We thank Morgenbladet for a very thoughtful article by Jon Kåre Time based on an interview he had with us (https://www.morgenbladet.no/aktuelt/2023/09/29/vitenskapen-kan-ha-blitt-en-trussel-mot-folkehelsen/). We appreciate that the article includes for balance some scathing criticism from professor Marc Lipsitch and a shorter mention to similar criticism by professor Devi Sridhar in The Guardian (https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2022/mar/24/scientists-wrong-covid-virus-experts). Both Lipsitch and Sridhar are brilliant, they have co-authored an aggressive pro-lockdown manifesto (https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736(20)32153-X/fulltext) and have massively utilized political advocacy and media and social media firepower during the pandemic. While Lipsitch urges with disdain that our work should be ignored, we urge for his work (both the scientific and the advocacy component) to be given full respect and full attention. It is important to understand with calm and dignity why such charismatic scientists contributed so massively to the COVID-19 fiasco and ignored almost everything we knew in epidemiology and public health when the pandemic hit. Moreover, we hope that Lipsitch will use his political advocacy firepower to make more prominent his message that schools should not have been closed so long and that we need openness about the origin of the virus. The slanderous piece by Sridhar has already been replied to at the Guardian (https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/mar/30/i-did-not-mock-those-who-were-worried-about-covid-19).

The article also mentions an implausible 30 million excess deaths estimate. One major proof about how unreliable pandemic data continue to be is that there is major residual debate even about how many people died worldwide. If this estimate were true, this would mean that the measures we took killed far more people than the virus itself. Excess deaths are probably much lower, but even if they are 10-15 million (a more plausible estimate), again deaths from the measures taken worldwide match and may even exceed deaths from the virus, as dissected in a peer-reviewed article co-authored by one of us (https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/eci.14008).

We agree with professor Oreskes and Dr Polidoro (https://www.morgenbladet.no/aktuelt/2023/09/29/vitenskapsdebatt-uaerlig-uvitenskapelig-og-urettferdig/) that in the USA (and elsewhere) there have long been organized efforts by various parties on weaponizing distrust and doubting science. We admire their work in highlighting this pervasive problem. However, this means that, to fight all these unethical monsters, first we should keep the highest ethical standards within science itself. We disagree with their view that science in the USA was not politicized. Ironically, they bring in support of their argument studies that show that Republicans have worse outcomes than Democrats, a type of highly-confounded analysis that clearly politicizes science for dubious reasons. Republicans and Democrats may differ in zillions of ways in factors that may influence health outcomes. What is bad is to lack education, access to health, social support, sufficient income, and access to reliable information; to be exposed to pollution and toxic chemicals; to be addicted to tobacco, opiates, or alcohol; or to live in circumstances that lead to obesity – not per se to belong to a specific political party. If, in a thought experiment, we could somehow turn all Republicans to Democrats but fix none of these deficiencies, health outcomes would continue to be as bad – or worse, since we have now added one-party totalitarianism. Moreover, such analyses and political party endorsements in scientific venues infuriate and alienate from science half the population (those most in need actually): they see science as a political enemy (https://www.nature.com/articles/s41562-023-01537-5). Oreskes and Polidoro are also clearly not in touch with current scientific evidence when they claim that scientists were not wrong when they insisted that social distancing, masks, and vaccines would curb infection. Sadly, we were terribly wrong about all these. In the long run, social distancing had minor benefits, if any, and, its extreme forms of lockdown had potentially major harms. Masks were shown to be most likely ineffective in the latest Cochrane review (https://www.cochrane.org/CD006207/ARI\_do-physical-measures-such-hand-washing-or-wearing-masks-stop-or-slow-down-spread-respiratory-viruses). And vaccines did save lives, but had little or no effectiveness specifically in curbing infection. Eventually, we could not use better words than Oreskes and Polidoro: “dishonesty and half-truths are, even when the purpose is good, no safe way to build trust."

We also want to thank professor Camilla Stoltenberg both for her thoughtful commentary on our interview (https://www.morgenbladet.no/aktuelt/2023/10/03/camilla-stoltenberg-et-for-svart-syn-pa-vitenskapen/) and for her public health leadership during the pandemic. Norway overall did very well during the pandemic. It even had a death *deficit* rather than excess deaths: age-adjusted deaths were 2% lower in 2020-2023 versus the 3 immediate pre-pandemic years when seasonal influenza was the dominant respiratory pathogen rather than SARS-CoV-2. The performance of Norway is almost as good as Sweden, which had the best performance among all European countries (3,5% lower age-adjusted deaths in 2020-2023 versus pre-pandemic years) (https://www.medrxiv.org/content/10.1101/2023.04.24.23289066v2). Conversely, the USA and the UK - where overconfident voices like Lipsitch and Sridhar were dominant and urged for ignoring and demonizing opposite views – had devastatingly high excess deaths.

We share with Stoltenberg a deep respect for science and would wish to share also her optimism, but we have major reservations. While trust in science runs high in the largely healthy and tolerant social environment of Norway, this is not true for the USA and many other countries. This sad evolution justifies skepticism and even pessimism about the future of both science and public health and even of democracy. Some want to turn their sight elsewhere, and yet many countries register double-digit surge in vaccine resistance and distrust in expertise. This cannot be divorced by scientists’ and institutions’ own mistakes. Instrumental self-defense and excess certainty can kill.

John Ioannidis and Andrea Saltelli