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## The national(ist) necropolitics of masks

Since the outbreak of COVID-19, the science of masks has become hotly debated by epidemiologists, public health officials and the public at large. An icon of rational hygienic modernity, the epidemic has made face masks key to the production of contemporary necro-politics, alongside practices of containment, surveillance and quarantine. Surgical masks and N95 respirators are the subject of international diplomacy and geopolitical tussles; consignments of masks are being diverted or impounded in transit as governments panic-buy protective gear for their strained medical systems. The positive effects of masking the general public remain contested. The World Health Organization advises that masks only be used by healthcare professionals, caretakers and the sick. Rejecting this risk-based approach, public authorities in Singapore, South Korea, Turkey and the USA recommend citizens to cover their mouth and nose in public. In Europe, masks are mandatory alongside other social distancing measures in Austria, Poland and the Czech and Slovak Republics.

As visible signifiers of disease, masks may in certain situations lead to the stigmatisation of their wearers. In other cultural contexts, wearing a mask is perceived as part of responsible citizenship and social etiquette. Some European politicians have sought to exploit such positive associations to invoke a sense of solidarity and civic duty among their citizens. In Slovakia, President Zuzanna Čaputová attends official events wearing colourful cloth masks, while Prime Minister Igor Matovič briefs the press in white masks decorated with a small Slovak flag. Such deliberate efforts to present masks as fashionable – and fashionably patriotic – hints at the current necro-political logics of masking. Marking out practices of masking as part of a wider moral imperative to protect the greater good, this logic also defines the content and boundaries of this greater good in the form of the national body politic.

Masks are boundary objects, mediating between ideas of contamination and containment, purity and pollutions, and life and death. Since the outbreak of COVID-19, however, they perform a new kind of boundary work: they demarcate and negotiate the relationship not only between the body and the body politic, the individual citizen and the national whole. In the hands of politicians, the political logic of masking reinforces other governmental practices – from the imposition of travel bans, the neglect of migrant populations and stigmatisation of certain minorities – in defining the permeable boundaries between nation and self, self and other from the invading virus.

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