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VIRUS COVID-19 SURVEILLANCE IRAN SECURITY PARTNERS RUSSIA CYBER NATO UNITED STATES COMMUNICATIONS

NEW THREATS

HUMAN RIGHTS INFODEMIC STATES INFORMATION UKRAINE CRISIS PANDEMIC RESPONSE NUCLEAR VIRUS CHINA JOINT EFFORTS SPACE

- **PANDEMIC RESPONSE**
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THREATS TO INTERNATIONAL SECURITY: WHAT CAN COME OUT OF THE STRATEGIES OF GREAT POWERS?

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Frequently international threats result from the way states define their interests and aims – be it conflicts caused by the great powers' competition or reluctance to cooperate in tackling persisting global challenges like the climate change or emerging ones like the current pandemic. In this paper, we analyse the latest strategic documents of the key international security players – five permanent UN Security Council members (the USA, China, Russia, the United Kingdom, and France) and G4 countries (Germany, Japan, India, and Brazil). The authors draw on this analysis to identify threats to international security that come from the stated intentions of the most powerful nations.

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic yet once again put governments across the entire planet to test. The previous sudden success of ISIS information and military campaigns, as well as many other emerging or presumptive threats coming from terrorist groups, forced the power-holders to rethink their approaches to recognising possible sources of threats and preventing them. They started to look beyond countries and territories. Cyberattacks and leaks of classified information reassured them in this decision, as the danger may come from anywhere and cause significant disruptions in government operations. A tiny virus, locking millions at home and yet finding ways to take hundreds of thousands of lives, is even more negligent of borders and political regimes.

This trend can be clearly seen in security-related texts produced by governments. In their speeches, countries' and international organisations' leaders talk about the interconnected world and the threats' becoming increasingly global. National security and foreign policy strategies are in the same framework. Global threats, such as climate change, pandemics, terrorism, and the like, get a large share of space in their texts. Being centred on the national interests of the countries, such strategic documents take these explicit challenges to the safety and well-being of their citizens as the most important focus of their policies.

While the significance of the abovementioned perils should by no means be diminished, the analysis of the potential global threats should go beyond those on the surface. With this paper being written in the midst of a pandemic, it may seem ironic to claim that the realisation of threats like these is highly unlikely (except for the climate change, which requires immediate and coordinated

reaction). Even terrorist attacks are, to some extent, "black swans" with enormously high impact (followed by extensive media coverage) but low probability. The threats coming from assertive behaviour of the nations across the world are, on the contrary, happening daily. Attempts of one country to influence the other(s) politically, economically, diplomatically, and even militarily are taking place every day and may cause immediate danger.[1]

> **While some states' intentions remain latent, a significant part of them is actually quite explicitly stated in their strategic documents (e.g., foreign policy concepts, national security doctrines), which can be used to derive the course of action that a state is most likely to pursue in the future**

Assertive behaviour of countries can be identified in a number of ways. While some states' intentions remain latent, a significant part of them is actually quite explicitly stated in their strategic documents (e.g., foreign policy concepts, national security doctrines), which can be used to derive the course of action that a state is most likely to pursue in the future, serving as either a cause or a solution to an emerging/existing threat. National security, defence, and foreign policy doctrines cannot be an exhaustive source of such potentially assertive actions, but they are public statements that have an evident

political purpose to articulate a country's perspectives.[2] They are externally oriented, as the government's focus, selected tone, and choice of words, etc. can serve as a reference for policy-makers both at home and abroad.

The scope of this study is limited to the text analysis of the latest strategic documents of the states with a substantial impact on international security – the five permanent members of the UN Security Council (the USA, China, Russia, the United Kingdom, France) and G4 countries (Germany, Japan, India, and Brazil). The authors draw on this analysis to identify the threats to international security that come from the stated intentions of these most powerful nations. We look beyond the surface risks and challenges described almost identically by these countries and attempt to find the sources of possible assertive behaviour in any of the domains – political, economic, informational, diplomatic, or military. These intentions are not plentiful across the documents but signify the distinct interests and concerns that the states pay special attention to. We will first provide general remarks on the distinct features of the security and defence documents of each of the abovementioned states, followed by reflections on general trends.

Analysis of Strategic Documents

National security strategy (NSS) documents of **Brazil**[3] are written on the premise that the conflicts of today and tomorrow are drastically different from those of the past. The world is unlikely to face yet another great war, but the lesser scale does not necessarily mean smaller scope. The conflicts will still

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1   S. De Spiegeleire, *From Assertiveness to Aggression: 2014 as a Watershed Year for Russian Foreign and Security Policy*, "HCSS StratMon", Hague Centre for Strategic Studies, 2015 [https://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep12566.1].

2   C. McKeon, *Contrasting Narratives: A Comparative Study of European and North American National Security Strategies*, "Rethinking Security", March 2018 [https://rethinkingsecurityorguk.files.wordpress.com/2018/03/contrasting-narratives-march-2018.pdf].

3   *Política Nacional de Defesa e a Estratégia Nacional de Defesa*, Ministério da Defesa, 2020 [https://www.gov.br/defesa/pt-br/assuntos/copy_of_estado-e-defesa/estrategia-nacional-de-defesa].

revolve around borders and economic tensions, with natural resources being the most probable cause. While the world lacks these resources already, with more severe shortage to come, South America still has plenty of them, and that could be a source of a potential threat to Brazil. It is especially significant concerning the Brazilian Amazon, over which Brazil will reaffirm its sovereignty unconditionally. Otherwise, the NSS is written in very broad strokes, and such threats as terrorism or pandemics are mentioned quite vaguely. The view that Brazil has no real enemies still prevails.

