The World HandCOV'd: Russia and Eurasian Dilemmas

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Key takeaways

- The disruptive nature of the pandemic for Russia and the post-Soviet space should not be overestimated. Yet, it has served as a stress test by aggravating many of the previously vexed issues and their implications, which go well beyond national agenda.
- The pandemic has boosted the requirement for pragmatism and devaluated rhetoric that is not corroborated by practice.
- Russia will maintain all its core foreign policy priorities once the pandemic is over.
- Russia's crucial task for the post-COVID period is to prevent the chaotization and atomization of the post-Soviet space. Or otherwise, we might observe galloping uncertainty and unpredictability, in which multidirectional nationalism will serve as the determining driver, as well as the ideology of religious exclusivity.
- There is an urgent need to restart the Eurasian integration projects and enhance their practical efficiency and appeal.
- Russia will be focused on the idea of "harmonizing" Eurasia. In this context, the post-Soviet space will even gain in importance for Moscow.

Future historians will definitely christen the year 2020 as the worldwide onset of coronavirus. It seems like tons of research articles and expert reports on the impact of the pandemic on the global economy and international political processes have been published. However, it is quite obvious that with the focus having been shifted towards the global perspective, the processes taking place in individual countries and regions

appear to be falling out of sight. In the meantime, all of the conclusions drawn about the comprehensive implications of COVID-19 will remain somewhat schematic and generic without due consideration of their nuances and peculiarities.

How much have Russia and the post-Soviet space been modified by the coronavirus pandemic? Can we speculate about any new trends in Eurasia? And if so, what sort of consequences will they have for the countries of the South Caucasus, Central Asia, the European part of the CIS, Russia, its Western competitors (the U.S. and the EU), as well as China, whose growing international influence is increasingly becoming the subject of contentious debate?

To answer these questions, one needs to assess the degree of change in Eurasia brought about by the advent of COVID-19. Has the pandemic caused entirely new threats or exacerbated issues that have been in place for some time now? In the words of Russian analyst Dmitry Suslov, "the coronavirus pandemic does not nullify the primary trends in international relations, but acts as a powerful catalyst for them." It seems that this formula, which is applicable to the main tendencies in world politics, can be employed in the analysis of Eurasian processes before and after the onset of COVID-19.

Eurasia before the pandemic: a complex competition

Before 2020, the post-Soviet space was not the only one, but one of the key arenas of confrontation between Russia and the West. Russian operations in the South Caucasus in 2008, in Crimea and Donbass in 2014 were qualified by the U.S. and the EU as "geopolitical revisionism" that constitutes a threat not only in the context of the relationships between Moscow, Kyiv and Tbilisi, but also within the framework of pan-European security. In many ways, the Ukraine crisis consolidated the positions of the U.S. and EU in terms of the "deterrence of Russia." Integration projects initiated by Moscow (the Eurasian Economic Union, Collective Security Treaty Organization) were interpreted, *inter alia*, as attempts to "re-Sovietize" Eurasia in one form or another.

> Anyway, it would be wrong to reduce the formats of Eurasian competition to a mere remake of the Cold War. As soon as the former union republics became independent states, they outlined their own foreign policy interests, which often fail to coincide with the approaches of competing world powers.

For example, Georgia, which was granted a political declaration about its future NATO membership back in April 2008 (and became the only post-Soviet republic to hold a referendum on joining NATO that year), was the first state in the South Caucasus to sign

a free trade agreement (FTA) with China. Conversely, members of the CSTO and the EEU, that is, Russia's strategic allies, took an extremely cautious stance on the territorial integrity of Georgia and Ukraine. The two pillars of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, Russia and China, tend to divide on the prospects of the organization. For Moscow, it is a format that may evolve into a Eurasian alternative to NATO, primarily in terms of security, as long as it is given certain impetus. For Beijing, it is also a tool to promote China's economic interests. In Central Asia, too, we observed Moscow's specialized focus on security matters and Beijing's focus on economic issues, underpinned not least of all by significant investment resources.

Each of the post-Soviet countries sought its perfect pattern of engagement in various integration organizations, sometimes trying to combine the incompatible and find a certain balance that appeared to satisfy neither the West, nor Moscow. However, even once they found their place in, say, the EEU or CSTO, each of the member states of these organizations immediately encountered a dilemma: either national sovereignty or deeper integration. Not always was this choice unambiguous. In some countries (Moldova is the most striking example), severe political struggle domestically coincided with the search for the best possible foreign policy option.

COVID-19: a stress test for post-Soviet countries

Have these baseline conditions changed in 2020? The disruptive nature of the pandemic should not be overestimated. COVID-19 has never unearthed any contradictions within integration associations or collisions between national sovereignty and decision-making in the interests of international organizations. Aspirations of some states to minimize possible limitations on themselves while maximizing the benefits of integration are nothing new, either. The pandemic has caused no ethno-political conflicts in the South Caucasus, Donbas, and Transnistria or difficulties in cross-border relationships between Central Asian countries. Prior to the pandemic, there were (and there will remain after it) conflicts between external players struggling for influence in Eurasia as a whole and in some of its regions. It was not the virus that caused the complex processes of power transfers in Kazakhstan and Tajikistan, anti-government protests in Georgia, and the desire of some Kyrgyz elites to get back to the presidential model. COVID-19 was not the reason behind serious intra-elite schisms (concerning not only power, but also the foreign policy choice between European and Eurasian integration tracks) in Moldova and inefficiency of state institutions in Ukraine.

