

Turning the page after Covid-19 – not such a good idea

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3rd February 2025



Reassessing our decisions and behaviours during the pandemic? Not a priority, perhaps. Such reluctance is understandable, but it stops us being better prepared for future pandemics. While Covid seems to belong to the past, it is also part of our future.

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The Covid-19 pandemic was a major event for the whole planet, but the memory of it seems to be already fading in the West, replaced by worries about wars, climate change or the polarisation of society. Managing the coronavirus upended all our social and political habits, yet it is not the subject of a real debate, either in politics or society. Do we want to turn the page and forget Covid? Several teams participating in the National Research Programme “Covid-19 in Society” (NRP 80) have addressed this question in the course of their work.

“I get the impression that people are rather tired of the subject,” says Nadine Frei from the University of Basel, who [is studying](#) anti-Covid protests as part of NRP 80. For example, Frei talks about a councillor in a small village who refused to take part in her study, possibly for fear of reviving old tensions. During the pandemic, the councillor had to implement health measures in an environment largely hostile to them.

However, such reluctance to look back on this difficult period is neither widespread nor uniform. For example, people who protested fiercely against pandemic measures – the wearing of masks, vaccination, the certificates – are still very happy to talk about it, says the sociologist. “It’s very marked among the dissenters who espoused conspiracy theories or esoteric health movements. They’re still very keen to convince others that they were right then and still are today.” Another group, who opposed Covid rules based on libertarian principles, especially in rural areas, are equally keen to speak out.

Avoiding tensions

The pandemic saw intense polarisation between people who supported government measures and those who opposed them. This split has left its mark, note Federico Germani and Giovanni Spitale from the University of Zurich. As part of NRP 80, Germani and Spitale are [analysing](#) social media debates surrounding the pandemic, especially the ‘infodemic’. “We’ve seen many acquaintances who stopped speaking during the pandemic reconnect and get on well again,” says Spitale. “However, they avoid revisiting past differences, probably to avoid heated discussions that nobody wants.” This attitude is quite understandable, but it is problematic at a societal level, Spitale adds. “Today, we must face up to our past opinions, confront our differences and work towards a consensus. Otherwise, we’ll never form a stable political vision of how to manage the next pandemic. You can’t prepare for the future if you’ve forgotten the past.”

In June 2024, over 73 percent of the Swiss electorate rejected the popular initiative “For freedom and physical integrity”, which sought to outlaw the possibility of compulsory vaccination. The campaign was surprisingly quiet on an issue that had profoundly divided society just a few years earlier. The result and the prevailing calm may have been partly due to unwillingness to re-open old wounds over coronavirus. Unfortunately, institutions may tend to put coronavirus behind them quickly, adds Germani. “The declaration from the Director-General of the WHO in May 2023 that the Covid-19 public health emergency was over had a big impact on governmental institutions and governments. Funding for research projects is drying up internationally, although we are far from having drawn all the lessons to be learned from the pandemic.”

Not every institution is ready to fundamentally reassess how it operates, Germani continues. “During the pandemic, it was often said that lessons would be learned and leveraged to bring about change and to increase resilience. But instead, I see small, spur-of-the-moment provisional adaptations and few structural changes of consequence that would enable us to deal more effectively with a future public health emergency.”

Between weariness and the need to talk

Collecting statements relating to the pandemic period has not always been easy, says Daniel Drewniak, a sociologist from the University of Zurich. As part of his work for NRP 80, he [analyses](#) how elderly nursing homes managed Covid-19 control measures and how these measures affected staff and

residents. “We have to go through a large number of institutional intermediaries before getting to the healthcare staff,” he explains. “They are tired after long hours and don’t always see the point of taking part in yet another Covid survey while paperwork already eats up a large part of their working day.”

Drewniak adds that the pandemic was frequently a challenging experience at the institutional level. The stringent implementation of protective measures mandated by authorities significantly limited the autonomy of healthcare institutions, leaving them with little flexibility – a loss of independence they may not wish to revisit.

But again, this is not always the case, and some professional groups are willing to talk. Lisa Marie Borelli at the University of Applied Sciences and Arts of Western Switzerland (HES-SO) in Valais says that she has had no trouble finding social work professionals to interview. As part of an [NRP 80 project](#), she interviews them about their experiences during the Covid-19 pandemic, with a particular focus on the support they provided to marginalised individuals. “The response rate was high, more than for other similar projects,” she says. “People appeared interested in talking about their experiences in that period, which, while certainly limiting, also gave them a measure of freedom. They said that they devised creative solutions that probably wouldn’t have been accepted in normal times, such as cutting down on the paperwork required for giving financial support to people in need.” Borelli points out a risk, however: “Much of the knowledge of that period is not located in the institutions but in the individuals. So, it’s at risk of disappearing.”

Our biased memories

Our memories – when people agree to dive back into the past – are not always reliable (see also “[Urgently Seeking – Memory](#)”). “It’s a well-known fact in social and psychological sciences,” explains Robert Böhm from the University of Vienna, who is not himself involved in NRP 80. “However, assessing the extent of memory bias and identifying the factors that influence it remains challenging, as there is often insufficient objective data to compare against people’s recollections. Covid-19 has presented a unique opportunity to compare memory with reality, drawing on the surveys carried out during the pandemic and used as points of comparison.”

His team has been able to [show](#) that the memories people have of their past opinions and perceptions – such as regarding the probability of infection, trust in institutions, or mask-wearing – greatly depend on the opinions and perceptions that they have currently. This phenomenon is especially evident when people change their minds. For example, someone who now says that they are against masks but did not express that opinion in a survey carried out during the pandemic will tend to overestimate their past opposition. Equally, vaccinated people have a tendency to overestimate the risk of infection that they perceived at the time. “Our findings also indicate that the polarisation over how the pandemic was managed is greater today than it was at the time,” says Böhm. “This is important to consider when trying to anticipate if people would be prepared – or not – to comply with measures in a future health

crisis.” But even our biased memories are still useful, says Lisa Marie Borelli from HES-SO Valais. “From now on, society must be prepared for new pandemics. When trying to shape the future, what we think today is just as important as what we thought in the past.”

No future without the past

The promises that lessons would be drawn from the pandemic so that we would never live through anything like it again have been forgotten, Federico Germani from the University of Zurich says regretfully. “The Spanish flu epidemic of 1918-1919 caused between 25 and 50 million deaths – i.e. more than the First World War – but its memory soon faded. We are more liable to remember wars and natural disasters because they often involve a clear culprit (the enemy, the elements, etc.), a kind of national unity, and commemorations honouring the heroes and the victims. But Covid was different. It has left a bitter aftertaste and a feeling of division.”

“There is no glory in prevention,” Daniel Drewniak from the University of Zurich reminds us, quoting epidemiologist Christian Drosten and Geoffrey Rose’s prevention paradox. “People have little motivation to think of the future, as we see with the threat of climate change. In my opinion, we need to create a space for discussions like this and encourage people to take part in them.”

All researchers interviewed stressed the importance of preparing for future pandemics. To do so, it is essential to remember Covid-19. But as Nadine Frei puts it, “Whether it’s remembered or forgotten, it’s always a political issue.”

References:

NRP 80, research project [“Coronavirus protests compared”](#)

NRP 80, research project [“Encouraging public discourse”](#)

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Note: This article was edited by Raed Hartmann, DeFacto.