In its primary national security documents, **China**[4] unambiguously proclaims all the great powers as challengers. Although explicitly the country emphasises the desire to cooperate, it is impossible to overlook how hard it is trying to flex its muscles simultaneously. China asserts its undivided right to resolve its issues with Taiwan – preferably by political means, but also by force if needed. The same goes for Hong Kong. In both cases, China firmly warns that any possible intrusion from "external forces" may also be answered by forceful means.

A few things are worth mentioning. First, quite an extensive subsection goes deep into describing patrolling and military exercises, emphasising such activities in the East and South China Seas. Second, much attention is devoted to safeguarding the borders. The latter does not necessarily imply, at least not in all cases, any intent to redraw them. But along with such running themes as self-sufficiency and great military and economic power, as well as an assertion to settle all internal issues independently, it

seems like a warning to other great powers not to meddle with China's interests, or else the consequences will be severe. In general, this document is a unique combination of cooperative spirit on the surface, assertive comments, and even explicitly drawn lines that should not be crossed, with quite a defensive tone overall. China goes into detail explaining its stance and how it is "forced" to behave in certain ways far more frequently than other countries do in their documents, and this also cannot go unnoticed.

The **French** national security strategy[5], for the most part, follows the general patterns of security strategy documents of the EU countries. The focus is on the mutual responsibility of the EU members for defeating terrorism and safeguarding Europe from hybrid threats, as well as sanctioning and deterring perpetrators of disruption to the international order. There is, however, one domain where the assertiveness is barely hidden: France's unabashed interest in retaining influence over the former colonies in Sub-Saharan Africa and the Sahel. It comes as no surprise given the economic importance of the region and many expatriates and citizens with dual nationalities (and, more broadly, the francophone communities that France is also determined to protect). The means to this end vary in the degree of assertiveness but go as far as bilateral defence agreements allowing France to deploy its troops in a country whenever it finds its interests endangered. In general, the right to both unilateral military intervention and defence is mentioned in several places across the document, which may indicate a potential source of assertive behaviour.

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4   *China and the World in the New Era*, State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China, 2019 [http://english.www.gov.cn/archive/whitepaper/201909/27/content_WS5d8d80f9c6d0bcf8c4c142ef.html]; *China's National Defense in the New Era,* State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China, 2019 [http://english.www.gov.cn/archive/whitepaper/201907/24/content_WS5d3941ddc6d08408f502283d.html].

5   *Defence and National Security Strategic Review*, Government of the French Republic, 2017 [https://www.defense.gouv.fr/layout/set/popup/content/download/520198/8733095/version/2/file/DEFENCE+AND+NATIONAL+SECURITY+STRATEGIC+REVIEW+2017.pdf].

Germany's national security strategy[6] starts from redefining the essence of a threat per se – in contemporary society, it should not be limited to the absence of war. Hence, the citizens' security should be treated as a multifaceted phenomenon, and the country must prepare to face possible challenges. A large share of those will be economic. Germany clearly identifies two regions with emerging economies (Asia and Latin America) as potential competitors that will overtake the German economy in volume. Although no specific actions in this regard are mentioned, the assertive tone is quite apparent. Another threat to international security and to Germany, in particular, is the behaviour of Russia. The document avoids going into details on other potential hotspots but elaborates widely on the risks brought about by the recent events in Ukraine, claiming that "Russia is openly calling the European peace order into question." While the statements remain quite diplomatically trite, the acknowledgment and persistent mentions of Russia as a threat in many instances throughout the document may signify a case worth exploring further.

India's national security strategy[7] is, for the most part, very chequered and rarely utilises any explicitly coercive wording. The proclaimed attitudes are highly cooperative, and even India's own national policies are often criticised, which is quite uncommon for the documents of this kind. The only major exception is Pakistan, which is regarded as the most overt threat. Despite the attempts to resolve the conflict through diplomatic and political means, the risk of direct military confrontation remains high. India goes as far as to claim a right to unilateral military intervention to neutralise terror groups that Pakistan hosts. While causing much distress with its growing military presence and influence in South Asia, China is viewed as the primary challenger mostly in the economic domain. The growing influence of an already mighty neighbour is regarded as a definite threat, and scepticism over possible trading or other partnerships is clearly articulated. It is once again atypical for security strategies, known for plentiful instances of reverence, even towards the most likely foes.

Japan's national security strategy[8] is exceptionally reserved. China and North Korea are exposed as the main sources of risk, but no concrete measures to counter them are named. It ought to be noted that the NSS has not been reviewed or updated since 2013, but there are other more recent defence and security documents, of which the 2018 National Defence Program Guidelines is the most relevant to our analysis.[9] Suffice it to say that it is also much chequered, albeit more concerned about the emerging threats and uncertainties as well as the potential need to defend against more powerful adversaries. Russia is added to the overview of risk-generating countries, although the wording is somewhat blurry. Similar to the 2013 NSS, special attention is paid to the cooperation with the US, which is seen as a central pillar of Japanese security, perhaps even more so than the national military.

