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From moral values to public health effectiveness: the place and importance of trust during the COVID-19 pandemic

SUMMARY

The COVID-19 pandemic has put every contemporary society in front of various challenges. While those are often reflected and explained through economic, political or medical lenses, it seems that thorough ethical and bioethical insights are too rarely exposed and made explicit. This article tries to contribute to the neglected sphere of interconnection and interrelatedness of basic moral values and general, primarily public health, challenges. Moreover, it will be argued that by deeply disrespectful behaviour of chief institutions and inappropriate communication to the overall community (citizens) the value of elementary trust and respectfulness has been eroded, betrayed, and consequently brings to the plethora of economic, political, medical, and other challenges and troubles. The key argument is that the effectiveness of the public health measures is primarily rooted in stable and publicly communicated basic values, such as life and health, but the stability and communication of those values lays mostly in moral values such as trust, respect, fairness etc. One of the most important lessons this pandemic could give the humanity is the almost self-evident, but often forgotten insight, that moral values are the necessary glue of all values needed for functional society (and generally functional global community on Earth). The examples will be taken from the Croatian example of social, political, and institutional confrontation to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Keywords: moral values, ethics, trust, public health, COVID-19 pandemic, bioethics, Croatia.

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Introduction

The still current COVID-19 pandemic has forced every contemporary society to face various challenges. Those are often reflected and explained through economic, political or medical lenses, and the discourse of medical threat, economic crisis and political tensions is dominant. On the other hand, it seems that thorough ethical and bioethical insights are too rarely exposed and made explicit. The exception are several thoughtful, some even book-sized (see Jurić, 2021; Žižek, 2020), comments from distinguished philosophers where the emphasis is primarily on the biopolitics and biopower. Of course all various social and civic values, including ethical ones, are also examined and discussed to a certain extent.¹ This article tries to contribute to the neglected sphere of interconnection and interrelatedness of basic moral values and general, primarily public health, challenges in three steps.

Firstly, I will argue that through deeply disrespectful behaviour of public institutions and public officials, as well as inappropriate communication to the overall community (citizens), the value of elementary trust and respectfulness has been eroded, betrayed, and consequently brought to the plethora of economic, political, medical, and other challenges and troubles. I will pay most attention to the indirect messages of public institutions in terms of being extremely a bad role model for public behaviour, but I will also comment on the direct messages to the public which made things even worse and opened the floodgate of erosion of public trust.

Secondly, I will maintain, as my key argument, that the effectiveness of public health measures is primarily rooted in stable and publicly communicated basic values, such as life and health, but that the stability and communication of those values lays mostly in morally evaluated phenomena such as trust, respect, fairness, etc. I will show that this comes from the fact that in the same way the general social values are rooted in primarily moral values, public health values (e.g. health of the community, eradication or at least control of disease spread etc.) are rooted in consistent and transparently defended ethical values. Without this, the effectiveness of public health measures is doomed to be poorly executed or completely ineffective.

Thirdly, I will briefly conclude that one of the most important lessons this pandemic could give humanity is the almost self-evident, but often forgotten insight, that

1 It seems that the most attention of philosophers (Giorgio Agamben, Jean-Luc Nancy, Alain Badiou, Yuval Noah Harari, etc.) in the first reactions to pandemics were given to those segments which are the most important for their general thesis about biopolitics, so they were primarily concerned with economical or ecological aspects of pandemics. The short presentation of immediate philosophical reactions with complete references and the discussion related to those reactions see in Jurić, 2021: 14-22. For the exemplary elaboration of how those analysis are rooted in wider philosophical systems of the mentioned philosophers, but also the suggestion of several other philosophers which are very insightful for the general discussion about pandemics see Jurić, 2021: 22-28.

moral values are the necessary glue of all values needed for functional society (and generally functional global community on Earth).

The examples will be taken from the Croatian example of social, political, and institutional confrontation to the COVID-19 pandemic.

