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Chan, KW, Gentile, M, Kinossian, N, Oakes, T and Young, C (2020) "More-than-viral" Eurasian geographies of the covid-19 pandemic: interconnections, inequalities, and geopolitics. *Eurasian Geography and Economics*, 61 (4-5). pp. 343-361. ISSN 1538-7216

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/15387216.2020.1840414>

Publisher: Taylor & Francis (Routledge)

Version: Accepted Version

Downloaded from: <https://e-space.mmu.ac.uk/626903/>


Additional Information: This is an Author Accepted Manuscript of an article published in *Eurasian Geography and Economics* by Taylor & Francis.

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“More-than-viral” Eurasian geographies of the covid-19 pandemic: interconnections, inequalities, and geopolitics

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ABSTRACT

This paper develops the notion of “more-than-viral” geographies of the covid-19 pandemic. It introduces a set of commentaries on the pandemic in the Eurasian region and its links with the rest of the globe. Taking “more-than-human” perspectives in Human Geography as an inspiration, it develops ways of analyzing the covid-19 pandemic as a “more-than-viral” phenomenon in which human and viral agencies are entangled. In this Introduction to the special issue, we focus on three key intertwined sets of processes that run through this volume, and which both shape, and are being radically reshaped by, the pandemic: interconnections, inequalities, and the geopolitics of disease. Each of these inter-related processes is developed in various ways by the commentaries which make up the special issue.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 13 October 2020
Accepted 19 October 2020

KEYWORDS

Covid-19; pandemic;
more-than-human;
more-than-viral; Eurasia

Introduction

The immense global human toll of the covid-19 pandemic continues to unfold. With over one million known deaths (and countless more suffering long-term medical and mental health consequences), an estimated US\$12tn (£9.4tn) loss to the global economy forecast over 2020–21 (Georgieva 2020), and billions suffering disruption to their daily lives, the pandemic has thrown the multitude of relationships making up globalization and everyday life into turmoil. The potential consequences of the pandemic, its impact on people’s lives, and its intense reconfiguration of society and space are at times difficult to comprehend. According to the Head of the International Monetary Fund (IMF), over 1 billion people in the 70 poorest countries face “unprecedented human and economic devastation,” and she continues to map out how the decades-long declining trend in global poverty is being pushed into reverse, with as many as 90 million additional people falling into extreme poverty, mostly in sub-Saharan

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Africa and south Asia ... There is also the fear that the pandemic will set back health progress for decades as well as reverse progress on other crucial fronts such as gender equality. Just as people with weak immune systems are more vulnerable to the virus, so low-income countries with weak fundamentals are more prone to its economic effects. More than half of these countries were already at high

risk of – or actually in – debt distress before the crisis began. The pandemic has exacerbated this with a poisonous cocktail of external shocks: sharply falling exports and commodity prices, collapsing trade, evaporating tourism and less capital inflows. Remittances, which are the main source of income for many poor families, have been hit hard – by almost 20% in countries such as Bangladesh (Georgieva 2020).

This special issue of *Eurasian Geography and Economics* (EGE) comprises a set of commentaries on the geographies of the covid-19 pandemic. Each commentary discusses a particular aspect of the pandemic and its impacts and/or develops theoretical approaches to understanding it. The commentaries were written between April and September 2020, and in some cases reflect the situation in those countries at that time, which of course may have changed rapidly since. Nonetheless, each raises issues that continue to be important for understanding the pandemic and its global spread.

Here EGE addresses the question which Castree et al. (2020) also pose as becoming more significant because of the pandemic: “How can we ensure that it is not only the voices of English-speaking academics and those based in the more privileged institutions internationally that are heard?” While some of the commentaries were submitted to the journal directly by the authors, we took an active approach to addressing this question by soliciting commentaries through our networks, resulting in a broad, if not fully comprehensive, coverage of the Eurasian region.