6   *White Paper on German Security Policy and The Future of Bundeswehr*, Federal Government, 2016 [https://issat.dcaf.ch/download/111704/2027268/2016].

7   *India's National Security Strategy*, Government of India, 2019 [https://manifesto.inc.in/pdf/national_security_strategy_gen_hooda.pdf].

8   *National Security Strategy*, Cabinet of Japan, 2013 [http://www.kantei.go.jp/foreign/96_abe/documents/2013/__icsFiles/afieldfile/2013/12/17/NSS.pdf].

9   *National Defense Program Guidelines*, Cabinet of Japan, 2018 [https://www.mod.go.jp/j/approach/agenda/guideline/2019/pdf/20181218_e.pdf].

Russia's NSS documents[10] closely resemble the United States of America's one in their quite explicit listing of potential threats to international security. While other countries are more abstract in this regard, talking mostly about common challenges such as terrorism or proliferation of weapons of mass destruction with relatively rare mentions of specific risks, Russia, on the contrary, starts by expressing its desire to increase its dominance in the world and goes on describing very concrete actions that it will take and which can serve as sources of assertive behaviour.

These include the support of Abkhazia and South Ossetia as independent nations, and direct opposition to "ex-territorial activities of the US" and further eastward expansion of NATO. Such behaviour is assertive in the sense that Russia uses both hard and soft power to ensure that its influence over the neighbouring territories remains strong. As the recent history clearly illustrates, such a stance can be very easily turned from assertiveness to aggression.[11] The documents pay particular attention also to the eastern borders of Russia, as those are in close proximity to several unstable or potentially threatening territories. Ukraine is mentioned using negative rhetoric (anti-constitutional riot, open support from the West for radical solutions for internal conflict, etc.). No specific actions were mentioned in this context, but the events as a whole are framed as being entirely anti-Russian. Furthermore, the documents express a clear intention to further develop the Collective Security Treaty Organisation and transform it into a full-fledged military union, providing a capable alternative to the existing ones.

The **United Kingdom's NSS**[12] places a strong emphasis on soft power and spreading British values as an efficient mode of deterrence of potential adversaries. It will be achieved through an increase in financing of diplomatic services, deepening of expertise on the regions that may prove risky (Russia, China, Arab nations), target awards (i.e., fellowships) for highly skilled individuals to study in the UK, expanding and improving the services of the British Council, the BBC World Service, and the like. The general tone of the document is quite similar to that of the USA – nationalistic and from a power stance. Like many other countries, the UK mentions Russia as an immediate threat to Europe and the world. Still, it places less emphasis on it than, for instance, Germany does, listing Russia's recent actions among others, such as Syria, Iraq, China.

The National Security Strategy of the **United States of America**[13] is arguably the most overtly assertive document of all in this review, which may be attributed to a number of factors, but particularly to the Republican Party's outlook on international policy. The general tone is borderline nationalistic, with rich praises for America's exceptionalism

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10 *В. Путин, Концепция внешней политики Российской Федерации (утверждена Президентом Российской Федерации В. В. Путиным 30 ноября 2016 г.) (Concept of Foreign Policy of the Russian Federation, approved by the President of the Russian Federation V. V. Putin on 30 November 2016)*, President of the Russian Federation, 2016 [http://kremlin.ru/acts/bank/41451]; *Указ Президента Российской Федерации от 31 декабря 2015 года "О Стратегии национальной безопасности Российской Федерации" (Decree of the President of the Russian Federation from 31 December 2015 On the Strategy of National Security of the Russian Federation)*, Pub. L. No. 683, 2015 [http://kremlin.ru/acts/bank/40391/page/1].

11 De Spiegeleire, n1.

12 *National Security Strategy and Strategic Defence and Security Review 2015: A Secure and Prosperous United Kingdom*, Great Britain, 2015 [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/478933/52309_Cm_9161_NSS_SD_Review_web_only.pdf].

13 *National Security Strategy of the United States of America*, White House, 2017 [https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/NSS-Final-12-18-2017-0905.pdf].

and reprehension of its many rivals and enemies throughout most of the text. Many of the stated intentions are quite vague but coercive in nature, even towards the closest allies in the EU (enforcing fair trade and greater dedication to collective security). Also very noticeable is the emphasis on unilateral action. Although acknowledging the importance of cooperation, the US is ready to single-handedly take any steps it assumes necessary to pursue its interests, be it economic measures (most noticeably exemplified by the ongoing trade war with China) or use of coercive force (as demonstrated by the increasing tensions with Iran, so far having culminated in the takedown of Iranian general Qasem Soleimani in January of this year). Another distinct feature of the United States' NSS is the strong anti-immigration sentiment, which comes along with the promises of impenetrable borders and strict law enforcement. Nevertheless, the US is willing to expand its global influence via soft power means.

General Trends

Having described the specific interests and assertive behaviours through which the great powers project their might, we would like to shift focus to more general trends and patterns. Most of the NSSs cover a vast but similar set of topics and domains; thus, here we will try to underline the issues that we find particularly important and/or distressing.

The most common and general threats lie on the surface and are present across the documents. First, great powers are much more overt in their assertive and coercive claims directed towards smaller states than ones of their own size. While, say, the regimes of North Korea and Iran are universally condemned and treated as

adversaries, the attitude towards Russia and China is leaning towards more neutral tones. In some particular cases, the rhetoric used gravitates to more cooperation than deterrence and sanctioning. This softer and more ambiguous stance towards some of the violators of the international order and human rights leaves them with the latitude to sustain their aggressive foreign and domestic policies.

