



Steve Probst/Newsday RM via Getty Images

English



# COVID-19's Lessons for Democracies

Mar 30, 2022 | YVES LETERME

*While pandemics are rare, natural disasters, financial crises, and industrial accidents occur on a regular basis. By assessing the response to COVID-19,*

*governments can craft more flexible, equitable plans to manage future emergencies and strengthen democratic institutions.*

**B**RUSSELS – For more than two years, COVID-19 has taken lives, destroyed livelihoods, disrupted daily routines, and dominated political discussion around the world. As the acute phase of the pandemic comes to an end, we must evaluate what COVID-19 has revealed about the ability of democratic systems to respond to such emergencies.



*Economics*

Project Syndicate

## Shock Therapy for Neoliberals

**JOSEPH E. STIGLITZ** argues that two decades of systemic crises have made lingering free-market policy orthodoxy untenable.

18

< >

There are several lessons to be learned from a crisis that has caused the death of over [six million people](#) and produced the [deepest recession](#) since World War II. Over the past year, Club de Madrid's [Global Commission on Democracy and Emergencies](#) brought together former heads of state and government, eminent experts, and civil-society leaders from around the world to discuss what COVID-19 has taught us, and how our countries can plan for future crises.



Just as no one ever steps into the same river twice, for it is not the same river and they are not the same person, no country ever experiences the same disaster twice. But learning from one emergency is essential to preparing for the next. Although pandemics are rare, epidemics, natural disasters, financial crises, and industrial accidents are regular occurrences. Governments, legislative bodies, judicial institutions, civil society, and international organizations must be equipped to promote resilience in

the face of crisis.



For starters, governments must elevate the status of emergency preparedness and work with their peers to embrace radical transparency, support responsible journalism and media, promote digital literacy, and work with civil-society organizations to debunk disinformation, especially online. They should engage with technology companies to solve problems arising from the digital environment and increase access to digital resources. And, with COVID-19 having revealed serious gaps in social security systems, they also must advocate for better protections for vulnerable minorities, women, and young people.



In fact, government leaders should mobilize all available tools of fiscal policy to strengthen democratic resilience and improve equity. This includes not only broadening the tax base combating tax evasion, but also redoubling efforts to fight corruption.



At the same time, legislatures should evaluate their governments' COVID-19 response and recommend measures to improve performance in future emergencies. They should review their country's legal framework to ensure that how emergencies are defined adequately reflects current risks, and that constitutional provisions for declaring a state of emergency provide sufficient safeguards to mitigate the risk of abuse of power.



Project Syndicate

**PS Events: Finance 3.0**

Legislatures also must ensure that their plans for emergency preparedness are robust enough to allow for effective oversight during future crises. These plans should include flexible rules of legislative procedure and embrace digital technologies to promote resilience and encourage citizen participation.



Judicial institutions, for their part, must ensure that the rule of law guides democracies' response to future emergencies. When the pandemic ends, courts will be

Cryptocurrencies and blockchain-based technologies are here to stay. But what will their next chapter look like?

Join us for our live virtual event, **Finance 3.0**, to hear the world's leading experts discuss how to maximize the benefits and mitigate the risks of the burgeoning new crypto industry.

**REGISTER NOW**

called upon – as some already have – to scrutinize governments' actions against the criteria of necessity, proportionality, procedural fairness, and respect for fundamental rights. Courts must make sure that their emergency-preparedness plans allow for swift judicial oversight during times of crisis.



Civil society and the media bear most of the responsibility in a democracy for preventing the spread of disinformation. They also have the power to bring issues into the spotlight and act as a catalyst for emergency policies that better engage and meet the needs of underrepresented groups. In preparing for future

emergencies, civil-society organizations should advocate for more public dialogue about critical risks and preventive action.



Lastly, multilateral organizations have a critical role to play, by coordinating lessons learned from member countries and strengthening shared values. International human-rights monitoring mechanisms can serve as a framework for upholding fundamental rights in countries' emergency response. Regional bodies that have instruments in place to protect democracy and the rule of law among their member states should reflect on how these tools might be used for regional oversight in emergencies. And global institutions like the International Labor Organization, the United Nations Development Programme, the World Bank, and regional development banks should continue to aid efforts to build resilience through social inclusion.



Every democracy is different, and every emergency is different. But the most important lesson to be learned from the COVID-19 pandemic is that all democratic

states have a responsibility, as they prepare for the next crisis, to safeguard their core values.



# Project Syndicate

Help us strengthen our reporting on global health and development by taking a short survey.

**TAKE SURVEY**

## YVES LETERME

Writing for PS since **2019**  
2 Commentaries

Yves Leterme, a former prime minister of Belgium, is Chair of the Global Commission on Democracy and Emergencies and a member of Club de Madrid.

**PS.** Get our weekly newsletters



# Project Syndicate

## Putin's Failed State

**ANDERS ÅSLUND** thinks Ukraine's routing of the Russian military has eliminated the last political asset the Kremlin had.



# Project Syndicate

## The Dollar's Reserves of Strength

**GENE FRIEDA** explains why financial sanctions against Russia are unlikely to weaken the greenback's global hegemony.



# Project Syndicate

## Latin America's New Pink Tide?

**JORGE G. CASTAÑEDA** doubts that there is any analytical utility to be gained by lumping recent left-wing victories together.



# Project Syndicate

SUBSCRIBER EXCLUSIVE

## The Justices Have No Clothes

NICHOLAS DEER LANGEN

# Project Syndicate

## The Failure of Russia's Media Elite

# Project Syndicate

## A Cure for Europe's Addiction to Russian Energy

**NICHOLAS REED LANGEN**

Faced with populist demagogues, the judiciary often must choose between bending the knee or defiantly asserting the supremacy of fundamental legal norms. Ketanji Brown Jackson took the latter route in her recent Supreme Court confirmation hearing; but she will now join an institution that has come to be regarded as political through and through.



**MAXIM MIRONOV** argues that establishment contempt for mass audiences left the path clear for Vladimir Putin's propaganda.



**NIELS FUGLSANG**

urges EU leaders to embrace more ambitious, binding targets for retrofitting public buildings and housing.



*Economics*

Project Syndicate

## Equitable Capitalism or Bust

**BERTRAND BADRÉ & YANN COATANLEM** explain why the concept of social returns with longtime horizons must guide policymaking.

*The Big Picture*

Project Syndicate

**SUBSCRIBER EXCLUSIVE**

## The Forgotten Climate Crisis?

While the terrible human and physical cost of Russia's invasion of Ukraine is understandably the focus of political attention, the fight against global warming risks becoming another casualty of the war. What can policymakers do to prevent 2022 from being a lost year for climate action?

*Politics*

Project Syndicate

## What Is India Doing in Ukraine?

**SHASHI THAROOR** worries that officials are more willing to be courted by leading powers than to help mediate an end to the war.



On Point

Say More

Big Picture

Subscribe

Magazines

The PS Store

Donate

Rewards

Sections

Columnists

Archive

About Us

Careers

Contact

FAQ

Newsletters

Videos

Podcasts

Syndication

Submission policy

Member Publications

**PS.** Get our weekly newsletters

your@email.com