The erosion of public trust in state institutions – opening the floodgate

A little over two years ago, the great threat of an unknown virus came dramatically to Croatian citizens just as it did to the majority of the world. All media regularly showed pictures and detailed reports of devastating consequences in our closest neighbour who had succumbed to the burden of rampant pandemic – Italy. Anxiety and fear slowly increased among Croatian citizens. Following the first cases of COVID-19 infections in Croatia, the government responded quickly through national institutions and available regional and local resources. The Civil Protection Headquarters on the national level were established and regional Civil Protection Departments were activated. The prescribed public health measures were becoming harder and harder (more and more coercive) day by day, and even a lockdown happened from the end of March to the beginning of May 2020 as the ultimate measure.

During the period from March through May 2020 the communication from all public figures of the Headquarters showed some interesting features. The data seemed to be openly and transparently given, the efforts of all included were evident from continuous media reports, the Minister of Health Vili Beroš, chief epidemiologist and Director of the Croatian Institute of Public Health Krunoslav Capak, and Director of the University Hospital for Infectious Diseases (Zagreb) Alenka Markotić gave the impression of strict professionalism and medical competence, while the rhetoric and communication displayed by the Minister of the Interior – and Head of the Headquarters Davor Božinović – were encouraging, calming and seemed candid. Despite all problems during this hard period, citizens trusted the Headquarters and there was a sense of general respect showed by the citizens on almost every level of social functioning.² One, and the most important level was the adherence to the measures which were a hard hit for every democratic society, as they restrict many civic rights and freedoms. However, it seems that the nation believed that

2 That trust in public (health) officials was pretty high, sometimes to the extent that some of the members of Directorate are perceived almost as some superheroes who defend the whole nation. The prime example was the case of a boy who presented Vili Beroš as a Superman, Krunoslav Capak as a Batman, Davor Božinović as a Flash Gordon and Alenka Markotić as a Wonderwoman. He sent his drawings to Directorate with a letter of thanks as encouragement for further fight of pandemic. Although a bit pathetic, this case influenced – through media reports and extensive comments – the raising positive attitude of public towards the officials and the epidemiological measures they proscribed. (Jutarnji.hr, 2020a)

only through common efforts will we beat the pandemic, or at least minimize its negative effects, and/or total devastation as was the case in neighbouring Italy. The effectiveness of all those measures was pretty successful.³

Meanwhile, increasing information about the virus, a better epidemic situation, the habituation to the so called “new normal”, etc. slowly reduced the general anxiety that was being felt and people became more critical and ready to take certain risks for the rights, freedoms and other values they cherished. In autumn 2020, under these circumstances, the autumnal so-called second wave of the pandemic in Croatia, passed less dramatically, at least in terms of public opinion, although the number of deaths was objectively even more disturbing than at the beginning of the pandemic. I leave open the possibility of a vast variety of reasons that influenced the common opinion, from general ones such as, for example, psychological consequences related to the obtaining more and more knowledge about at first unknown strength and danger of a new virus among the human population to the highly specific ones such as, for example, the specific Croatian cultural features, state of national economy/standard, dominant religious attitudes in society, the role of the church in Croatian society, etc. which are all probably important variables for the overall story of dealing with the pandemic. However, I must stick to the point I see as the most crucial: my thesis is that the government and public official’s behavior was crucial and one of the major factors because it eroded the moral values as the core for possibly giving valuing to all other aspects of (social) life. As one author clearly pointed out:

Moral values enjoy precedence within the value field because they identify the basic loci of all valuing experience – that is, valuing subjects in relationship. Where moral values are secure, we can cultivate a wide array of values. Where moral values are in danger, all values are at risk. (Ogletree, 2004: 2541)

In other words, moral values are firm ground for people’s sense of meaning and purpose of all their actions, including health behavior in particular (see Gert, 2004). Research in bioethics clearly shows that trust is the central moral value in the mentioned context (see Whitbeck, 2014; Door Goold, 2014) and the present analysis demonstrates the devastating consequences of endangering public trust in public health matters.