Many of the pressing problems that currently present serious risks to the CIS member states already occurred in their recent history. These include decreases in budget revenues due to falling energy prices, which is an extremely painful issue for Russia, as well as for Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, and Turkmenistan, and plummeting remittances from migrant workers coming from Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan, with their share in these countries' GDPs ranging from 20% to almost 40%. For example, the President of Azerbaijan Ilham Aliyev inaugurated the commencement of the "post-oil era" four years ago. In 2020, he reiterated the idea upon the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic.

> What has the pandemic become for Eurasian states then? Although it has exposed no new challenges, it has served as a kind of a stress test for them by aggravating many of the previously vexed points. At first thought they appear to relate mostly to socioeconomic and domestic policy matters, but in reality, their implications go well beyond national agenda.

For Central Asian countries, socioeconomic risks are directly connected with the problem of religious radicalization, which poses additional threats to Russia, China and the U.S. that have been involved in the unsuccessful Afghanistan stabilization campaign for many years. However, the solution to this problem is inseparable from Russia's domestic agenda when it comes to migrants from Central Asian states. The radical rejection of guest workers from that region (attributed to the contraction of the Russian labor market) and pushing them back to their historical homelands is fraught with destabilization in Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, which will boomerang Russia itself. But in the current labor market there are risks of growing xenophobic sentiment in Moscow and other Russian regions which have actively employed migrants. As a consequence, an effective balanced solution is called for.

For Georgia, COVID-induced travel and transit losses maximize the relevance of the normalization of its relations with Russia, as Russian visitors on the one hand and Russian labor market on the other can be of a great practical interest to Tbilisi. However, it is also obvious that Georgian political elites (both supporting the incumbents and those in opposition) are unwilling to make concessions concerning Abkhazia and South Ossetia, while Western partners, primarily the U.S., are openly jealous of attempts by the government of the allied country to diversify its foreign policy, let alone move away from the Euro-Atlantic consensus. Hence Washington's unprecedented (even for a strategic alliance with the U.S.) intervention in Georgian internal affairs. Suffice it to say that the memorandum of 8 March between representatives of the ruling party and the

opposition was mediated by U.S. Ambassador Kelly Degnan. In October 2020, the parliamentary election will be held in Georgia, the most significant electoral event of the past four years, and the recovery from the pandemic amidst the falling popularity of the government and external pressure from Washington becomes one of the key factors in the campaign.

Were there any domestic policy contradictions in Moldova, in which the main actors (President Igor Dodon and the Alliance of Pro-EU Parties) would clearly associate themselves with the choice in favor of the EU or Eurasian integration? Absolutely. However, the controversy over the Russian loan to curb the epidemic de facto provoked changes in the Constitutional Court and moved the issue of dual power in Moldova up the national agenda. Ahead of the upcoming direct presidential elections in 2020, the reliability of Chisinau's partners (the EU or Russia along with the EEU) in the context of coronavirus is crucial for all political forces in the country.

In Ukraine, the pandemic did not uncover, but once again emphasized the weakness of state institutions, which caused a major conflict between the central and municipal authorities over the advisability of the lockdown. Now that President Volodymyr Zelensky has lost much of his former popularity, demand for tougher rhetoric on Donbass, sometimes reminiscent of the speeches of Petro Poroshenko during the final year of his tenure, has become stronger. It is symbolic that the pandemic and quarantine restrictions did not stop the armed confrontation in the southeast of Ukraine.

In Armenia, the pandemic has made it easier for Nikol Pashinyan's Cabinet to establish tighter control over the unrecognized Nagorno-Karabakh Republic, which is likely to harden Yerevan's negotiating position rather than make it more willing to offer concessions.

Breaking away from the cliché and restarting the integration projects

The onset of the pandemic disrupted the stable political constructs and politicized clichés with respect to post-Soviet states. We have seen a bunch of varied methods to contain the threat, from quarantine and even curfews to the rejection of strict sanitary and epidemiological limitations for economic motives. At the same time, those countries that traditionally stand high in Freedom House's *Freedom in the World* rankings (Georgia and Kyrgyzstan) went all the way to the introduction of curfews, while Azerbaijan, Belarus and Uzbekistan with permanently low ranks of political freedoms never imposed any curfews or formalized quarantine measures in the form of an "emergency situation" or a "state of emergency". In the former case, it was about the

introduction of "special quarantine", and in the latter, recommendations of the national headquarters to combat the epidemic. In contrast, Georgia, which introduced not only a state of emergency, but also a curfew, subsequently outpaced neighboring Armenia in terms of lifting its quarantine restrictions.