Castree et al. (2020) suggest that this question “is pertinent not only because COVID-19 has affected so many countries in Asia, continental Europe and elsewhere. It also speaks to different potential ways of understanding the how, what, why, when and significance of the ‘crisis.’” While EGE obviously has a geographical focus on generating knowledge from within the region, we also see this as part of the journal’s efforts to encourage and promote theoretical work stemming from beyond the Anglo-American context (thus contributing to wider attempts at provincializing theory generation e.g. Lawhon et al. 2016; Sheppard, Leitner, and Maringanti 2013; specifically in EGE see Robinson 2016; Ferencuhová and Gentile 2016; Chan et al. 2018; Tang 2019; Trubina et al. 2020).

Thus in this special issue we cover the pandemic in larger and more powerful countries such as Russia, China, the USA, and European nations, but we also publish commentaries on the situation in considerably less studied areas, such as Moldova (Crețan and Light 2020, this volume), Belarus (Åslund 2020, this volume), Serbia (Šantić and Marija 2020, this volume), Myanmar and Cambodia

(Grundy-Warr and Lin 2020, this volume), Taiwan (Zhang and Savage 2020, this volume), and the Pacific States (Mayer and Lewis 2020, this volume). Other journals have already begun to cover its impact in other global regions (see e.g. theme issues of *The Asia-Pacific Journal Japan Focus* 2020; Finn, Pope, and Sarduy 2020b; *Espaço e Economia: Revista Brasileira de Geografia Econômica [Brazilian Journal of Economic Geography]* 2020; on Africa see Obeng-Odoom 2020; on Asia see Chung, Xu, and Mengmeng 2020; on Latin America see Finn, Pope, and Sarduy 2020a; see also *Policy and Society* 2020 and *Dialogues in Human Geography* 2020).

In this Introduction, we develop three key themes that intersect throughout the commentaries in order to contextualize them and develop points of critical geographical engagement with the pandemic that particularly engage with the core concerns of this journal, and *Human Geography* more widely. Each of the commentaries reflects on aspects of how the virus actively reconfigures socio-spatial relations in the Eurasian region and between Eurasia and the rest of the world.

Writing in this journal a decade ago following the 2009–10 H1N1 “swine-origin” influenza pandemic, McLafferty laid out the spatial characteristics of pandemics as

a widespread disease outbreak and, more specifically, ...an epidemic that spreads over a large territory, at the continental or global scale, and that has the potential to cause illness and even death within a large and dispersed population (McLafferty 2010, 143).

Thought of in this way pandemics are obviously of significance to the Eurasian region. Eurasia is often associated with the “origins” of various pandemics, and is characterized by a large population, geographically diverse economies, areas of rapid urban, socio-economic, and environmental change (Huang and Smith 2010), and a diverse and often rapidly transforming cultural and political context. The result is a “complex and uneven landscape of disease incidence and consequences” (McLafferty 2010, 144) which has been intensified in the intervening 10 years.

Economic growth, urbanisation, increased trade and tourism, and the increasing connectivity between the region and the rest of the world have created suitable conditions for new forms of infectious disease to emerge and spread rapidly. New forms of international integration, such as China’s Belt and Road Initiative, which also involves the increased exploitation of the natural environment, facilitate this trend. At the same time, the risk of zoonosis in Eurasia has, since the outbreak of Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) in 2003, spurred significant mitigation efforts in places like Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Singapore that have transformed geopolitical relations, as well as drawn increased attention to interspecies relations throughout the region (Keck 2020).

Much valuable geographical work will focus on the spatial spread and medical consequences of the covid-19 pandemic and the effectiveness of

measures to contain it (e.g. see Bertuzzo et al. 2020). However, this special issue of EGE follows recent trends in the development of a more critically informed medical geography which emphasizes the cultural geographies and politics of health, with a focus on difference and inequality (see Parr 2004; Ingram 2005). In particular, the covid-19 pandemic raises important issues about the ways in which “biopolitics meets geopolitics” (Greenhough 2012; and see; Ingram 2005, 2009; Ali and Keil 2008; Brown 2006; Hinchliffe et al. 2016), bringing into focus the “more-than-human” geographies (see Keck 2020; Greenhough 2014; Panelli 2010) of the pandemic (eg. Searle and Turnbull 2020), particularly a “more-than-viral” approach (see Klingberg 2020, this volume).

