the spread of infection with significant consequences.

2.3. Human Influence on the Emergence of Epidemics/Pandemics

Over the centuries, civilizations have employed chemical and biological terrorism, most often through epidemics, whether involving toxic substances of animal, plant, or mineral origin, with the aim of carrying out assassinations or acts of sabotage.

What is common to all cases is the deliberate use of toxic agents with the intent of entering organisms and causing fatal outcomes.

Recent events in Ukraine also suggest that there existed or still operate biological laboratories producing weapons of mass destruction intended for use against Russia and the Russian population by the United States and its compliant European partners, which were detected and supported with material evidence by Russia, prompting a special military operation aimed at preventing the fulfillment of the objectives of the investors behind these so-called “factories of evil.”

2.4. Epidemic/Pandemic as a Consequence of a Bioterrorist Attack

The potential use of biological weapons manifested as epidemics or pandemics represents a distinct type of threat, with the assumption that it will be increasingly employed compared to conventional weapons. On the other hand, the use of weapons of mass destruction, besides being rapidly developed, can multiply the effects of an attack.

Considering the smallpox epidemic and its consequences as a bioterrorist attack, it is significant that it was unique for being one of the deadliest diseases, killing more people than any other, indicating that the primary target was the human population, or its maximal elimination. On the other hand, the extensive territory affected by the virus, spanning North Africa and Europe, suggests the colonial ambitions of the United States and its continued efforts over subsequent decades to control energy and labor resources - an observation particularly evident in recent years, especially during the coerced Russo-Ukrainian conflict.

At the same time, this highlights the capability, or the lack of capability of a state to manage emergencies and events of this nature.

2.5. Climate Changes and Epidemics/Pandemics, interactions

Climate changes affect the frequency and intensity of natural disasters in various ways, including epidemics and pandemics. The general rise in temperatures leads to an increase in the number of hot days and a decrease in cold days, representing one of the factors contributing to the emergence of epidemics and pandemics. In the middle and higher latitudes of the Northern Hemisphere, increased precipitation has been observed, causing floods, landslides, and soil erosion, which also serve as triggers for epidemics and pandemics. Climate changes create favorable conditions for the spread of infectious diseases and their vectors, while also facilitating the expansion and geographical distribution of many infectious diseases, alongside globalization, migration, and bioterrorist threats, all of which characterize the reality of the world we live in today.

2.6. Migration as a Risk Factor for the Emergence of Epidemics/Pandemics

Migration movements could represent a potential risk space for Serbia, where migrants possessing certain expertise and experience might engage in planning bioterrorist actions regionally or beyond. For example, following the eradication of the Variola vera virus, which, according to the official WHO announcement in 1980, killed half a billion people despite the existence of vaccines and caused fatal outcomes in the Republic of Serbia, the AIDS virus emerged, for which neither a vaccine nor effective treatment exists, subsequently, two additional viruses Ebola and Marburg appeared, also lacking vaccines or effective therapies, suggesting the possible ultimate objectives of their creators. All of this indicates a high likelihood that these pathogens were produced in biological weapons laboratories, however, as Serbia navigated between East and West during that period while maintaining a neutral course under the Non-Aligned Movement, it could not avoid the scourge of the Variola epidemic. In this regard, there is a similarity with the COVID-19 pandemic.

It is difficult to answer whether a pandemic or any other deliberate bioterrorist act can be entirely avoided. Nevertheless, its impact can be minimized and mitigated through an adequate response by the state and institutions that is facilitated by the development of regional trade relations, the flow of goods, the exchange of information, and human factors, through which the virus itself can be transmitted, imported, or exported, particularly via migration.

2.7. Consequences of Epidemics/Pandemics

By employing various sophisticated global means including media, the opinions of scientists and experts, and the completely new challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic, the question arises as to whether it could have been prevented and what its consequences are. Is it, perhaps, an imposed conflict among global powers in the race to seize vital resources, seeking to achieve maximum material gain through interaction with the manufactured pandemic, without considering the opportunity costs and the consequences, which inherently include the death of a large number of the planet's inhabitants?