> *great powers are much more overt in their assertive and coercive claims directed towards smaller states than ones of their own size*

Second, weapons of mass destruction remain one of the most menacing issues breeding mutual distrust and new insecurities. All states in the list (except Japan for apparent reasons, but including Germany through NATO) justify the possession of nuclear arsenals as the means necessary to ensure their security, and at the same time vow to counter proliferation on a global scale. While uncertainties, distrust, and existence of WMDs fuel each other, the gravest dangers persist, and a scenario in which a terrorist group gains access to them remains plausible (which is also recognised by the documents, making them even more internally controversial in this regard).

The boundaries of space policy are a less pronounced issue, but just as important. They remain largely undefined for all states.[14] All national strategic documents in this review claim rights for unrestricted access to outer space for purposes such as exploration, commerce, and defence. The

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14 Although quite a few treaties have been signed in this domain since the 1960s, they can barely catch up with the advance in technology and the global power dynamics.

latter category is especially troubling and simultaneously hazy. It encompasses many phenomena, including reconnaissance satellites, anti-satellite and space-to-Earth weaponry. Very few countries speak out openly against the militarisation of outer space, and those that do (most notably Russia) may do so out of fear of being the underdogs in deploying such systems. Global tensions between the great powers, therefore, increasingly threaten to turn the space race into an arms race.

The things that the major powers' NSS are silent or not verbose about are just as important. When the world was caught off guard with the COVID-19 pandemic, it became evident that the prospects of such an outbreak had not been considered seriously enough by any of the powerful international actors. Most, though not all, documents under scrutiny mentioned the threat of pandemics, either caused by natural reasons or artificially manufactured. The NSS of the US, for instance, mentions SARS and Ebola outbreaks as the omen of future global epidemics. These sections, however, are commonplace and extremely short, which clearly indicates their low priority.

The UK goes further, elaborating in more detail both the risks from a natural disease outbreak and the use of biomaterials for a directed attack. But overall, the NSSs of great powers serve as another proof of inability to develop any joint strategy to prevent or reduce the consequences of biological threats, despite the many warnings from the scientific community.

This poses a question of how many other potential dangers are overlooked in these powerful nations' agendas. The ones that come to mind immediately are climate change, degradation of the environment, and exhaustion of natural resources. Most countries mention them as serious issues to be dealt with swiftly and in cooperation. Suffice it to say, these document sections are not any longer or more specific than those on pandemics.

The stances of Russia and the United States deserve special attention. Russia claims that climate change, albeit posing severe risks to all of humanity, is used as an instrument of political and economic coercion against it.[15] The US warns that environmental regulations are secondary to economic freedom, and will not be tolerated if they put excessive restraints on industries.[16] In essence, these two cases are just the most overt examples of the states' unwillingness to sacrifice short- to medium-term interests in favour of sustainability, especially if that implies even a minuscule restriction on their sovereignty.

> **When the world was caught off guard with the COVID-19 pandemic, it became evident that the prospects of such an outbreak had not been considered seriously enough by any of the powerful international actors**

Yet the explicit dangers should not hinder the challenges that are not framed as such but serve as a source of assertive action of a country. While being mostly veiled by other statements and rarely clearly phrased, these threats have a significantly higher probability rate, as they describe the actions that a country might take as retaliation against the "other side". The struggle against other "big" global threats has been

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15 Putin, n10.

16 *National Security Strategy*, n13.

ongoing for years and did not succeed in preventing the tensions between the states, these tensions being economic (trade wars) or even open small-scale armed conflicts. And those are also explicitly stated in the documents, quite clearly marking potential friends and foes.

Great powers claim rights, and sometimes even express explicit dedication to unilateral actions. Multilateral institutions, such as the UN, will remain largely ineffective. Cooperation against global threats will be limited (pandemics, climate change, terrorism, air pollution, data regulation, space). This can only further exacerbate those issues, as great powers often see each other as main threats, which can become a self-fulfilling prophecy. Several possible flashpoints can lead to a direct confrontation that includes global powers – Taiwan, Hong Kong, South China Sea, and India–Pakistan.

Another hotspot of assertiveness (and the events of the past months serve as a proof) can be found by examining further the competition/conflict between China and the West in a broad sense, mostly represented by the US. Moreover, not only the immediate neighbours are quite frightened by the rise of China, and might be willing to undertake some assertive actions (most likely in the economic domain) to confront Beijing, but also the EU members that regard this country as a serious competitor.

Conclusions

National security strategies are documents written in a very thought-through tone and marked by a deliberate choice of every word. Thus, they should by no means be treated as a directory for future actions. These documents are quite similar in their more general parts, recognising the common and well-known global threats such as terrorism, climate change, and the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, and expressing a clear intention to join international coalition in attempting to tackle them.

Nevertheless, careful consideration of the countries mentioned in the documents, the tone used to describe relationships with them, and interests that a country openly claims to pursue, all taken together, can be used to identify potential sources of assertive behaviour in diplomatic, economic, and military domains, as well as the dangerous blind spots in the state policies. In some documents, the country's desire to achieve a certain objective is expressed clearly, while in others, it is obscured by carefully weighed diplomatic wordings. But at any rate, the threats that can be derived from some documents are more immediate, clear, and significant; thus, they should not be ignored.