The major problem, as it will appear, were some atrocities of public officials’ behavior which influenced the public trust. It should be completely clear to every public health professional that trust is the key to the effectiveness of any public health measure. The prime historical example of the central role that trust plays in this sense is vaccine

³ There were some sporadic cases of disobedient behavior, but it seems that those cases were more acts of clumsiness than the clear sense of aware disobedience. They were also presented in such manner in public media and were more or less ridiculed and being the subject of general critique.

hesitancy.⁴ The trust of the community in public health law and measures is primarily rooted in the conviction that the public officials are working for the public good, and relatively, public health officials are working for the health of the community as one of the most important aspects of public good. Moreover, this is not just a moral justification, it also gives grounds for legal justifications: “Governmental power to act in the interest of public health through law is embodied in the legal maxim, *salus populi est suprema lex* (the welfare of the people is supreme law).” (Orenstein, 2014: 2600). Thus, when citizens start to doubt the sincerity of public officials and services, it leads to the loss of trust not just in their moral motivation and professionalism, but also in general legislation and rules they proscribed.

The Second wave of the pandemic in Croatia, which peaked in October and November 2020, brought about many such doubts, through daily reports in the media of new examples of certain public figures like politicians, judges and celebrities, not following the proscribed measures who were not sanctioned for doing so, and sometimes even had their actions ridiculously “justified” by members of the Headquarters, or their close assistants. There were plenty of dubious moves from state officials, where it became clear that they are motivated by daily political purposes, and not the main common goal at the moment: an effective confrontation with the pandemic.

It started with a very old traditional religious manifestation – the procession in the central part of the island of Hvar in Dalmatia which took place on April 9 and 10 2020. Despite the fact that Headquarters banned religious gatherings almost a month prior, it allowed this procession during the peak of the coronavirus pandemic in Croatia, and the media exposed the ridiculous explanations of the officials who denied that it was contrary to the established epidemiological measures, and they also stressed the interesting fact that Prime Minister Andrej Plenković and the Minister of Health Vili Beroš both have family roots on Hvar (Luzar, 2020; Tomšić, 2020; Marković, 2020).⁵

Probably the most debated was the epidemiologically inexplicable, but politically very understandable decision by the government to allow a gathering during the

4 Cf. „Some of the most dramatic examples of vaccine hesitancy or refusal have spanned diverse national and cultural contexts, from United Kingdom, where unfounded allegations of a connection between the measles mumps rubella vaccine and autism led to a dramatic decline in acceptance of the vaccine and subsequent outbreaks of measles, to northern Nigeria, where rumors that the global polio eradication campaign was an imperialist plot to poison Muslims led to widespread refusal of the vaccine and deadly disease resurgence. These episodes highlight the critical role of maintaining community trust in public health programs.“ (Oppenheimer and Colgrove, 2014: 2599).

5 Concerning the all facts given in mentioned references, it is obvious that it was a clear concession to a number of faithful voters, but also a pretty open compromise to Catholic church which has important role in Croatian society, at least for Croatian politics. I will stress this several times during the paper, but merely in the footnotes, because it is not the focus of my article. It is worth noting just as an indication that a few months later the Christian Brotherhood of Jelsa gave the Prime Minister and the Headquarters the official public acknowledgement of gratitude (cf. Grund, 2020).

Remembrance Day of the Sacrifice of Vukovar in 1991 on 18 November 2020, amidst the second wave of the pandemic in Croatia for which they gave ridiculous excuses and explanations. For instance, the story of a maximum of 500 people marching very cautiously while maintaining an appropriate social distance, when a quick look at the pictures and video evidence shows that there were several thousand people in attendance disregarding epidemiological regulations or rules. On the contrary, it turned out that there were more than 5 000 people, many of them gathering at official masses, with most of the state leadership included (M.V., 2020). Bearing in mind the current epidemiological situation and the fact that other countries had very modest ceremonies on their national holidays, people were very confused and heavy criticism followed, including that of the President himself (Duhaček, 2020). Government and state officials pretended they knew nothing and that they were completely ignorant of those events. For example, during the Remembrance Day celebration the next day in Croatia's second largest city Split, there was a mass gathering and march through the city with no reaction from authorities, despite the blatant disrespect of all epidemiological measures (R.S., 2020).

There were also plenty of less debated but highly dubious moments, including events like private parties hosted by influential politicians (including the Minister of Health!), judges and celebrities contrary to all proscribed epidemiological measures (cf. Jelinić, 2020). In some such cases public officials responded, but ironically, with an apparent dose of complete doubt in the effectiveness of authorities while real intervention occurred only when a sacrificial lamb was needed (cf. D.D., 2020). All such events deepened the public's distrust, increased their doubts, and continued to raise criticism of the government and public officials and the measures they proscribed.

