

## Conference Report: “COVID-19 in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE): Lessons Learned and Pandemic Preparedness – Five Years Later”, Lublin Conference Centre, October 2–3, 2025

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On October 2–3, 2025, the Faculty of Law, Canon Law and Administration of the John Paul II Catholic University of Lublin (Poland) and the Institute of Social Sciences in Belgrade (Serbia), in cooperation with the Institute for Self-Government Development, organized an international scientific conference titled “COVID-19 in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE): Lessons Learned and Pandemic Preparedness – Five Years Later.” The event was held under the Honorary Patronage of the Marshal of the Lublin Voivodeship and the Patronage of the European Association of Health Law.

The conference was conducted in a hybrid format, fully in-person and virtually, reflecting both the accessibility goals and the digital transformation accelerated by the pandemic. Scholars, legal practitioners, and policy-makers from 13 European countries gathered to discuss how COVID-19 experience reshaped governance, law, ethics, and public health preparedness in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE).

The event took place only a few months after the adoption of WHO Pandemic Agreement (May 2025) – an international legal instrument aiming to strengthen global prevention, preparedness, and response to future health emergencies. Against this background, the discussions addressed two guiding questions:

- (1) What lessons have been learned from national responses to the COVID-19 pandemic, and how have these influenced preparedness for future emergencies?

(2) How are CEE states responding to the new global health governance framework introduced by the Pandemic Treaty?

The conference opened with welcoming remarks from hosts and organizers, emphasizing the need for continued comparative legal research in public health emergencies. Marta Sjenicic and Katarzyna Miaskowska-Daszkiwicz spoke on behalf of the organizers, emphasizing that the event was a follow-up to the conference held in spring 2021, during which participants discussed the public law instruments being introduced in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, which was raging around the world.

The first keynote speech was delivered by Leszek Bosek (University of Warsaw, Poland), titled “Anti-Epidemic Emergency Regimes and Professional Standards.” Professor Bosek analyzed the constitutional and administrative dimensions of emergency regimes enacted during COVID-19, highlighting tensions between public necessity and professional autonomy in healthcare. He argued that the pandemic had exposed structural weaknesses in national legal frameworks, particularly in defining proportional restrictions and maintaining medical accountability under emergency powers.

The first session provided a comparative perspective on national legal and administrative responses. Manuela Sirbu (Titu Maiorescu University, Romania) opened this panel with “Operationalizing One Health in Europe after COVID-19: Legal and Governance Perspectives with Reflections on Romania’s Emerging Engagement.” She argued that the COVID-19 pandemic exposed the lack of integrated governance linking human, animal, and environmental health, and calls for embedding the One Health approach – endorsed by the WHO Pandemic Treaty and the EU Scientific Advice Mechanism – into clear, enforceable legal frameworks, with Romania urged to reform its legislation and institutions to operationalize this model effectively.

Larisa Patru (University of Medicine and Pharmacy of Craiova, Romania) followed with “Strengthening Health Emergency Legislation: Lessons from Romania’s COVID-19 Response,” showing how Romania’s 2024 Regulation on the Management of Emergency Situations Generated by Epidemics institutionalizes intersectoral crisis governance, aligns national law with the 2025 WHO Pandemic Agreement, and provides a model for reconciling rapid emergency response with the protection of fundamental rights.

Next speaker, Ivan Demchenko (Bogomolets National Medical University, Kyiv, Ukraine), discussed “National Responses to COVID-19 Pandemic Consequences and Preparedness for Future Emergencies: The Case of Ukraine.” His presentation offered insight into crisis governance during wartime conditions. Demchenko analyzed Ukraine’s dual challenge of managing the post-COVID-19 recovery amid ongoing war, highlighting reforms such as the 2022 Law “On Public Health” and digitalization efforts that improved governance and preparedness, while noting persistent institutional and strategic gaps in emergency planning and coordination.

Athina Sophocleous (Alexander College, Cyprus) contributed “From Emergency to Opportunity: Cyprus and the COVID-19 Wake-Up Call,” underlining that Cyprus’s experience with COVID-19 revealed deep structural weaknesses and the absence of a constitutional right to health, concluding that enshrining this right in the Constitution is essential to guarantee universal healthcare, accountability, and resilience in future public health crises.