> These distinct country differences notwithstanding, some common features have emerged in Eurasia as well. In general, the ideology of combat against coronavirus is based on mobilization rhetoric and nationalism, even in those cases where the involvement in integration projects remains highly relevant.

Asserting domestic economic and political interests is perceived as a more valuable cause than any alliance. Meanwhile, the pandemic has not brought rival countries any closer. Violations of ceasefire in Karabakh persisted (at the end of March, military incidents were reported to become more intense). The armed confrontation in Donbas did not stop, either. Moreover, there has not been a single suggestion that relations between Russia and Ukraine, Russia and Georgia, and Azerbaijan and Armenia will improve as soon as the pandemic is over. COVID-19 has not put an end to the competition of external players around Eurasia. The U.S. still sees Moscow as a "dangerous revisionist" and is not ready to listen to its arguments about Abkhazia, South Ossetia or Crimea.

In this context, Russia's crucial task for the post-COVID period is to prevent the chaotization and atomization of the post-Soviet space. The U.S., EU and China may temporarily pay less attantion to Eurasia due to both political developments (presidential elections in the U.S.) and efforts to make up for economic losses. However, even today, the idea of Moscow's rivals folding their cards and dropping out of the hand looks virtually unbelievable. As a consequence, it is important not to miss out on the withdrawal from the pandemic and the opportunities that will be opening up at that time.

If Russia loses its control of integration processes or fails to complete the projects that are currently underway, we will observe galloping uncertainty and unpredictability, in which multidirectional nationalism will serve as the determining driver (the ripening of subnationalist, "parochial" ideas and practices should not be ruled out), as well as the ideology of religious exclusivity. Another challenge for Russia that is deemed just as important is to prevent the archaization and degradation of post-Soviet countries and their transformation into resource regions that become battlegrounds of various powers.

Therefore, there is an urgent need to restart the Eurasian integration projects, enhance their practical efficiency and appeal. Because stiff competition with the world's leading actors is going to remain in place, not only critical work to expose NATO's plans and actions will matter, but also the formulation of a functional agenda for Moscow's partner states, both on a multilateral (as part of integration associations) and bilateral (for Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Azerbaijan) basis. At the same time, the quality of integration can and should become a priority over quantitative achievements. Perhaps more attention should be focused on special forms of engagement between allies within integration associations.

> The pandemic has boosted the requirement for pragmatism and devaluated rhetoric that is not corroborated by practice. It is therefore practical moves that will be more in demand, not abstract speculation about values whether in the European or in the Eurasian context.

This will probably serve as the main lesson to learn as soon as the world is through with the pandemic.

Russia after the pandemic: no illusions

Russia will maintain all its core foreign policy priorities once the pandemic is over. Most important among them is the aspiration for strengthened influence in Eurasia, which should help Moscow in promoting its vision of security at the regional and international levels. An alliance-free inclusive model, whereby the U.S. and its allies had no "golden share", would be ideal for Russia. However, such a model can hardly be achieved as long as Moscow is unable to resolve its multiple differences within the post-Soviet groupings, as well as in relations with Eurasian "heavyweights" (from China and India to Turkey and Iran).

Hence, Russia will be focused on the idea of "harmonizing" Eurasia. In this context, the post-Soviet space will even gain in importance for Moscow. Russia will abstain from breaking the status quo and will instead prefer predictability. Tough reactions to developments in its *near abroad* may still take place, both in case the epidemiological situation worsens and if, on the contrary, it improves considerably. But only where and when Russia's competitors and opponents try undermining the existing balance. For example, if Ukraine decides to overtake the control of the state border by force, Moscow will in all likelihood respond immediately, coronavirus notwithstanding.

The Russian leadership seems not to have any illusions that the pandemic will become a turning point in international relations and will be conducive to any breakthroughs (say, the abolition of sanctions) in its relations with the West. Any serious discussions in Russian-American relations, both on strategic and specific current matters, will be postponed until after the U.S. presidential campaign is over, which has some positive implications for Moscow. The internal agenda, aggravated by the coronavirus, will be distracting the American leadership from Eurasian affairs, which are of crucial importance for Russia. Moreover, growing U.S.-Chinese confrontation will likely give Russia a "pause" for revisiting its own objectives, aims and resources. At the same time, Moscow will do everything possible in order to make its bilateral relations with Western nations more pragmatic. The Italian case (Moscow's humanitarian aid to Rome during the pandemic) might be seen as a possible pattern for other bilateral relations.

The pandemic of the coronavirus has created some governance problems inside Russia. The vertical of power had to be diversified so that to incorporate regional differences in reacting to COVID-19. But this has not led to a collapse or mass protests, which some of Moscow's competitors seemed to hope for. Thus, this margin of safety can also benefit Russia's foreign policy. In this respect, it will be crucial for Russia to preserve the margin of safety under the conditions of extreme uncertainty as to the future of COVID-19.

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