These events surely affected the trust that was previously given to the Headquarters, and also lessened the nation's obedience of proscribed measures. This opened the floodgate of distrust that peaked with two other highly controversial events.

The loss of transparent and consistent (public health) values – the flood of distrust

Two instances of shameful and blatant disregard for the proscribed measures that were probably the most detrimental to the public's trust and that contributed to a sense of complete disrespect toward the general community occurred during two funerals. The first was the funeral of Miroslav Tuđman, the son of the first president of Croatia and member of the current leading political party in Croatia. Despite epidemiological measures, enforced from January 29 (until February 15) which

stated that: “A maximum of 25 people can be present at funerals, last farewells and urn laying, condolences to the bereaved must not be expressed through close contact, and cemetery administrations are obliged to monitor compliance with anti-epidemic measures.” (Lexpera, 2022), there was a minimum of 100 people attending the funeral on January 31 (Telegram, 2021).

In times when people were emotionally distraught because they couldn't attend funerals of those due to the aforementioned measures, the funeral of a prominent member of the leading political party seemingly had no visible restrictions. To make matters worse, the entire state leadership (prime minister, president of Parliament etc.) was in attendance. The shamefulness of the event doesn't stem just from the fact that there was no explicit apology or expressed regret from state officials. On the contrary: they tried to justify the event by explaining that they adhered to epidemiological measures and that everything was adequately organized (PI., 2021). This was offensive and deeply frustrating for everyone who wanted to – by obeying epidemiological measures – be present at the funeral of their family members, friends, or colleagues. The hypocrisy of the political leadership completely came to light and undermined the public trust.

The funeral of Milan Bandić, the mayor of Croatia's capital Zagreb, a charismatic and controversial politician deepened and probably completely destroyed the public's trust in the enforced restrictions. The aforementioned restriction of maximum 25 attendees at a funeral was extended and still in effect on March 3 when thousands of people came to the mayor's funeral. The whole state leadership, the majority of politicians, celebrities and public figures were in attendance (A.K, 2021). Looking back on this moment, it is hard to tell if the dominant feeling in the public sphere was outrage or a kind of resignation. The enormous number of people in such epidemiological circumstances is almost unbelievable, but the most troubling part is the complete loss of trust in public officials, their authority, as well as the legality of measures prescribed. All sense of order and planned activity for fighting the pandemic was lost by the selectiveness of authorities in their adherence to the ongoing measures. Self will of leading politicians and health officials reflected the blatant injustice and unfairness to other members of the society. People felt offended, betrayed and disrespected because they weren't treated as equal members of the society. On one hand, the justifications from the top ranking health officials were completely ridiculous. For instance, the Minister of Health tried to justify the whole thing by arguing that “the virus is not a long jump champion“ (*sic!*) (Index Vijesti, 2021). On the other hand, legal authorities (courts) and police did not react with any sanctions. On the contrary, they made several procedural mistakes and a few official charges for disobeying the epidemiological measures were dismissed (Grund, 2021).

The power of public health legislation and the power of police in its protection is grounded in very precise tacit agreement about their purpose and function. As one author put nicely in the encyclopedia of bioethics: “The basis for early state and local public health legislation was the state’s police power to protect people’s safety, health and welfare. The police power constitutes the reason for the establishment of state governments: to advance the public good and protect people from one another. This is a broad and inherent power of government generally because it is part of the social contract.” (Orenstein, 2014: 2600) Thus, people are usually ready to respect many public health measures despite the fact they limit their freedoms. The problem arises when the trust in the motives of state leaders is shaken, more specifically, as the previous example shows, when it is not clear that the government is primarily working on public health as a part of public good. Of course, it is completely clear that the “philosophical basis” of state public activities “is largely utilitarian, seeking a balance between the public interest and the protection of entrepreneurial interests in development and property.” (Orenstein, 2014: 2600) But such a balance isn’t clear in the aforementioned cases. Namely, it is hard to understand that while other restrictive measures concerning the working rights – which directly affect people’s income, living standards, and even jeopardizes many family businesses, smaller companies, and even some economic branches⁶ – were in action and more cautiously monitored, the activities like the aforementioned funerals were left completely unsupervised and unpunished. Moreover, the government tried to justify them.