In addition to the fatal consequences (pandemic has claimed over 600,000 lives) it should be noted that the pandemic had enormous direct and indirect impacts on the economy, politics, and deeply affected many aspects of human life. Approaching this problem to prevent, mitigate, and minimize its consequences requires a multidisciplinary and philosophical

approach, encompassing biomedicine, veterinary science, and their integration into the educational system in accordance with security challenges.

3. VIRAL INFECTION, EMPIRICAL INSIGHTS

Despite prior experience in confronting various epidemics and pandemics, such as the Spanish flu, SARS, and others, the newly emerged security and medical challenges posed by COVID-19 were reluctantly and difficultly overcome, leaving catastrophic consequences that are still felt today. The unpreparedness of states and the failure to recognize this type of security threat, like COVID-19, have had repercussions at both domestic and international levels, affecting the political sphere, public health, the economy, and the lives of individuals.

The newly mentioned virus, named COVID-19, became the cause for the declaration of a pandemic. On March 11, the World Health Organization officially declared COVID-19 a pandemic. "At that time, more than 116,000 people were infected worldwide and by April 2, just three weeks later, the number of COVID-19 cases had exceeded 1,000,000, with over 50,000 deaths so that by June 28, more than 10,000,000 people had been infected globally, with over 502,000 fatalities. Three weeks later, on July 21, the number of infected individuals worldwide surpassed 15,000,000. Among countries, the United States had the highest number of COVID-19 cases, totaling 4,101,308. The U.S. also led the world in COVID-19 deaths, with 146,192 fatalities recorded on July 22. On the same day, the total number of COVID-19 deaths worldwide reached 630,750" (Obradović, 2020).

Building on experience from previous pandemics, measures to control COVID-19 varied by country, resulting in differing numbers of infections and deaths. Many countries, particularly within the EU, initially regarded it as an internal problem of China, showing little empathy or humanitarian concern just to, as the pandemic rapidly spread to neighboring countries and across continents, enter a phase of self-interest, and it can be said outright, opportunistic behavior including hoarding medical equipment, vaccines, and other resources solely for their own population. The EU's underestimation of COVID-19 ultimately plunged the entire EU into a recession, and in such a context, even coordination on financial aid packages for member states proved difficult.

On the other hand, the response of the Republic of Serbia to the COVID-19 pandemic was organized, decisive, and effective. The healthcare system proved to be vital, with the individual placed at the center of attention. The system operated sustainably during the crisis, while the systems of wealthier and more powerful countries collapsed.

4. PREVENTION AND RESPONSE IN THE CASE OF EPIDEMICS/PANDEMICS CAUSED BY NATURAL OR ARTIFICIAL MEANS

Although the 21st century is an era of scientific and technological achievements that should serve as global assets, globalists often exploit these resources through the egoism of their mindset, considering themselves the sole rightful owners and thereby destroying human, animal, plant, natural, and material resources. To minimize the consequences, it is essential to establish legislative and legal frameworks and incorporate provisions into national criminal law, which has been done by 144 UN member states, that have undertaken obligations and ratified the Convention on the Prohibition of Biological Weapons from March 26, 1975, in order to reduce the potential for terrorist acts to a minimum.

Based on recent experiences, one of the most important measures should not be overlooked: the need to revise policies within the context of biological security. Another essential requirement is the applicability of intelligence methods of digitized citizen surveillance, in

the process of combating epidemics and pandemics, alongside legal and formal compliance with the law. Strengthening awareness of this issue, continuous monitoring, the implementation of preventive measures, and the adequate preparation of human resources and material assets for responding to disease outbreaks are critically important. In this regard, the experience and lessons learned from previous pandemics are particularly valuable.

5. POSSIBLE MODELS FOR RESPONDING TO NATURAL DISASTERS OF EPIDEMICS/PANDEMICS

Since epidemics and pandemics are an unavoidable factor in the modern world, with negative consequences for human health, there is a necessary need to prevent them through various response models, depending on the stage of risk. Response models will be examined through the lens of different sectors and strategic structures of the Republic of Serbia responsible for managing risks in natural disasters, epidemics, and pandemics, based on knowledge gained from past events.