In this Introduction to the special issue, we focus on three key intertwined sets of processes that run through this volume, and which both shape, and are being radically reshaped by, the pandemic: interconnections, inequalities, and the geopolitics of disease. Each of these inter-related processes is developed in various ways by the commentaries which make up the special issue, as we note in the sections below.

Interconnections

As several commentaries in this special issue note, the origins, spread, and dramatic impacts of covid-19 cannot simply be reduced to medical understandings of its behaviors as a virus. This is not a new insight. William H. McNeill’s classic study of the historical impact of diseases on the course of history – *Plagues and Peoples* (McNeill 1976) – highlighted that the global impact of diseases such as smallpox, bubonic plague, and typhoid was the outcome of the interaction of micro- and macro-parasitic forces. While micro-parasitism identified the emergence of new parasites that found homes in humans due to shifts in ecosystems, their impact was made possible by their combination with macro-parasitic systems such as trade, colonialism, and the actions of military-industrial complexes and military campaigns. Similar points have been made about the 1918–19 influenza pandemic (see Cloke 2020, this volume).

As long ago as 1994 geographer Peter Haggett drew attention to the role of human activity and its environmental impacts in creating conditions for the emergence and spread of new diseases. Bringing together intensifying processes of globalization, environmental impact, urbanization, and transportation, he linked “the *de novo* evolution of new microbiological agents” with the “changing geography of the late twentieth century and the way in which new opportunities have been created for the way in which interactions between parasite and host are constantly being shaped and reshaped” (Haggett 1994, 103).

These new interactions have been intensified during the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries (Mayer 2000; Harvey 2020; Connolly, Ali, and Keil 2020; Mayer and Lewis 2020, this volume). As Barrett and Osofsky (2013, 368) detail at a global scale:

Ecosystems can maintain healthy populations, but when mismanaged or rapidly altered due to human pressure, they can also be associated with disease emergence. Despite the importance of the environment to the preservation of human and animal well-being, we face increasing challenges to the maintenance of healthy ecosystems, including climate change, deforestation, intensification of agricultural systems, freshwater depletion, and resultant biodiversity ... The growing global human population will continue to increase its need for land, food, and energy, yet already 60% of the essential ecosystem services of the planet are degraded or are under increasing threat. Addressing the environmental factors affecting health is essentially a public health-oriented prevention strategy, as it tackles the upstream drivers of disease. For example, an estimated 24% of the global burden of disease, and more than one third of the burden among children, originates from modifiable environmental causes.

This, they argue, is happening more now than ever, with human activity altering ecosystems “more rapidly and extensively over the last 60+ years than during any other period in history, causing some scientists to describe our current geologic time period as the Anthropocene (‘age of man’ or ‘age of human influence’)” (Barrett and Osofsky 2013, 368; see also Mayer and Lewis 2020, this volume).

As human activity and development come into closer, more intense contact with the environment, the potential for the emergence of zoonotic diseases – i.e. where an infectious agent (virus, bacterium, or parasite) jumps to a human from a non-human animal – increases. While the exact point and location where the SARS-COV-2 virus responsible for covid-19 in humans initially made this jump remains in doubt – it is just as likely that it was brought to the Huanan seafood market in Wuhan, China where it was first detected as it originated there – there seems little doubt about its transmission due to human contact somewhere with a host animal species (most probably bats, probably via another species) (see Quammen 2020; Jabr 2020).

The result is that the covid-19 pandemic is driven by “new spatial patterns of biosocial interactions in a globalizing economy” (Chung, Xu, and Mengmeng 2020, 6), and these new interactions make conceptualizing the virus beyond epidemiological understandings highly important (particularly as they open up analysis to include inequality and geopolitics as is developed below). The development of “more-than-human” approaches in Human Geography (see Whatmore 2002; Panelli 2010; Greenhough 2012, 2014) underpins an approach to understanding disease which focuses on “the complex ways in which human and viral agencies are already entangled alongside a host of other human and non-human entities” (Greenhough 2012, 282; and see; Blue and Rock 2020).