Concerning finding appropriate ways of balance, some convincingly argued for the “principle of least restrictive or coercive interventions” which “requires that policymakers move cautiously along this continuum, with each shift from less restrictive to a more coercive policy requiring justification.” (Holland, 2014: 2619). In this context some propose “a six step framework, which involves inquiring into a public health program’s goals, effectiveness, and burdens; looking at alternatives to the program; and querying whether it is implemented fairly, and whether associated benefits and burdens are justly distributed.” (Holland, 2014: 2619)

While people did not question (during the first, and partially during the second wave of pandemics) the professional assessment of public officials at first (primarily, public health officials, police officers and politicians) with regard to the first four steps, the

⁶ The tourism was probably in the worst condition, but the more serious problem is the fact that Croatia has the largest share of tourism in GDP in Europe (18 percent, from the data collected in 2016), so the whole national economy was in true danger of collapsing. It should be also mentioned that surrounding countries endorsed high restrictions for their citizens concerning the travels in countries of higher numbers of diseased (so called „red countries“) and Croatia was in risk to become of one of the countries included in those restrictions.

last two were scrutinized and brought into question very soon due to debatable, and highly unethical occurrences presented and commented upon in this article. In other words, people trusted public officials when it came to public health measures (stopping the pandemic), the estimation of their effectiveness (social distance and self isolation), the evaluation of needed restrictions (restraint of certain liberties and rights), and the transparency of information regarding possible alternatives. However, people started to slowly doubt the fairness of said measures and the distribution of restrictions.

The first funeral was an ethically dubious event that sparked distrust while the second funeral, pushed this process even further.⁷ Other events, mentioned below only cemented the public's distrust and doubt in the government's respect toward their citizens.⁸

Moral values as the only hope for effective public health and society as a whole

The tacit agreement concerning the obedience of public health measures and the whole philosophy of public health is set *a priori* in the context of mutual agreement between all citizens to these practices which should ensure the wellbeing of the community. In other words, as Beauchamp correctly observes, “public health already constitutes, in broad outline, a democratic or civic ethics for advancing our health together.” (Beauchamp, 2014: 2610) Such a relationship, between government (and their decisions) and community (and their obedience) rests on mutual respect and trust based on the conviction that both sides would act responsibly: the government with its critical and careful balancing of measures; and the community with responsible and cautious behaviour (e.g. adhering to provided public health measures).

7 It is worth mentioning that just little more than a month after Zagreb's mayor Milan Bandić, the English prince Phillip, Queen Elizabeth II's husband died (at 9th April 2021, see BBC, 2021), and the funeral was very modest, in the strict circle of the family, according to the actual epidemiological measures. Without any doubt this made the people's discontent more evident and the Croatian media reacted immediately making the clear parallel between those funerals (cf. for example Paraf, 2021).

8 The indicative shift of trust was even evident among medical students during the seminar workshops with real cases and examples of public health circumstances, decisions and behavior. For example, students in medical ethics (University of Rijeka, Faculty of Medicine, second year of integrated study of Medicine) showed openly the anger and distrust during the spring 2021, while the trust and belief in common goal and the efficiency of measures were pretty high a year before. Having in mind that those people are the future physicians, and among the most educated group of citizens concerning the health issues and consequently the most confident in (public) health measures, this phenomenon is far more serious and plays significant role in giving insight about the general shift within society from strong trust to high doubts, or at least serious scepticism concerning the given public health measures.

The key to maintaining such a relationship is proper communication. In public health emergencies, like bioterrorism or natural sudden spread of viruses like in the current pandemic, “providing the public with accurate and consisted information is key to those responses.” (Orenstein, 2014: 2608) Looking at the Covid-19 pandemic, we can say that the terrifying scenarios from Italy during it’s first wave are quite vivid examples and evidence supporting this thesis. As I previously said, the government’s communication toward the public was perceived as candid, confident and grounded during the first wave, and was followed by strong obedience of the enforced rules by the community.⁹

But the communication is not just important during the first response to the pandemic or other public health issues. It is necessary for the maintenance of the relationship between the government and the community as long as the pandemic is deemed a threat. This could be shown easily during the third wave of the pandemic in Croatia, by looking at the “four pillars of philosophy of public health”: 1) “[p]ublic health must place a distinct emphasis on democratic society’s capacity for self examination, criticism and reform”; 2) “[p]revention must be primary”; 3) medicine should be “properly organized and available to all”; 4) “claims of individual autonomy must be acknowledged even as justifiable actions are taken that limit liberty and autonomy.” (Beauchamp, 2014: 2610-2611) Let’s look at the funerals and other events through the lenses of these four pillars.

