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Mobility, migration, and the COVID-19 epidemic: governing emergencies in Lithuania and Poland



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In the last months, CMR researchers have received as many as five grants in several National Science Centre [@NCN_PL](#) competitions. In this issue, we present the research plans of dr Marta Jaroszewicz [@m_jaroszewicz](#) and her Lithuanian partner prof. Dovilė Jakniūnaitė at the [Institute of International Relations and Political Science](#) of Vilnius University [@VU_LT](#), who will be studying emergency politics and policy practices arising as an effect of epidemics, such as COVID-19.

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Mobility, migration, and the COVID-19 epidemic: governing emergencies in Lithuania and Poland

New Polish-Lithuanian research project at the Centre of Migration Research (CMR)

Marta Jaroszewicz

Owing to a research grant of Polish National Science Centre (NCN) and the Research Council of Lithuania (RCL), the CMR, together with the Institute of International Relations and Political Science of Vilnius University, is starting to explore forms of governance over mobility (including international migration) in Lithuania and Poland during the COVID-19 pandemic. Our study is intended to fill a vacuum in research on emergency politics and policy practices arising as an effect of epidemics, from the angle of critical security studies, political sociology and Europeanisation studies.

Literature on the COVID-19 pandemic and mobility. What did we learn so far?

The Covid-19 pandemic, which caused a temporary global lockdown, has greatly affected mobility around the world, international migration in particular. According to a recent IOM/MPI report ([Benton et al. 2021](#)), the number of passengers on international flights in April and May 2020 was reduced by 92 per cent, in comparison to the same period of 2019. Migration flows to OECD countries – measured by new permits issued – were

estimated to decrease by 46 per cent in the first half of 2020, and 2020 is expected to mark a historical low for migration to OECD countries ([OECD 2020](#)). These are only a few examples from numerous data that can be cited. Availability of big data tools and many worldwide dedicated databases have produced a lot of research material. Yet, the focus of the exiting research was either on documenting mobility restrictions, or on investigating relevance of adopted mobility restrictions for the modes of spreading of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Only recently, scholarship has started investigating wider context of pandemic/mobility relationship and the restrictions' consequences. There is a body of research which has explored the effects of the first wave of the pandemic and the related restrictions. Migration-linked effects of the first wave were sometimes referred to as 'panic migration', characterised by quick unplanned return migration, often performed in unsafe conditions. Only in Poland in March-April 2020 as many as 145,000 Ukrainian migrants left the country in a 'panic' return migration ([Jaroszewicz 2020](#)). A much gloomier picture arises from the research on

East Asia, Africa, or South America. According to [Bhagat et al. \(2021\)](#) the COVID-19 pandemic and related restrictions caused one of the biggest streams of mass return migration in India, while “the very effort to stave off the pandemic turned into one of greatest human tragedies in India’s recent history”. A second group of publications researches the growth in inequalities and migrants’ vulnerabilities that arose in effect of the pandemic. Among others, the [IOM/MPI report \(2021\)](#) has revealed that the COVID-19 pandemic further divided the global population into a group of privileged travelers who, albeit with some limitations, still travelled freely, and the unprivileged ones, often stranded for months without access to legal or social protection.

Finally, there is a small, albeit crucial in the context of our research, group of studies that looks at the wider socio-political consequences of the pandemic situation, which the following project has the ambition to contribute to as well. Among others, research looking at the growing role of nationalism in governing migration ([Bieber 2020](#)), different ways of thinking about migration that - among others - include the increasing popularity of the ‘key workers’ concept (Anderson 2020) or the role of expertise (Kreuder-Sonnen and White 2021) should be mentioned.

Emergency politics and governing society

An emergency can be defined as an exceptional state of risk or danger, which

requires immediate action by power actors to prevent or diminish great loss or harm (Sorrel 2013: 1). It usually entails a swift and sudden political decision, which transcends ‘normal’ routine politics. In this sense, emergency policy deals with both extraordinary situations and the extraordinary measures undertaken as a reaction to these events (Wright 2015: 3) and can validate certain types of action that ordinarily would have been regarded as incorrect or unacceptable.

Emergencies are usually considered in relation to existing law. In a rather pessimistic diagnosis, Agamben (2005) argues that the suspension of law within a state of emergency is a permanent feature of contemporary politics. On the contrary, Honig (2008) proposes to ‘de-exceptionalise exception’ and start perceiving emergency politics within democratic legal procedures. She draws attention to a very crucial aspect of emergency policy, which we will study in our project, namely the actual emergency practices which are adopted on the fast track and usually have a more executive than legislative character. She also emphasizes that in political practice, emergency policy refers to governmental capacity to take the politics out of ‘normal’ politics. In their research conducted already after the eruption of the pandemic, Kreuder-Sonnen and White (2021) emphasize that when it comes to EU policies towards the COVID-19 pandemic, a shift from managerial competences to the political aspects of improvised decision making can be observed. They also highlight the tendency of

both the EU member states and the EU to perform various forms of exceptionalism, which also include irregular, informal, and sometimes extra-legal procedures.

Emergency politics and mobility

One should agree with Sheller and Urry (2006) that in the 21st century epidemics have started to be understood by both scientists and politicians as a crucial dimension of the new mobility paradigm. A vital pattern of this new paradigm is the fact that issues of movement, of too little movement or too much, or of the wrong form of movement, have become central for many governments. Thus, as suggested by Adey (2016), practices of governance connect mobility and emergencies. It means that emergency responses are always 'political', and so are the different types of mobility created by the emergencies. Being 'political', they usually take the form of exceptional mobility measures that surpass legal and political constraints and reflect the dominant ideas and power structures (Ripoll Servent 2019).

An emergency can result in divergent governing modes. In the project, the typology proposed by Adey (2016) will be applied. It features emergency measures as a continuum of instruments, ranging from the anticipation of catastrophes, extended cooperation, to the experiments and improvisations with which society has learnt to live in emergency situations (Adey 2016).

Project's objectives

The research project will examine forms of governance over mobility (including international migration) in Lithuania and Poland during COVID-19. Its aim is to contribute:

- to conceptualising mobility and migration within the perspective of emergency governance;
- to investigating wider socio-political roots of the emergency policies towards mobility and migration.

Also, the proposed study enables an empirical comparative analysis of the emergency governance models adopted by Poland and Lithuania, its roots and thus will contribute to the ongoing discussion on the variation of individual states' responses to the COVID-19 crisis, and its relation to the EU policies. We argue that mobility and migration serve as an archetypal area for studying 'new' (exceptional) and 'old' (but redefined) modes of governance. Thus, we will contribute to the ongoing discussion on the variation of individual states' responses to the COVID-19 crisis and the alleged specific characteristics of the 'new' EU member states' responses.

Research approach

The project applies a multidisciplinary approach embedded in critical theory and comparative policy studies, chiefly critical security studies and mobility/migration studies, as well as political sociology. More precisely, the research questions and

hypotheses are anchored in theories of emergency politics (Agamben 2005; Aradau and van Munster 2011) and resilience mechanisms (e.g. Bourbeau 2013). It will also draw heavily on an existing strand of literature that links emergencies with mobility and migration (Adey 2016, Sheller and Urry 2006).

The research methods applied include: process tracing, historical analysis, critical discourse analysis and expert problem-centered interviews. We will conduct around 40 expert interviews in Poland and 30 in Lithuania with security, emergency, health, and mobility experts to reveal, often unwritten, emergency practices.

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Keywords: COVID-19, mobility, governing emergencies, Lithuania, Poland

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