In this context Van Loon (2005, 40; see also Greenhough 2012) draws attention to the need to study epidemic space:

... a dense space, marked by complex connections between a wide range of nodes: patients, medical staff, equipment, modes of transportation, roads, hospital wards, virulent pathogens, parasites, animals, communication technologies, military

personnel, weapons, barbed wire but also less tangible actors such as regulations, procedures, and accounts.

Many of the papers in this volume thus follow a critical geographical analysis approach focusing on “national and international responses to epidemics (geopolitics), or on how the urban and industrialized spaces of capitalist enterprise are both conducive to the spread of epidemic disease and reconfigured in the wake of epidemic threats (political ecology)” (Greenhough 2012, 283). As Harvey (2020) makes clear, pressures on the environment and the emergence of new diseases occur in the context of understanding the capitalist economy as “a spiral of endless expansion and growth.” The globalized economy creates conditions for the emergence of new diseases and their rapid spread (and see Cloke 2020, this volume, on the role of trade and transportation in the global spread of viruses).

In turn, deeply integrated global production chains, financial markets, and massively increased consumption are vulnerable to disruption by pandemics, with severe implications for workers (Harvey 2020; He et al. 2020; Rose-Redwood et al. 2020b). Indeed, Sparke and Anguelov (2020) comment that these global production networks have “have suddenly turned into networks of devaluation and deglobalization.” Thus, Lawreniuk (2020) and Amit (2020) trace the impact of disruption to supply chains and falling Western consumer demand on garment sector workforces in China, Cambodia, and Bangladesh. The effect on global production chains and consumption, and the implications for national economies, remains to be seen, but Connolly, Hanson, and Bradshaw (2020, this volume) make clear how the pandemic effects the growth models of major oil and gas producer countries, in their case focusing on Russia. A wider question will be how the pandemic effects the redrawing of economic connections within Eurasia and between it and the rest of the world. The World Bank estimates a 5.2% contraction in global GDP over 2020, despite the massive interventions by governments, reversing years of economic progress and potentially placing millions of people into extreme poverty (World Bank 2020a), which will have huge impacts in the Eurasian region. At the same time, China already looks set to be the first major economy to begin its recovery.

While we have not as yet found a way of living safely with the SARS-COV-2 virus (such as developing a vaccine), we are also seeing the emergence of “more localized, endemic sites of human-virus encounter” (Greenhough 2012, 283; and see; Brown 2006) as traced by Wolfe (2020, this volume) in his account of how daily life has adjusted in Switzerland, and Chen (2020, this volume) on how social media has played a role in developing new sets of social relations in China, in response to the agency of the virus. Greenhough’s focus on “the materialities of human and viral bodies, the socio-material worlds they inhabit and the ways in which they accommodate each other’s presence and agency” (Greenhough 2012, 294) develops a “more-than-human” approach to understanding disease.

Indeed, while the technologies underpinning global connectedness and economic activity have played a key role in the rapid spread of the pandemic, technology also offers the possibilities for new forms of contact, mutual support, consolation, and care. Thus, Chen (2020, this volume) analyzes how Chinese social media networks provided the opportunity to develop spaces of care and resistance (see also Maddrell 2020; though for a counter-view see Anonymous (2020) on China's nationalist takeover of social media sites).

We suggest – particularly following the argument of Klingberg (2020, this volume) – that these relationships must also be thought of as “more-than-viral” i.e. going beyond considering its behavior and existence as a virus to incorporate its viral agency as a potent materiality co-shaping the current pandemic, responses to it, and the realignment of everyday life. Cloke (2020, this volume) further develops understandings of the materiality and agency of the virus by drawing on biopower and actor network theory in his conceptualization of covid-19 as an “anthropandemic.” Here there are parallels with arguments that we have entered “a new planetary epoch – the Virocene” (Fernando 2020a, 2020b), in which it is even more important to understand the links between the macro and the micro in the everyday (see Wolfe 2020, this volume).