1) Firstly, did the people feel like they were part of a democratic society characterized by equality and (mutual) respect for all citizens? By showing that there are people who are more important than others, this feeling of respect has been betrayed. This doesn’t refer to the departed, but rather those attending the funerals. Actions like these instantly destroy the belief in an equal society. Even worse are the government’s flimsy attempts at justifying their actions.

2) Secondly, where were the policemen and civil protection inspectors during those funerals? If prevention is the primary goal, and all measures are put into action for the reason of preventing the spread of the virus – how was it possible to organize an event where thousands of people gathered in a relatively small area? Keeping in mind that all other measures strictly forbade the gathering of more than 25 people, even in open spaces, including activities with no risk of close contact (for example, football practice and exercise), the only impression the people could have was that someone, i.e. the government, was making fools of them. If we look at some other practices where many institutions, who should be role models during the pandemic, disobey

⁹ Distinguished Croatian scientist, who is working abroad in the field of virology, in his recent interview pointed out clearly the centrality of adequate communication of authorities and public officials with public for maintaining the trust and credibility (Jutarnji.hr, 2022).

the enforced measures¹⁰, which are also completely ignored by members of the government, than this was an even deeper reason for the distrust in the government's motives and the efficiency of public health services.

3) Thirdly, medical institutions were very active and functional in the beginning of the pandemic. They made health care available to those infected with COVID-19 very quickly. However, the response from the government regarding the working conditions of the already overworked healthcare workers was focused on convincing the community that stopping the spread of the virus was crucial. Of course that was crucial, but the medical system was basically functioning only because of superhuman efforts of the medical staff, and not because of timely and functional organization and help from the government. The more disturbing question was what to do with the many sick people who's health had to take a back seat to COVID-19?

How many people had to suffer or even die from “less important” diseases or complications due to untimely health care?¹¹ Even worse is the example of powerful and prominent individuals who received their vaccines outside the foreseen schedule, which completely destroyed the trust in a just and fair care of public health system, and consequently in the government responsible for said system. The case of the Rector of the University of Zagreb and his wife, who both received their vaccine at the Department of Dental Medicine despite not being on any vaccination priority list is a prime example of the blatant disregard for vaccine prioritization. This was followed by clumsy and unconvincing explanations which erupted in the media. The reasoning behind their actions was almost unbelievable: he stated they were given the vaccine so that it would not be wasted. In a time when those most in need of the vaccine had difficulty getting it, the reaction in the media was, understandably, extremely critical (P.N., 2021; D.D., 2021).

10 The most evident case is the incomprehensible approach to organisation of work on faculties of Medicine and Health Studies which are generally perceived as those which should have a special responsibility as a role model for medical practice, including the public health measures. Moreover, they should be pioneers of all practices relevant for stopping the spread of pandemics and chief instructors for public health officials, and not *vice versa*: not to be pure followers, and at least to be the disobedient and ignorant subjects. If we take all this as a strong basic premise, it is completely incomprehensible why some medical/health faculties despite the possibility of working from home (which is even suggested to be maximally engaged for every employee which has such available possibility from Directorate), insisted on the mode of being physically in facilities, usually in circumstances which included many people in small closed areas (offices). It is also hardly to understand the stubborn insistence on real classes at the beginning of the epidemiological peak of pandemics' third wave, despite the fact the on-line classes were going on at the almost on other faculties and such practice were one of the strongest recommendation from public health officials.

11 This was a general problem, not just in Croatia, but in other countries, frequently disputed (see for example Halimović, 2020; Beck, 2020; Clerik, 2021).