5.1. The Role of the Medical, Intelligence, Security, Academic Sector, Military, and Police in Combating a Pandemic

At the very outset, the medical sector is the most important and fundamental link in the chain of combating and eliminating infectious diseases, namely epidemics or pandemics, as well as addressing their aftermath.

As the medical sector falls under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Health of the Republic of Serbia, the responsibility of this ministry extends across all segments at the highest level, requiring significant engagement and prompt action. In the event of an emergency, such as an epidemic or pandemic, the Ministry of Health, together with its facilities including temporary field tents and units relocated from primary institutions, which proved essential during the COVID-19 pandemic due to limited accommodation capacity, provides primary medical care, patient transport via ambulances and other vehicles, treatment, regularly coordinates with other relevant state entities, while also carrying out field sanitation operations.

In addition to the traditional security and civil-military intelligence sectors, a specialized sector for medical intelligence operations, MEDINT, plays a crucial role in the emergence, i.e. containment, spread, and elimination of various infectious diseases. During epidemiological contact tracing, intelligence tools have revealed certain inefficiencies and gaps, despite their significant contribution to preventing the spread of COVID-19. As confirmed in various cases, GPS-based location of individuals yielded results only if the person, who was also the subject of monitoring, actively used the device and if the territory was covered by a signal. Therefore, it is necessary to apply multiple techniques to prevent gaps when integrating information obtained from different technological tools, even though their use may challenge established codes of rights and freedoms.

Regarding the Ministry of Defense of the Republic of Serbia, during the COVID-19 pandemic, it prepared and proposed documents, including government regulations and decisions within the scope of its authority. It also deployed specialized teams, primarily medical, which incorporated veterinary units, for protection and rescue operations.

The role of the Serbian Armed Forces, in addition to its regular duties, included leadership and command of activities during the COVID-19 crisis, as well as the practical deployment of its units to provide assistance, since the information on available resources within the defense system proved invaluable for carrying out tasks in support of civilian populations.

The Ministry of Internal Affairs, during the emergence of COVID-19 in the Republic of Serbia, responded in accordance with its mandate for the protection and rescue of people, while prior to the onset of the pandemic it prepared legislative documents, submitted proposals for their adoption, and carried out other responsibilities. The most significant role in emergencies, including those caused by epidemics and pandemics was held by the specialized Emergency Situations sector, organized into multiple teams within the Ministry of Internal Affairs of Serbia, tasked with protection, rescue, and preventive activities.

5.2. Media and Epidemics/Pandemics

Informing citizens about various epidemics and pandemics must be multidisciplinary and serve as the primary means of public awareness, enabling individuals to act independently for their own protection and survival during an impending or ongoing disaster, whether it is television, the most accessible medium, various radio programs, and print media. Social media, as a form of public service, allows users to exchange internal data and knowledge, while also providing authorities with insights into the state and development of an epidemic or pandemic in otherwise inaccessible, rural, or fortified areas affected by a disaster, such as the number of infected or deceased individuals, or urgent needs for water, technical and drinking water, food, medical supplies, and healthcare services. It should not be overlooked that social media plays a crucial role in decision-making by providing policymakers with analyzed data and collected information, and it also serves as an essential tool for local communities in the prevention and mitigation of epidemics and pandemics.

Building on the previous discussion, observing the current global crisis from the perspective of media influence and propaganda, it can be linked as a continuation of the prior health crisis related to the COVID-19 pandemic, which served as a precursor in the phase of physical and psychological exhaustion, transitioning from a latent phase to the current stage, framed as a conflict against one of the world's most militarily and resourcefully powerful countries, Russia with the aim of economic stagnation and the severing of access to regular consumers, ensuring that monopolistic control remains in the hands of the strongest global hegemony and their corporations, both private and state-owned.

It is also noticeable that, in responding to crises in general, and from the media perspective, socialist systems based on public health models proved to be more effective and successful than the wealthier systems which was evident in the case of the European Union's treatment of its member state Italy, while on the other side countries relying on their own resources and crisis communication models, such as the Republic of Serbia, demonstrated greater pragmatism and capability, with visible results. Furthermore, it is clear that preparedness for a catastrophe must exist both at the institutional and individual levels.