Finally, Marko Milenković (Institute of Social Sciences, Serbia) presented “Emergency Governance and Constitutional Oversight in Serbia – Reflections Five Years After the COVID-19 Outbreak.” He evaluated the balance between efficiency and constitutional safeguards, concluding that constitutional review mechanisms must be strengthened for future crises. Milenković reviewed Serbia’s 2020 COVID-19 state of emergency, arguing that governance by decree, weak institutional oversight, and limited judicial review exposed enduring vulnerabilities in constitutional accountability, and concludes that Serbia’s experience highlights the urgent need for transparent, rights-based frameworks to balance health security with democratic resilience in future crises.

The second panel focused on systemic reforms in public health governance. Martin Rusnak and Viera Rusnakova (Trnava University, Slovakia) presented a systematic review of “The Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Primary Care in Central Europe and the Western Balkans.” They presented a systematic review of primary healthcare disruptions in Central Europe and the Western Balkans during COVID-19, identified shortages, staff stress, and weak monitoring as major challenges, and concluded that strengthening primary care through better communication, streamlined

administration, and secured resources is essential for future health crisis preparedness.

Katarzyna Mełgieś (War Studies University, Warsaw, Poland) discussed “The Use of the Armed Forces in Public Health Emergency Situations,” analyzing the military’s role as a public health actor and the associated accountability concerns. She reviewed the post-pandemic legal framework authorizing the Polish Armed Forces to support civil authorities in managing public health emergencies, concluding that their discretionary involvement – formalized through statutory amendments after COVID-19 – enhances crisis response capacity without undermining the military’s institutional structure.

Ranko Sovilj and Aleksandar Vukadinović (Institute of Social Sciences, Serbia) examined “Legal and Ethical Challenges in the Reform of the Serbian Healthcare System in the Post-COVID Era.” They argued that underfunding, inequitable access, and growing private sector involvement threaten health equity, and concluding that timely legal and policy reforms are crucial to ensure sustainable, affordable, and just healthcare for all citizens.

Sanja Zlatanović and Andjelija Stevanović (Institute of Social Sciences, Serbia) explored “Resilience in Labour Regulation: Evaluating Serbia’s Post-Pandemic OSH Reform.” Presenters assessed Serbia’s post-pandemic labor law reforms, concluding that despite the enactment of Law no. 35/2023 on Occupational Safety and Health of the Republic of Serbia, the legal framework remains unprepared for future health crises due to its failure to integrate psychosocial risk management, mental health protection, and comprehensive emergency labor governance mechanisms essential for true regulatory resilience.

Concluding the panel, Anna Jacek (University of Rzeszów, Poland) presented “State Sanitary Inspection in the System of Prevention and Monitoring of Infectious Diseases and Epidemics. Evaluation of the Current Legal Status,” highlighting administrative coordination challenges within Poland’s public health system. Jacek evaluated the Polish State Sanitary Inspection’s legal competences in preventing and controlling infectious diseases, concluding that while its administrative powers partially ensure sanitary and epidemiological security, legislative ambiguities, insufficient resources, and lack of clearly defined oversight functions limit its effectiveness in epidemic prevention and response.

The third session addressed digital transformation and its implications for governance and rights. Nina Gumzej (University of Zagreb, Croatia) opened with “AI-Driven Disinformation and the WHO Pandemic Agreement: Legal and Governance Challenges in a Post-COVID World.” She argued that while the WHO Pandemic Agreement marks progress in global health law, it lacks enforceable mechanisms to combat AI-driven disinformation, leaving a regulatory gap that threatens effective pandemic response, and proposes integrating EU-style binding digital regulations with stronger global partnerships to ensure the authenticity and rapid dissemination of trustworthy health information

Judge Dragana Marčetić (Court of Appeal in Belgrade, Serbia) followed with “Remote Judging – Pros and Cons,” reflecting on judicial practice during lockdowns. She examined the rapid adoption of remote judging during the COVID-19 pandemic, outlining its advantages in health protection, efficiency, and access to justice, while warning that it also threatens core judicial principles such as immediacy, publicity, and witness integrity, thus requiring robust legal and procedural safeguards to maintain fairness and transparency.