4) Was the fact that groups of up to 25 people were allowed to gather in churches but not in bigger spaces and gyms discriminatory? Absolutely it was!¹² This was a total populist political move made to satisfy the majority of voters¹³ and not a comprehensive public health policy balanced with personal freedoms. The same could be said for physical activities like sports, especially ones that take place outside like football. Despite the need for spiritual wellbeing and possible benefits (like hope, positivity, etc.), the benefits of physical activity, are the same, if not greater. Physical activity impacts not just our mental health, but also has a direct influence on our immune system and the overall strength of our body. Moreover, when the Director General at the Croatian Institute of Public Health Krunoslav Capak was asked at a press conference on 18 December 2020 why they banned all gatherings in cafes, but allowed those in churches, he simply responded: "The answer is actually impossible", adding this odd explanation: "We try to prevent contact, but not limit activities that are important economically, mentally and psychically. Church gatherings are allowed because of the believers' need for peace and to celebrate this holiday." The Director of the University Hospital for Infectious Diseases Alenka Markotić gave a similarly poor explanation (Index Vijesti, 2020; cf. also Jutarnji.hr, 2020b).

As is clear by now, public health philosophy is firmly based on its ethics based on the mere fact that it stems from population perspective.¹⁴ It is clear that its "defining feature [...] is its population perspective", which necessarily has two aspects. "Firstly, public health aims to protect and promote the health of populations of people, including whole societies and sizeable subgroups within a country's population. Second, public health achieves these aims by collective, societal action." (Holland, 2014: 2617). In other words, public health measures depend on the responsibility of both sides: the purity and sincerity of the government's motives to defend public health as part of the public good; and the volition and readiness of the people to work together (with them).

12 There were some open and brave examples of ironising the epidemiological measures and showing the contradictions in their explanations. One of the prime example is the making of workout of two influencing sportsmen in the church, showing the absurdity of permitting the gatherings in the church, but prohibiting the gatherings in the gyms (cf. Gloria.hr, 2021; Bosančić & Kanić, 2021).

13 There is a vast majority of people who declare some confession, and in Croatia most of them declares Roman Catholic confession, which is a main pool of traditional values proclaimed by actual leading political party. It is not just about voters, but because of importance of the existing alliance with socially highly dominant Catholic church for achieving political goals and results.

14 In some explicit way this fact is revealed relatively recent in academic circles. Cf. „Public health's population perspective creates ethical challenges related to, but distinct from, those found in medical ethics and bioethics. [...] But around 1990, it was more clearly recognized that public health has a distinctive ethical dimension. Another upsurge of interest was discernible around the turn of the millenium, and public health ethics has subsequently become established as a widely taught and researched discipline.“ (Holland, 2014: 2617). There is pretty high probability, having in mind raising literature and academic discussion, including this thematic issue, and related workshops and conferences, that the pandemic of Covid-19 will be a new upsurge in development of discussions and research in public health ethics.

According to the presented analysis, it seems that government and public officials, especially the chief epidemiologist and Minister of Health, both doctors, both members of the Directorate of Civil Protection, and both the most important figures in forming the epidemiological measures during the pandemic, have failed in all chief ethical obligations from the stance of epidemiological professionalism. Namely, those are the “[o]bligations to society: avoid conflicting interest; [...] to maintain public confidence in the profession.” (Soskolne, 2014: 2627). Both ignored their primary professional ethical obligations towards the citizens at least as health care users for the everyday political interest of their (governing) party and thus completely tricked the public trust.¹⁵ This is impermissible because of the importance of their role, because “[i]n the policy domain, researchers and practitioners must be cognizant of their respective roles in making pronouncements to influence policy.” (Soskolne, 2014: 2628)

They completely played the people and lost their confidence, trust and respect, by losing sight of the responsibility they have primarily as epidemiologists and physicians rather than as practical politicians. This is one of the most continuously pressing challenges for the effectiveness of public health measures. As Soskolne put it: “Ever present are issues of partiality stemming from self interest and conflicting interests that are permitted to take precedence over the public interest.” (Soskolne, 2014: 2629) The Croatian reality showed (and continues to show?) the presence, but also the drama of ethical erosion in public health practice. In some cases, maybe personal or group (e.g. political party) benefit could be gained, but at the same time they deeply threaten the well being of society as a whole, becoming the betrayer of the people and their common good and interest, instead of being the last bastion of public good protector and respectable, important service.¹⁶