5.3. Crisis Communication

When discussing crises and crisis management itself, the role of crisis management is to reduce a crisis to the level of an extraordinary event by employing all available methods of crisis communication. By definition, a crisis is irrational and transcendent. Crisis communication in combating epidemics and pandemics represents one of the most significant components directed by crisis management toward the collective understanding of a specific crisis, with the ultimate goal of overcoming it, and answering the question which methods should be implemented in order to resolve the situation and to navigate through it with minimal human and material consequences, up to the complete elimination of its effects. Furthermore, a highly important factor in the fight against epidemics, pandemics, and the spread of other infectious diseases is the communicator itself, who must be trained and professional, instilling trust among those affected and among the officials

responsible for implementing the prescribed measures, in other words, the communicator must know how to act and what to say, as well as which approach or rhetoric to employ in public communication.

5.4. International Cooperation

Following the Cold War and advances in transnational communication, trade, transportation, and others, the possibility has emerged for the illegal dissemination of artificially produced infectious diseases in the form of epidemics and pandemics, including their manifestation as terrorist acts. The occurrence of such terrorist activities underscores the necessity for international cooperation to enable more effective containment and elimination of these threats.

In the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic, which affected the entire globe, and based on the experiences gained, there is an undeniable need for coordinated international action regarding the prevention and containment of pandemics in any form. Furthermore, as evidenced during this pandemic, there was a clear absence of international dialogue and coordination, as well as a lack of oversight by the World Health Organization. One should also note the self-interested behavior of individual European Union member states, including the NATO alliance, particularly regarding mutual solidarity.

It is evident that, in addition to existing frameworks, more effective models of coordination and response must be established through mutual cooperation in combating infectious diseases, epidemics, pandemics, and other forms of bioterrorism. Furthermore, it is necessary to harmonize legal and regulatory frameworks at bilateral, trilateral, and global levels within the domain of international cooperation at a strategic level.

6. CONCLUSION

In the Republic of Serbia, the emphasis of preventive measures should be directed toward epidemics and pandemics. It is also important to note that the risk of natural disasters of this type is mitigated by prior citizen training, their preparedness, and, above all, awareness of the concept of “Natural Disaster” and the potential infections and contagious diseases.

One of the responses to epidemics/pandemics, as well as to other natural disasters, including those caused by bioterrorism, is the establishment of regional rapid response centers whose goal is to provide timely intervention and services depending on the type of epidemic, pandemic, or other disaster. A notable example is the establishment of regional hospitals in Serbia for COVID-19, such as those at the Belgrade Fair, the Arena in Belgrade, and in Niš, as well as the Russian-Serbian Emergency Situations Center in Niš.

The response of the Republic of Serbia to the COVID-19 pandemic was organized, decisive, and effective. The healthcare system proved vital, placing the individual at the center of attention. The system functioned sustainably in crisis situations, whereas the systems of wealthy and powerful countries collapsed. Families and local governments, using their knowledge from past events in mitigating consequences, can influence the development of awareness about natural disasters among citizens. Particular emphasis should be placed on the education and training of personnel. Nevertheless, the COVID-19 epidemic demonstrated that the reaction of both citizens and the state, informed by lessons and experiences from the 1972 epidemic, was not at its maximum potential. In fact, it became evident that social and political circumstances play a significantly greater role in determining how a state responds to a pandemic.

If we focus on the global level of the economic and healthcare sectors during the COVID-19 pandemic, the existence of protected crisis circumstances negatively affected adequate and

effective attention to the emerging threat, highlighting the vulnerability of the state in specific sectors, which inspires potential terrorists to modify biological warfare procedures. There is a recognized need to strengthen capacities for rapid laboratory diagnostics, to ensure proper conditions for isolation and treatment, and to develop medical procedures for the effective containment of infectious diseases, regardless of whether they are naturally occurring or the result of bioterrorism.

The COVID-19 pandemic has proven once and for all that no one is safe until everyone is safe. A health crisis in any local area can very quickly become a health crisis everywhere. The COVID-19 pandemic also exposed weaknesses in the international system responsible for coordinating the world's response to pandemic threats. Numerous expert review panels have reached the same conclusion: more actions must be taken to reduce the likelihood and impact of future pandemics.

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