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INTERNATIONAL POLITICS – A PERIL FOR INTERNATIONAL SECURITY? WHAT SHAPED THE COVID-19 CRISIS

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The narrative around the COVID-19 pandemic is significantly focused on its future implications. This article, however, explores the pandemic retrospectively. It does so by giving an account of the way the COVID-19 crisis was shaped from the very beginning to understand the drivers behind some of the nowadays' national, regional, and international issues and what can be anticipated from the world's leading actors beyond the crisis. China, the European Union, and the United States, among the front-liners of the pandemic and bearers of authority in international politics, are central to this discussion[1].

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic cannot be regarded as purely a health issue. Since the onset, it has affected more than 21 million people across 215 countries and territories[2]. But the novel coronavirus also unsettled the institutionally endowed international powers: China, the European Union, and the United States. These actors could have pre-empted the amplitude of the soon-turned pandemic, at least at the regional level. However, the politicisation of the virus early on has played a major role in the development of the crisis. As it appears now, the virus and the pandemic are of a much wider meaning for these three actors. In China's case, it was defined significantly by its domestic politics, but even more so by its international agenda. For the EU, the matter was shaped by, and did shape in turn, its regional affairs

and international politics equally. In the US, the pandemic was defined substantially in terms of domestic politics, with occasional references to its foreign policy. Despite having different backgrounds, these actors' responses to the virus were detrimental for international security and not reassuring for the international environment. Their fault was possibly in harbouring internal isolationism on political grounds.

How Political Approaches Shaped a Public Health Issue

The Chinese case

China was confronted with the novel coronavirus at a time of insecurity and political ambition. President Xi Jinping's policies on power centralisation, censorship, acts of human rights infringements, and

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1   The analysis examines the facts that took place prior to August 15, 2020.

2   *WHO Coronavirus Disease (COVID-19) Dashboard*, World Health Organization, 15 August 2020 [https://covid19.who.int/ access: 15 August 2020].

heavy investment in multilateralism and foreign partnerships have shaped a governance model far from being unanimously endorsed at home or appealing to Western powers[3]. This is why China continued to seek domestic order, both locally and nationally, and an uninterrupted advancement of the country in international politics, especially with the new threat in sight.

The outbreak in Wuhan, province of Hubei, reported in December 2019, was first approached with the intent to contain the existence of the problem, rather than contain the virus itself. Local authorities had suppressed the information and warnings coming from the medical community about the virus, which had "severely disturbed the social order"[4]. Even after notifying the World Health Organisation about the outbreak, the government resumed the tactic, contributing to delays/censorship in public and media communication about the threat[5], delays in confirming human-to-human transmission[6], ordering laboratories to destroy samples of the virus, or reprimanding doctors and whistle-blowers[7].

The government's coronavirus narrative, however, has pledged transparency and responsibility. The country's official timeline of COVID-19 portrays the authorities as quick to inform the public about safety measures, release briefings, establish guidelines on early discovery, diagnosis, and quarantine, identify the virus, and regularly inform the international community, all in early January[8].

The authorities' belated response to the already manifesting consequences of the virus discredited the narrative. Only on 20 January did President Xi declare a national mobilisation, followed by a lockdown in Wuhan and Hubei[9]. But amid the increase in cases, public criticism, and concern about the virus, the authorities had to politically grasp the issue and show they were doing the best they could, with President Xi in command. The mobilisation was striking and aggressive: rapid testing, quickly built hospitals, cut-off transportation, a contained population under a wide-mandated lockdown, and an across-the-country surveillance[10] facilitated by contact-tracing apps and facial recognition[11]. Political-

3   M. Pei, *China's Coming Upheaval*, "Foreign Affairs", May/June 2020
    [https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/2020-04-03/chinas-coming-upheaval access: 12 July 2020].

4   *Coronavirus: What Did China Do About Early Outbreak?*, "BBC", 9 June 2020
    [https://www.bbc.com/news/world-52573137 access: 25 June 2020].

5   S. Cook, *China Media Bulletin: Coronavirus-era Repression, Propaganda, Censorship, Surveillance and More*, "China Media Bulletin" 142, Freedom House, March 2020
    [https://freedomhouse.org/report/china-media-bulletin/2020/china-media-bulletin-coronavirus-era-repression-propaganda#A3 access: 25 June 2020].

6   BBC, n4.

7   K. Gilsinan, *How China Is Planning to Win Back the World*, "The Atlantic", 28 May 2020
    [https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2020/05/china-disinformation-propaganda-united-states-xi-jinping/612085/ access: 25 June 2020].

8   *China Publishes Timeline on COVID-19 Information Sharing*, Int'l Cooperation, "Xinhuanet", 6 April 2020
    [http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2020-04/06/c_138951662.htm access: 25 June 2020].

9   J. P. Cabestan, *China's Battle with Coronavirus: Possible Geopolitical Gains and Real Challenges*, "Aljazeera Centre for Studies", 19 April 2020
    [https://studies.aljazeera.net/en/reports/china%E2%80%99s-battle-coronavirus-possible-geopolitical-gains-and-real-challenges access: 25 June 2020].

10 H. Brueck, A. M. Miller, S. Feder, *China Took at Least 12 Strict Measures to Control the Coronavirus*, "Business Insider", 24 March 2020
    [https://www.businessinsider.com/chinas-coronavirus-quarantines-other-countries-arent-ready-2020-3 access: 25 June 2020].