The ethical erosion of public health services showcases the type of drama every society faces in which it sells or betrays basic ethical values in favor of minor personal or (sub)group interests. It shows in a most dramatic way, namely through the betrayal of the community’s trust and respect, the one-way trajectory to the ineffectiveness of public health measures and consequently the loss of hope, which leaves society helpless and distraught in times where state authorities are expected to activate all of society’s resources to overcome the crisis.¹⁷

15 Maybe the most blatant and obvious tailoring of epidemiological decisions according to political needs is the ad hoc opening of borders during the elections on local level in 2020 and elections on national level in 2021, despite all warnings from medical profession and public critique in media and politics (cf. for example Zebić, 2020.; Matijanić, 2021).

16 It can be added that this is contrary to the values based in solidarity on which rests the Croatian (and general European) health system.

17 I would like to give thanks to my close colleagues Robert Doričić and Helena Štrucelj for the insightful comments on the first draft of this article.

In Conclusion

From the presented analysis of the Croatian example, it is evident that the double standards of elected officials showcased during the pandemic, and concerning the application of epidemiological measures opened the cracks in the public's trust. Additional tailoring of those measures according to daily political needs showed even more clearly the reasons for distrust in the professionalism of public health authorities and political institutions in general. Discrimination during the subsequent waves of the pandemic turned these cracks into wide gaps, especially due to inadequate communication and a lack of reasonable explanation of some of the Headquarter's acts and moves. Very soon the blatant loss of consistency and clumsy justifications destroyed the people's faith in the common goal – beating the pandemic. Unfortunately, this was a clear way of losing the credibility of authorities and trust in public institutions. The respect, fairness, faith in common goals and values, and the general sense of given public health measures were lost.

Through deeply disrespectful behaviour of chief institutions and inappropriate communication to the general community (citizens), the value of basic trust and respect has been eroded and betrayed. The analysis evidently shows that the effectiveness of public health measures is primarily rooted in stable and publicly communicated basic values, like life and health, but the stability and communication of said values lay mostly in moral values like trust, respect, fairness, etc. One of the most important lessons this pandemic could give the humanity is the almost self-evident, but often forgotten insight, that moral values are the necessary glue of all values needed for functional society (and generally functional global community on Earth).

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Od moralnih vrijednosti do učinkovitosti javnog zdravstva: uloga i važnost povjerenja tijekom pandemije COVID-19

SAŽETAK

Pandemija COVID-19 donijela je razne izazove svakom suvremenom društvu. Dok se tim izazovima često bavi i raspravlja s ekonomskog, političkog ili medicinskog gledišta, čini se da se temeljiti etički i bioetički uvidi o njima prertjetko izričito iznose. Članak nastoji pridonijeti zanemarenoj sferi međupovezivanja i međuovisnosti osnovnih moralnih vrijednosti i općenitim, primarno javnozdravstvenim, izazovima. Štoviše, zalagat će se za to da je iznimnim nedostatkom poštovanja od strane glavnih institucija i neprimjerenom komunikacijom prema cjelokupnoj zajednici (građanima) vrijednost osnovnog povjerenja i poštovanja oslabljena, izdana, što posljedično pridonosi mnoštvu ekonomskih, medicinskih i ostalih izazova i problema. Glavni argument jest da je učinkovitost javnozdravstvenih mjera primarno ukorijenjena u stabilnim i javno komuniciranim osnovnim vrijednostima, poput života i zdravlja, no stabilnost i komuniciranje tih vrijednosti uglavnom leži u moralnim vrijednostima, poput povjerenja, poštovanja, poštenja itd. Jedna od najvećih lekcija koju je čovječanstvo moglo izvući iz pandemije jest gotovo očigledan, no često zanemaren uvid da su moralne vrijednosti nužno ljepilo svih vrijednosti koje su potrebne za funkcionalno društvo (i općenito funkcionalnu zajednicu na Zemlji). Primjeri su uzeti iz hrvatskog primjera društvenog, političkog i institucijskog suočavanja s pandemijom COVID-19.

Ključne riječi: moralne vrijednosti, etika, povjerenje, javno zdravstvo, pandemija COVID-19, bioetika, Hrvatska.