Conceptualizing the virus only in epidemiological terms can obscure the uneven and unequal socio-economic, political, and environmental conditions that assist, and are being reshaped by, its pandemic nature. By contrast, a “more-than-viral” approach draws attention to the inter-related interconnections, inequalities, and geopolitics that both shape, and in turn are shaped by, the pandemic. Human-environment, and specifically human-virus, interrelationships thus form a vital core set of interconnections that underpin the origins and geographical nature of the covid-19 pandemic. In turn, the material presence of the virus has brought about a dramatic reconfiguration of social and spatial relations which we go on to trace through the themes of inequalities and geopolitics.

Inequalities

If the more-than-viral approach makes us focus on the interconnectedness of socio-economic development and the virus, recognizing the intersection of human and viral agency, then this points us toward the exploration of the preexisting inequalities that have helped to make it a pandemic and shaped its geography and its impacts. As Lawreniuk (2020) argues “The economic crisis that [the pandemic] precipitates has magnified the social inequalities and injustices that already cleave global society.” The impacts of the pandemic are being felt in a massively uneven way, a point starkly illuminated by the fact that while the number of people in “extreme poverty” is predicted to rise for the first time since 1998, affecting a further 115–150 million people worldwide (World Bank 2020b), the world's billionaires have seen their wealth increase

during the pandemic by an average of over 25% (Read 2020). The poorest, most vulnerable, and most marginalized will have the fewest resources with which to cope.

In the Eurasian context one key example of this is the impact on, and treatment of, migrant labor. The Eurasian region is highly reliant upon, and also provides, vast amounts of migrant laborers who have disproportionately borne the impact of the disruption the pandemic has caused to the global economy (and see Wolfe 2020, this volume). The treatment of Afghan workers returning from Iran and Pakistan, or of suddenly unemployed Indian migrant workers leaving cities to go back to their home villages, are only two of a myriad of global connections formed by transnational labor in which poor and marginalized workers, whose families are often dependent on their supply of remittances, find themselves out of work and further marginalized. Their economic marginalization – a position compounded by their high rate of participation in the informal sector – often intersects with their social marginalization. Baas (2020), for example, highlights the experience of foreign migrant workers and returning transnational labor in India and Singapore, detailing their treatment as an “(Un)Controllable virus” in and of themselves (and see, e.g., Sengupta and Jha 2020; Che, Du, and Chan 2020, this volume).

This issue is also of concern in this volume, for example, through analyses of the treatment of return migrants to Romania (Crețan and Light 2020, this volume) and Serbia (Šantić and Marija 2020, this volume). Between March and May of 2020 alone 1.3 million Romanian migrants returned to Romania. There, as in Serbia, their shift in status – from economically active transnational labor to unemployed citizens perceived to be carrying a risk of transmission of the virus – produced a considerable negative response. Shen (2020, this volume) traces the intersection of internal migration within China and the spread of covid-19 there. Survey work by Che et al. among migrant workers in China (Che, Du, and Chan 2020, this volume) shows how “the pandemic has acted a magnifier of the pre-existing disparities, worsening the situation of the poor and the disadvantaged,” with greater negative impacts of Covid-19 on the rural-*hukou* population. Overall they show that within the migrant population, and the population at large, the pandemic has created new layers of inequality associated with *hukou*.

However, economic status is only one socio-economic and cultural axis along which preexisting divisions are being exacerbated. As Harvey (2020) argues, “the progress of COVID-19 exhibits all the characteristics of a class, gendered, and racialized pandemic.” Again, a “more-than-viral” approach provides insight here, as Searle and Turnbull (2020, 294) note that:

glossing over COVID-19 as a purely biological event, rather than an unevenly distributed natural-cultural phenomenon ... obscures differences at national and international scales, and across lines of gender, race, and class due to bio- and necro-political governance that values profit over life.