11 Cook, n5.

oriented decisions were taken, too: new party chiefs for Wuhan, new censorship rules on the media,[12] and underreporting of cases[13], arguably to stifle criticism and downplay the damage, coupled with domestic, pacifying propaganda, ran by state media, on "people's war", heroic medical workers, and Chinese people[14].

China has evidently adapted its political response, more so than the public health approach, as the issue evolved. It was first a non-problematic China, turned into an efficient China, ultimately championing with a resolution of the crisis owed to its citizens. The approach was especially critical in the midst of public and party pressure, doubting Xi's leadership, and in anticipation of a difficult economic recovery affecting the working class, therefore the public's support for the leadership[15]. But the country's authorities had also initially isolated themselves from the issue, leaving the virus among its citizens, and facilitating both the domestic and international spread of COVID-19[16]. By concealing the country's experience, China also, potentially, denied a timely and clear understanding of the virus to the rest of the world.

The World Health Organisation, responsible for the assessment of COVID-19, has played a contentious and unclear part in the crisis. It has been criticised for biased actions owed to political links with China[17]. Others claimed that the WHO was obstructed early on from accessing information about the virus or patient cases[18]. But the WHO director-general's statements on transparency, timely cooperation, record identification, and containment measures attributed to China seem to counter the latter claim[19].

The fact is, the organisation had difficulties in evaluating the situation[20] and was somewhat ambivalent in its assessments. First, it argued against travel restrictions in late January, as countries were issuing them against China[21], and later claimed a quite successful containment of the virus, with very few cases around the world[22]. Soon, the narrative changed to calls for countries to "intensify preparedness", criticism towards them not being prepared to adopt China's

12 Pei, n3.

13 Cabestan, n9.

14 J. C. Weiss, *How Coronavirus Changes the Political Outlook in China and the U.S.*, "The Washington Post", 23 April 2020 [https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2020/04/23/how-coronavirus-changes-political-outlook-china-us/ access: 26 June 2020]; see also Cabestan, n9.

15 Cabestan, n9.

16 J. Wu, W. Cai, D. Watkins, J. Glanz, *How the Virus Got out*, "The New York Times", 22 March 2020 [https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2020/03/22/world/coronavirus-spread.html access: 26 June 2020].

17 Cabestan, n9.

18 *How China Blocked WHO and Chinese Scientists Early in Coronavirus Outbreak*, "NBC News", 2 June 2020 [https://www.nbcnews.com/health/health-news/how-china-blocked-who-chinese-scientists-early-coronavirus-outbreak-n1222246 access: 26 June 2020].

19 *Coronavirus 12 February, 2020 Speaker Key*, World Health Organization, 12 February 2020 [https://www.who.int/docs/default-source/coronaviruste/transcripts/who-audio-emergencies-coronavirus-full-press-conference-12feb2020-final.pdf?sfvrsn=ef1ba2bf_2 access: 26 June 2020]; *WHO, China Leaders Discuss Next Steps in Battle Against Coronavirus Outbreak*, World Health Organization, 28 January 2020 [https://www.who.int/news-room/detail/28-01-2020-who-china-leaders-discuss-next-steps-in-battle-against-coronavirus-outbreak access: 26 June 2020].

20 *Timeline of WHO's Response to COVID-19*, World Health Organization, 29 June 2020 [https://www.who.int/news-room/detail/29-06-2020-covidtimeline access: 7 July 2020].

21 *Coronavirus: US and Australia Close Borders to Chinese Arrivals*, "BBC", 1 February 2020 [https://www.bbc.com/news/world-51338899 access: 7 July 2020].

22 World Health Organization, n19.

measures, and concerns for the level of spread, severity, and inaction of countries, as it declared COVID-19 a pandemic, on 11 March[23]. Whether or not China affected the performance of the WHO, this agency, with its international representation, was not necessarily entirely neutral[24] and on top of the novel coronavirus. But this was the response that largely explained the crisis to the rest of the world.

> **" A constructed image about the crisis through domestic propaganda or state control of the media was, in turn, crucial for maintaining the party and the leadership's power**

China's domestic and foreign actions, driven by President Xi, revolve around governance of power and image. The political containment, followed by prompt tackling of the virus in China, aimed at the maintaining/assertion of power, which created a certain image of China. A constructed image about the crisis through domestic propaganda or state control of the media was, in turn, crucial for maintaining the party and the leadership's power. China employs the tactic similarly at the international level, whether it is the Belt and Road Initiative (e.g. in Africa), the strategic engagement with certain European countries (e.g. 17+1

discussions), or the tight cooperation with a multilateral platform, the WHO, for its own political agenda. Within the COVID-19 pandemic, China used international aid and propaganda for self-empowerment and the disempowerment of other actors – the EU or the US – initiated right as the crisis travelled to the rest of the world.

The European Union's case

Public health is deferred to member states' competence. The European Union can, nonetheless, coordinate and foster cooperation in this area among its member countries[25]. In cases of serious cross-border threats to health, prerogatives are enhanced and preparedness is key[26]. Certainly, no country/region could fully anticipate the breadth of the COVID-19 crisis. But the fact remains that the EU, alongside member states, did not seem to prepare a contingency plan for COVID-19, despite the red flags: a declared public health emergency of international concern, a first case in France, and unregulated borders and travelling.

