COVID-19's Implications for East European Security - discussion takeaways

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Summary

On 7 April 2020 the Minsk Dialogue Council on International Relations in cooperation with the Konrad Adenauer Foundation (Germany), the Eastern Europe Studies Centre (Lithuania), the Centre for Eurasian and European Studies at the Faculty of International Relations, BSU (Belarus) and the GCRF COMPASS project (United Kingdom) held an online discussion «The Pandemic Disruptor: COVID-19's implications for East European security». We present the key points of our speakers.

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Public health and security

The interconnectedness of public health and security has been discussed since the late 1990s. At a time, it was recognised that the rapid spread of infectious diseases requires new strategies in a wider security context. During the past couple of years some professionals in the health area, as well as international relations experts, analysed possible scenarios of a global pandemic. However, the global community was not ready to face COVID-19 and thus there is a necessity to analyse all of its dimensions and implications.

Health issues' impact on security is twofold:

- Direct impact – the effect infectious diseases have on the members of the armed forces: cases of infection among the personnel tend to diminish its operational readiness;

- Indirect impact lies in broader socio-economic consequences of pandemics.

Acceleration of geopolitical time

The main geopolitical effect of the COVID-19 is the acceleration of time: the process of transformation of the system of international relations, which began several years ago, will now be occurring much faster. The results of the transformation will be visible in a much more concentrated form than it would be the case without a coronavirus. However, unlike the aftermath of the great wars, the pandemic itself, most likely, will not cause any fundamental structural changes, but will aggravate previously existing problems and contradictions. Primarily, between the US and China. This means that the geopolitical tensions in the world after the pandemic will intensify. Although in different regions it will come about in different ways.

Importantly, the East European region is not located in the epicentre of the growing confrontation between Beijing and Washington. Both the US and China will be present in the region, yet their contest here will be diluted by the interests and potential of Russia and the EU member states. That means that instead of direct confrontation of big powers in Eastern Europe, we can expect increased manoeuvring by all regional actors. As a result, the field for regional arrangements will be quite broad.

Return of the state

One of the obvious effects of COVID-19 is the further strengthening and even certain revival of national governments. This is especially evident in the case of the EU.

The very fact that key actors are increasingly starting to behave in a unilateral way is a clear message to other, especially smaller, nations: it might be insufficient and even dangerous to largely rely on third parties when it comes to essential questions of security. Indeed, multilateralism (multi-vectored diplomacy) remains the best policy option for smaller states as it widens their opportunities and influence. However, given the prevalence of unilateral actions by larger states, it can lead to disappointment in the allies due to insufficient mutual consultation and support. Not to mention increasingly frequent unfriendly actions between formal allies.

Accordingly, we can see the tendency of the "Westfalisation" of international relations. *Inter alia*, its elements are the crisis of solidarity and the growth of radical right-wing ideas. That has implications for Eastern Europe, which can quickly find itself in conditions of total protectionism and resurgent interstate contradictions. Therefore, it is especially important to find mechanisms for maintaining and developing cooperation both in confronting the pandemic and on the traditional regional agenda.

The return of the state can also be seen in the increasing role of police and military personnel, as well as in the introduction of new regulatory constraints. Newly adopted legal restrictions might have an effect on the legal system after the end of the pandemic. Some analysts predict a "legal revolution," which will affect both established democracies and developing countries. However, at the same time, there is another tendency – the growth of social solidarity and self-organisation aimed at resolving specific local problems caused by the pandemic.

Global institutions

In fact, the pandemic tests the capabilities of international institutions to adapt to crisis situations. In line with the return of the state, we have witnessed a significant decrease in coordination between European governments. The very first response to COVID-19 within the EU was to close the borders. Certain competitiveness between national states in the beginning of the pandemic complicated anti-crisis cooperation. It serves as a reminder to pay special attention to nationalism and populism as these ideas might gain even more recognition amid the pandemic.

When it comes to the WHO capabilities, the main disadvantage revealed is the lack of political will by the member states to implement its non-binding decisions. Thus, we can expect certain reforms in the organisation after the pandemic ends.

Economic implications

Without any doubt, we will face a major economic slowdown and global recession as the result of quarantine implications on national economies, health-related spending and the disruption of global markets. Globalisation has indeed created great connectivity, yet, on the other hand, has exposed the vulnerabilities of all states, especially developing ones. The key lesson learned is the need to enhance sustainability through regional cooperation and self-reliance.

Another matter of concern is prioritising economy when it comes to public health. A strictly statistical approach to the coronavirus-related death rate can be perceived as a challenge to the moral values of the nations.

Military expenditures

Costly response to pandemics might affect the amount of defence spending in many countries. In case of Lithuania and, possibly, the other Baltic States, it is expected that defence expenditures will remain at the level of 2% of the GDPs, while the GDP itself

might go down nearly by 7%. Historically, pandemics were often accompanied by armed conflicts. If this pattern is preserved now, it may lead to an increase in defence spending as a precautionary measure. That pattern also applies to Eastern Europe.

We can expect negative consequences with regards to the arms control system as it will draw less political attention in the nearest future. There is no guarantee that disrupted confidence-building mechanisms (*e.g.* mutual inspections under arms control regimes) will be re-established after the end of the pandemic.

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