Claudia Severi (University of Modena and Reggio Emilia, Italy) discussed “Digitalisation of Education after the Pandemic: Opportunities, Risks, and the Role of Rights.” She analyzed the post-pandemic digital transformation of education, arguing that while digital tools and AI offer inclusivity and innovation, they also deepen inequalities and pose ethical and legal risks, and concludes that a human-centred, rights-based framework is essential to balance technological progress with equality, dignity, and the holistic development of learners.

Next speakers, Petra Stanojević and Sofija Nikolić Popadić (Institute of Social Sciences, Serbia) presented “The Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Digitalization and eHealth in Serbia.” They analyzed how the COVID-19 pandemic accelerated Serbia’s healthcare digitalization, leading to new eHealth services, telemedicine, and legal reforms such as the Digitalisation Programme in the Health System 2022–2026, while also identifying persistent challenges, including limited digital literacy, uneven implementation, and concerns over data privacy and system trust.

Finally, Sławomir Fundowicz (The John Paul II Catholic University of Lublin, Poland) examined “Regulating Sport in Times of Crisis: Legal

Responses to COVID-19,” addressing the interplay between public health and sporting autonomy.

Second day of the conference began with the second keynote, delivered by Claudia Seitz (Private University in the Principality of Liechtenstein), titled “The WHO Pandemic Agreement 2025 – Union Law in the Context of Global Health Crises.” Professor Seitz provided an in-depth analysis of how EU law interacts with the new global framework, noting that coherence between national, European, and international mechanisms will be essential for future pandemic preparedness. According to Professor Seitz, the WHO Pandemic Agreement should be understood not only as a health policy measure, but also as a building block of global crisis resilience with relevance to EU and constitutional law. This presents the Union with an opportunity to combine regulatory coherence, fundamental rights standards and international solidarity in a sustainable regulatory framework. The incorporation of an international legal instrument such as the WHO pandemic agreement into Union law could thus become a touchstone for the interaction of national, European and global legislation in a changing international legal order.

Fourth panel of the conference: Public Health, Vaccination and Bioethics examined bioethical and legal dilemmas. Dimitra Lempesi (Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, Greece) addressed “Critical Medicines Act,” discussing the EU’s strategy for secure supply chains. Lempesi presented the concept of the Critical Medicines Act, its basic principles, and assessed its effectiveness in terms of building the resilience of EU Member States’ markets to medicine shortages during the next public health crisis.

Andra Mažrimaitė and Vilius Lapis (Mykolas Romeris University, Lithuania) presented “COVID-19 Vaccines and Compensation for Damages: The Lithuanian Legal Framework in a Global Context.” The panellists presented the actions taken by the Lithuanian authorities at the beginning of the pandemic with a view to introducing protective vaccinations against COVID-19, illustrating the impact of the no-fault liability system for vaccine damage on the level of public confidence in vaccinations.

Katarzyna Miaskowska-Daszkiewicz (The John Paul II Catholic University of Lublin, Poland) analyzed “The Challenge of Mandatory COVID-19 Vaccinations: Between Public Health Protection and Human Rights Concerns.” She compared the result of the proportionality test of restricting the

right to decide about one's health by the possible introduction of mandatory COVID-19 vaccinations at the beginning of the pandemic – in particular, taking into account the conditional marketing authorization procedure for these vaccinations in the EU – to the current conditions, recognizing that the obligation to undergo these vaccinations would be unacceptable from the perspective of the lack of urgent social need, as mentioned by the ECtHR in its 2021 *Vavricka* judgment.

Nino Lipartia (Grigol Robakidze University, Georgia) explored “Legal and Ethical Aspects of Medical Triage: A Comprehensive Analysis of German Federal Constitutional Court Jurisprudence and European Human Rights Framework.” Lipartia analyzed legal and ethical dimensions of medical triage during the COVID-19 pandemic through German constitutional and European human rights law, concluding that the German Federal Constitutional Court's 2021 ruling established a binding duty for states to adopt clear, non-discriminatory triage regulations protecting persons with disabilities and ensuring equal dignity and access to care in future health crises.