The first actions taken in January and February, critical months for the entire region, were telling: sharing of information, repatriation of EU citizens, and mobilisation for researching the virus. Those contrasted with the weight of the international action: delivery of substantial medical aid to China, mobilised alongside member states, and investment in "global preparedness, prevention and containment of the

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23 World Health Organization, n20.

24 H. Brueck, *The Rest of the World Is 'Simply Not Ready' for the Coronavirus*, According to a WHO Envoy Who Just Returned from China, "Business Insider", 26 February 2020 [https://www.businessinsider.com/what-works-to-fight-covid-19-lessons-from-china-who-2020-2 access: 28 June 2020].

25 *Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union*, Article 186, OJ C202/1, 2016 [https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX:12016E168 access: 30 June 2020].

26 *Decision No 1082/2013/EU of the European Parliament and of the Council of 22 October 2013*, OJ L 293/1, 2013 [https://ec.europa.eu/health/sites/health/files/preparedness_response/docs/decision_serious_crossborder_threats_22102013_en.pdf access: 30 June 2020].

virus"[27], while cases spread within the EU. A mismanaged Europe that soon became the epicentre of the pandemic[28] created harsh rifts between the EU and member states and brought into question the functioning and priorities of the EU itself.

> ❝ *The European Union's focus on the international component and expectations have isolated it further from its member states, and opened it to external probing*

Members were unilaterally closing their borders and adopting different containment strategies[29], while appropriate measures were still in the talks at the EU level[30]. Germany and France banned exports of medical equipment,[31] and member states individually sought manufacturers for the lacking personal protective equipment[32], as the EU awaited offers under the Joint European Procurement Initiative, to come only later in March[33]. Meanwhile, the EU Commission president criticised the lack of cooperation and argued against internal borders and travel bans, with major social and economic implications[34]. The EU, therefore, expected member states to act according to their competence, but to deal with the crisis as a whole, show solidarity, and maintain the open borders of the Single Market during a pandemic that exceeded their capacities, contradicted the logic of regional mobility, and required effective regional management to prevent its spread in the first place. The EU also chose to dedicate great and consistent effort to the international response to COVID-19, as a practicing global actor and aspiring global leader. The vast financial assistance to the Eastern Neighbourhood and other European countries, Middle East, African countries, the "Team Europe" package, involvement with G20 and the Coronavirus Global Response[35], although well-intentioned and necessary, might have side-tracked the EU.

The European Union's focus on the international component and expectations have isolated it further from its member states, and opened it to external probing.

27 *Timeline of EU Action, European Union*
    [https://ec.europa.eu/info/live-work-travel-eu/health/coronavirus-response/timeline-eu-action_en access: 3 July 2020].

28 *Timeline: How the New Coronavirus Spread*, "Aljazeera"
    [https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/01/timeline-china-coronavirus-spread-200126061554884.html access: 3 July 2020].

29 *Commission Chief Warns against Unilateral Virus Travel Bans*, "EURACTIV", 13 March 2020
    [https://www.euractiv.com/section/justice-home-affairs/news/commission-chief-warns-against-unilateral-virus-travel-bans/ access: 7 July 2020].

30 *Timeline – Council Actions on COVID-19*, European Council
    [https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/policies/coronavirus/timeline/ access: 7 July 2020].

31 EURACTIV, n29.

32 B. Stockton, C. Schoen, L. Margottini, *Crisis at the Commission: Inside Europe's Response to the Coronavirus Outbreak*, "The Bureau of Investigative Journalism", 15 July 2020
    [https://www.thebureauinvestigates.com/stories/2020-07-15/crisis-at-the-commission-inside-europes-response-to-the-coronavirus-outbreak access: 25 July 2020].

33 *Coronavirus: Commission Bid to Ensure Supply of Personal Protective Equipment for the EU Proves Successful*, European Union, 24 March 2020
    [https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_20_523 access: 7 July 2020].

34 EURACTIV, n29.

35 European Union, n27.

Italy's case is representative. Upon dealing with approximately 15,000 cases in March, asking the EU for help, and having received no assistance, the country fast became subject to China's international aid: equipment and medical personnel[36]. It was then that the EU countries responded with solidarity: Germany took in Italian patients; Poland, Denmark, among other countries, sent medical aid[37].

The EU's vulnerability provided a window of opportunity for China: It reached out to other European countries, employing "mask diplomacy", playing into the region's divisions, and working in disinformation and propaganda. China's campaign was meant to discredit the performance of European democracies and illustrate a dysfunctional EU and a good-willed and helpful China able to take over when the EU could not, but was also part of a greater narrative centred on the pandemic and China's political standing. The country's international campaign sought to display the success and superiority of its political system, foster the image of an engaged global actor, and, ultimately, paint over China's mistakes in managing the virus in the first place[38].

The European Union's approach to engaging China has taken a turn since the pandemic. The EU initially pledged caution and pragmatism: maintain cooperation, where possible, and awareness of reform prerequisites in the country and the questionable parity/reciprocity between the two[39]. The assistance offered to China in February might have been an act of good will and cooperation, a response of a global actor, as well as an attempt to signal equal play level. But the recent approach towards China has been more upfront, despite the striving for a strategic dialogue.