Various kinds of lockdowns and disruptions to working practices and home life have exacerbated gender disparities, with the burden falling on women and girls in terms of lost economic opportunities, an increased burden of caring responsibilities (Power 2020), and the impact of domestic violence. The United Nations (2020, 2) reports how “Across every sphere, from health to the economy, security to social protection, the impacts of COVID-19 are exacerbated for women and girls,” whether this is economic, health-related (including reproductive and sexual health services), unpaid care work, or the impact of gender-based violence. While the health impacts of covid-19 have fallen disproportionately on older people, the exploitation of cheap child labor provides another shocking example of how different age groups are affected (Ellis-Peterson and Chaurasia 2020).

In fact, the pandemic has thrown into relief the intersectional nature of these inequalities, the combination of spatially uneven development, race and ethnicity, class, wealth and poverty, gender, age, sexuality, and governance. An intersectional approach

... foregrounds the lives and knowledges of those human beings most oppressed by structures that cement white supremacy, masculine privilege, and heteronormativity. In the current pandemic, this includes those facing gaps in appropriate health care access, those most disadvantaged in economies heading into recession, and those whose identities and living conditions intensify their vulnerabilities. Intersectionality engages the simultaneity of oppressions in the lives of individuals and communities (Eaves and Al-Hindi 2020).

Crețan and Light (2020, this volume), provide an example when they discuss the treatment of Roma communities in Romania. Long a group that has been economically marginalized and discriminated against on ethnic grounds, their continued “Othering” by the state and society includes representing their socio-cultural practices as socially irresponsible and responsible for spreading covid-19. This, and the rise of anti-Chinese and anti-Asian American racism and discrimination, provide new examples of the “geographies of blame” emerging in these intersectionalities (see, e.g., Sparke and Anguelov 2020; Wald 2008; Hasunuma 2020; Cloke 2020, this volume).

A further intersectionality arises with inequalities in governance and the resulting variation in covid-19 response (see Policy and Society 2020; Capano et al. 2020) and the treatment of individuals and societies. As Kingston (2020) argues with regard to South and South-East Asia:

The COVID-19 pandemic generates many uncertainties for everyone, but for Asia’s poor and marginalized, there is little doubt about the devastating consequences. It’s not only about unequal access to public health care, but also the loss of livelihoods that wreaks havoc in disadvantaged communities living on the edge of subsistence that are more likely to experience police abuses under the pretext of lockdown and quarantine enforcement.

Inequity in governance leads into our third intersecting key theme, that of the geopolitical aspects of the covid-19 pandemic.

Geopolitics

A third theme running through the commentaries in this issue is the geographical diversity in the ways in which the pandemic and its intersections and inequalities are shaped by, and are reshaping, geopolitical relationships (and see Sparke and Anguelov 2020). The covid-19 pandemic is the latest example of the “nexus between questions of disease, space and power” (Ingram 2005, 524) linked to the workings of the global political economy, in which disease is shaped by and shapes the:

spatial dynamics of inclusion and exclusion, of wealth, power and domination. Disease is geopolitical in that it emerges and is governed in a world that is spatially uneven and unequal, and responses to disease are positioned as constitutive of particular kinds of space as well as reflective of them (Ingram 2009, 2005).

As Greenhough (2012) notes, by “wedding ‘biopolitics with geopolitics’ geographers have explored how disease is governed through spatial practices and biopolitical interventions ... and the ways in which political-economic relations are implicated in the production of global health inequalities.”

Many of the commentaries in this theme issue are concerned with the geopolitics of the covid-19 pandemic. Mionel, Neğuț, and Mionel (2020, this volume), even suggest that we are witnessing the emergence of a new type of international politics in which the relationships between states, and between states and international organizations, is being recast in a new geopolitical cycle they term “pandemopolitics.”