The panel concluded with Jerzy Bednarski, Jakub Pawlikowski, and Paweł Piwowarczyk (Medical University of Lublin, Poland) presenting “Prioritisation of Patients in Access to ECMO during the COVID-19 Pandemic – Ethical, Legal and Clinical Aspects.”

This lecture was devoted to presenting the legal, ethical and medical issues involved in reconstructing criteria to facilitate decision-making on prioritizing access to ECMO for patients during a pandemic.

The fifth panel of the conference was devoted to the security and future challenges. Marta Sjenic and Hajrija Mujovic (Institute of Social Sciences, Serbia) began with “COVID-19 Aftereffect: New Health Needs and Public Health,” focusing on emerging post-pandemic health demands. Presenters highlighted that the COVID-19 pandemic exposed serious gaps in Serbia's disease surveillance and emergency preparedness, arguing that strengthening International Health Regulations (IHR) core capacities through coordinated national action plans and initiatives such as the 2023–2027 “EU for a More Responsive Healthcare System” project is essential to build a resilient, internationally aligned public health system capable of preventing and responding to future crises.

Maciej Banach (The John Paul II Catholic University of Lublin, Poland) followed with the question “Could We Have Been More Effective in

the Diagnosis and Treatment of Covid-19?” Based on statistical data, Professor Banach presented various scenarios for diagnostic and therapeutic outcomes during the COVID-19 pandemic, pointing to the need to register and monitor patients with symptoms of so-called long COVID, which would allow for better satisfaction of their health needs, as well as the collection of data on the effects of COVID-19.

Silvia Čapíková, Ján Mikas, and Mária Nováková (Comenius University and Slovak Medical University, Slovakia) discussed “Legal Protection of Healthcare Workers against Violence – Lessons from the Pandemic.” They argued that the COVID-19 pandemic exposed widespread violence and harassment against healthcare workers, revealing inadequate legal protection and state accountability, and concludes that national emergency laws and preparedness plans must explicitly codify safeguards, establish monitoring and redress mechanisms, and align with the WHO Pandemic Treaty to ensure the safety, dignity, and rights of healthcare personnel during future crises.

Sebastian Czechowicz (University of Łódź, Poland) presented “How Should Public Health Be Defined to Ensure It Receives Proper Legal Protection?” He argued that defining “public health” with conceptual precision is essential for its effective legal protection, especially in criminal law, since the COVID-19 pandemic exposed the inadequacy of *ad hoc* regulations and inconsistent interpretations; it calls for an interdisciplinary legal–medical framework to clearly delineate this collective good and strengthen its protection against future global health threats.

Igor Milinković (University of Banja Luka, Bosnia and Herzegovina) closed with “What’s Law Got to Do with It? Implementing a One Health Approach in National Legal Frameworks after COVID-19.” Professor Milinković explored how the One Health approach – linking human, animal, and environmental health – has become a core element of post-COVID-19 global health governance, analyzing its integration into the WHO Pandemic Agreement, EU law, and selected national legal systems, and concluding that embedding One Health principles in domestic legislation is essential for coherent, treaty-based preparedness and response to future health threats.

The final panel took the form of a discussion on “The Role of Local Authorities in Combating the Pandemic.”

Speakers – including hospital administrators and representatives of public authorities during COVID-19 – highlighted the crucial role of local authorities in implementing public health measures, ensuring communication with citizens, and coordinating local preparedness strategies. The panel discussion was moderated by Małgorzata Ganczar (The John Paul II Catholic University of Lublin, Poland).

The two-day conference demonstrated the intellectual maturity of CEE legal scholarship in addressing global health governance. Across all sessions, participants underlined the need for legal clarity, cross-sectoral cooperation, and ethical reflection.

Several cross-cutting themes emerged:

- the necessity of harmonizing emergency powers with constitutional guarantees;
- the integration of digitalization and AI regulation into health governance;
- and the role of One Health as a holistic paradigm bridging environmental, animal, and human health.

The discussions revealed both national diversity and shared regional experiences. The Lublin conference provided not only a comprehensive reflection on the legal and ethical legacies of COVID-19 but also a forward-looking roadmap for pandemic preparedness in Europe and beyond, in particular in view of the entry into force of the WHO Pandemic Agreement.