Indeed, the pandemic is recasting the role of the state in unexpected ways. Though mindful of the need to avoid the “territorial trap” of over-emphasizing the state as the key territorial unit for analysis (Agnew 1994, 2015; Wang, Zou, and Liu 2020) one geopolitical impact of the pandemic has been to throw the nation-state into new and uncertain roles. Although we introduced the theme of interconnectedness above, in actual fact the state has (re?)emerged as a key actor and territorial unit, both concerned with controlling its borders and managing its citizens. In this way, disease is geopolitical as it challenges sovereignty and state stability (Ingram 2005), and states have had to rethink their regional and global interconnectedness, most notably by introducing international travel restrictions and at times sealing borders as territorial-based responses to controlling the disease (Capano et al. 2020). As Grundy-Warr and Lin (2020, this volume) suggest:

responses to COVID-19 have tended to reify each nation as a sort of live epidemiological box on the world grid of the pandemic; with each territorial state becoming a new space for prevention, containment and treatment relating to the spread of the disease.

Thus, Ren (2020, this volume) explores different approaches to lockdown in China, Italy, and the US as explicitly territorial-based responses to covid-19. Similarly, Moisis (2020, this volume) explores what the Finnish state's response to covid-19 reveals about state power, "and the re-production of state power in the practices of health care and economic policy in particular." Sonn and Lee (2020, this volume) discuss the ways in which states can make use of technology in their efforts to contain the virus, in their case focusing on "Smart City" technologies in S. Korea, whilst also exploring the societal issues raised by such surveillance, while Kouřil and Slavomíra (2020, this volume) consider similar issues in the Czech Republic. State-level responses are also considered in papers by Åslund (2020, this volume – Russia, Belarus, and Ukraine), Krzysztofik, Kantor-Pietraga, and Tomasz (2020, this volume – Poland), and Grundy-Warr and Lin (2020, this volume – Cambodia and Myanmar) (for a range of other national policy responses see Policy and Society 2020; Asia-Pacific Journal Japan Focus 2020).

However, while we argue that the state has become (or remained) a key actor in terms of responses to covid-19, the papers in this special issue are cautious about the "territorial trap" issue, and consider the questions of state stability and sovereignty (Ingram 2005) that arise as states rethink and negotiate their relationships with each other and regional and international alliances (and see Mionel, Neguț, and Mionel 2020, this volume). These relationships are also coming under strain and being reshaped, as the withdrawal of US funding for the World Health Organization makes clear (Borger 2020). Crețan and Light (2020, this volume) and Šantić and Marija (2020, this volume), for example, reflect on how the pandemic has impacted on the relations of Romania and Serbia with the European Union (EU), particularly around issues of transnational labor (Romanians and Serbians working in the EU) and aid to them from the EU. At the same time, Romania and Serbia have had to maintain relations with neighboring states, with Romania, for example, negotiating relations with Moldova and Hungary. Geographical variation within states linked to the finer-grained geographies of urban and socio-economic development are also important, as Krzysztofik, Kantor-Pietraga, and Tomasz (2020, this volume) make clear in their analysis of the influence of urbanization (particularly socialist-era urbanization and subsequent "shrinking cities") and economic sectors (Silesian coal mining) on patterns of covid-19 infection in Poland.

On an international scale, nation-states are also undergoing a process of rapid shifts in their geopolitical and geoeconomic relations with key powers (and see Mionel, Neguț, and Mionel 2020, this volume). Cambodia and Myanmar are undergoing this process with respect to China (Grundy-Warr and Lin 2020, this volume). Šantić and Marija (2020, this volume) consider Serbia's complex repositioning in relation to the EU, China, and Russia, while Zhang and Savage (2020, this volume) explore Taiwan's complex relations with the US, China, the World Health Organization, and Southeast Asia, concluding that "Taiwan is by and large a pawn

in Sino-US relations.” These examples serve to illustrate the point that states and sovereignty remain relational constructs and there are considerable power inequalities between states and their ability to manage responses to covid-19 (Capano et al. 2020; Policy and Society 2020; Asia-Pacific Journal Japan Focus 2020).

What also remains to be seen is what impact covid-19 will have on domestic politics, as governments and regimes will be judged on their handling of the pandemic. Governments which would have positioned themselves as neoliberal have had to make unprecedented interventions in public life and engage in huge expenditure to ensure public welfare. The longer term futures for “left” and “right,” or various forms of “authoritarian neoliberalism” (Bruff and Tansel 2019; Tansel 2017), in the region will be a fascinating geopolitical aspect.

However, as noted above, the pandemic has exacerbated racial and ethnic discrimination and Othering and at a larger scale this informs “geopolitical scapegoating” (Sparke and Anguelov 2020; Klingberg 2020, this volume; Mionel, Neguț, and Mionel 2020, this volume). China and the USA have mobilized popular discourses blaming each other for the origins of the virus, with the Trump administration’s repeated labeling of it as the “China Virus” or “Wuhan Virus” a key example (Viala-Guadefroy and Lindaman 2020). As Klingberg (2020, this volume) argues, such stereotyping rests on an epidemiological view of the virus which allows for the construction of discourses which suggest that it can be tied down to a single point of origin (like Wuhan or China), whereas a “more-than-viral” approach focuses on a

relational response to the COVID-19 emergency [which challenges] these illusions by attending to the social, ecological, and political circumstances in which the pandemic – and xenophobic and racist reactions to it – have taken place.

At the same time, various actors see intervention in health as a means of achieving geopolitical stability and influence (Ingram 2005). Providing “humanitarian aid,” particularly medical supplies, trained personnel, and equipment has turned into a form of “soft power.” One example is provided by Šantić and Marija’s (2020, this volume) discussion of the role of aid and “mask diplomacy” in Serbia’s relationships with the EU, Russia, and China.

How these various geopolitical inter-relationships play out will be a key part of the future of the Eurasian region and the world.

Conclusion and acknowledgments

The covid-19 pandemic also drew us as editors into new “more-than-viral” relationships which caused us some reflection on our approach to academic publishing and knowledge production. Some journals took the decision that – given the uncertainties and pressures introduced by the conditions of the pandemic and their uneven impacts – it was better to considerably slow down, or even suspend, the processes involved in publication and knowledge production. At EGE the

editorial team decided to try and continue as normal as much as possible, though delays were inevitable, while supporting authors and reviewers and extending deadlines as required. We tried to be aware of the conditions under which our authors and reviewers were working, while undergoing various forms of restrictions and lockdown ourselves in the UK, Germany, Norway/Sweden, and the USA. Thinking about and preparing for this Introduction and putting together the special issue also provoked at times perhaps unhealthy focus on the pandemic and media coverage for some of us.

First and foremost, however, we took into account that authors from around the world continued to submit their papers and remained committed to getting their work reviewed and published. In fact the flow of original manuscripts and reviews in 2020 is higher than in previous years. EGE has not noticed the dramatic decrease in submissions from female academics which has been reported across other journals (Flaherty 2020), although this is in no way to downplay the gendered inequalities of (academic) life that women face under lockdown (Faria 2020; Society and Space Editorial Team 2020). The contributors to this special issue produced their papers rapidly sometimes under difficult conditions and we thank them for their contribution to EGE and willingness to respond to tight timeframes. We are pleased that we have been able to publish contributions from postgraduate students and early career researchers alongside established academics, and to cover parts of the world which are often neglected in Geography.

We are lucky to have the continued support at the journal of reviewers around the world for which we are grateful (although it is completely understandable that some are under too much pressure to be able to review papers at this time). We are particularly grateful to our production colleagues in India who continued the process of getting papers published online – thank you Lavanya Mani in particular. Taylor & Francis also supported us in getting papers in this special issue ready for publication and in making them Open Access.

These international relationships have been thrown into new light by the experience of running the journal under the “more-than-viral” conditions of pandemic (and at times lockdown), and we would like to thank all involved. This continued support of the academic community hints at the potential for the ways that we can support each other in future. EGE continues to welcome the submission of papers on the region – and indeed, on “Eurasia in the world” as the focus on interconnectedness above emphasizes – from around the world, and no doubt the covid-19 pandemic will now be the focus of many of them, particularly following the themes and issues we have sketched out in this Introduction.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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