The EU backed the calls for an investigation into the origins of the virus[40] and has questioned Beijing's disinformation campaigns[41]. The political implications of the pandemic had the EU reassess its own agenda, too. The Joint Roadmap for Recovery projects a more hands-on EU: still interested in building its international presence in world politics (pandemic response, multilateralism, and partnerships), but also aiming to build its own trademark, resilience, and self-sustainability, including in relation to China (the green and digital transitions). The roadmap finally recognises the system's faults during the crisis in terms of cooperation, executive management, and overlooked fields, such as health security. These are to be amended by policies, but especially by strong economic measures

36 J. Barigazzi, *Italy's Foreign Minister Hails Chinese Coronavirus Aid*, "Politico", 13 March 2020 [https://www.politico.eu/article/italys-foreign-minister-hails-chinese-caronavirus-aid/ access: 7 July 2020].

37 *Coronavirus: European Solidarity in Action*, European Union, 26 June 2020 [https://ec.europa.eu/info/live-work-travel-eu/health/coronavirus-response-0/coronavirus-european-solidarity-action_en access: 7 July 2020].

38 E. Brattberg, P. Le Corre, *No, COVID-19 Isn't Turning Europe Pro-China (Yet)*, "The Diplomat", 15 April 2020 [https://thediplomat.com/2020/04/no-covid-19-isnt-turning-europe-pro-china-yet/ access: 7 July 2020].

39 P. Le Corre, E. Brattberg, *How the Coronavirus Pandemic Shattered Europe's Illusions of China*, "Carnegie Endowment", 9 July 2020 [https://carnegieendowment.org/2020/07/09/how-coronavirus-pandemic-shattered-europe-s-illusions-of-china-pub-82265 access: 14 July 2020].

40 S. Amaro, *EU Chief Backs Investigation into Coronavirus Origin*, "CNBC", 1 May 2020 [https://www.cnbc.com/2020/05/01/coronavirus-eu-chief-backs-investigation-with-china-into-origin.html access: 14 July 2020].

41 Le Corre, Brattberg, n39.

(investments in most affected countries and revitalisation of the Single Market)[42], an approach similar to the economic-centred measures taken throughout the crisis. The road towards ensuring a budget for the fair socio-economic recovery, although successful with the 750 billion euro package, shows an ambitious, yet divided and politically unstable European bloc[43].

The European Union's response to COVID-19 raises questions about the contribution of the bloc to international politics and security, shaped not by global participation as such, but by merely the EU state of affairs. The recovery plan fills in certain gaps in the system and might stabilise the region, but those will likely be temporary economic remedies to political issues inside the EU (the North-South divide, political reforms in certain countries, or EU and member states' disparities). With this new agenda, which enshrines the pursuit of global actorness, the bloc risks to isolate itself from the region and its issues again and open it up to foreign incursions, already exploited by China. Irrespective of its foreign engagements, that kind of the EU will still affect international politics.

The United States' Case

"We're last, meaning we're first"[44], claimed recently the US president Donald Trump, misinterpreting the gravity of the death toll due to COVID-19, a pandemic in which the United States has actually been faring poorly[45]. The US administration has arguably employed a mistaken approach to the situation from the beginning, at the cost of the country's population and image.

> **The lack of a hands-on approach at the central level raises concerns of a US domestic isolationism – people and other authorities were left to deal with COVID-19 themselves**

The first two months of alleged control over the virus were limited to a declared public health emergency, a suspended entry from China for non-US citizens, and a coronavirus task force setup, but this was heavily downplayed by delays in testing and praises for China and President Xi for handling the virus and for transparency[46]. Such a positive account of China might have been related to the trade war détente at the beginning of 2020. However, the claim on America's preparedness did not live up to the reality beginning with March. Cases increased, states took charge and declared shutdowns, the US closed its borders with Europe, much to the European leaders' dismay,

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42 *A Roadmap for Recovery*, European Council, 21 April 2020 [https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/43384/roadmap-for-recovery-final-21-04-2020.pdf access: 14 July 2020]; See also, *Next Generation EU*, European Union, 27 May 2020 [https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_20_940 access: 14 July 2020].

43 J. Gill, L. Chadwick, *EU Summit: Leaders Reach Landmark €1.82 Trillion COVID-19 Recovery Deal and Budget*, "Euronews", 21 July 2020 [https://www.euronews.com/2020/07/21/eu-summit-deadlock-see-talks-stretch-into-sunday access: 23 July 2020].

44 C. York, *Donald Trump Makes Bizarre Claim US Is Beating Coronavirus*, "Huffington Post", 4 August 2020 [https://bit.ly/2XELPoT access: 7 August 2020].

45 World Health Organization, n2.

46 C. Peters, *A Detailed Timeline of All the Ways Trump of All the Ways Trump Failed to Respond to the Coronavirus*, "Vox", 8 June 2020 [https://www.vox.com/2020/6/8/21242003/trump-failed-coronavirus-response access: 16 July 2020].

by a unilateral decision, medical supplies were lacking, and most importantly, the US started to face an economic toll[47]. This was not the great America that Trump had promised upon his election in 2016, and not an America to boast about in the upcoming election. It appears that the president would not take responsibility for an issue that he does not fully comprehend.

It is understandable why the administration tried to minimise any traces of the pandemic inside the country. With a constant high number of cases, Trump has lobbied for the reopening of the economy, including non-essential businesses, despite states' limited capacity, has claimed the right to overrule governors' safety orders[48], and has been conducting visits across the country where he was focusing on other issues[49]. President Trump also politicised the novel coronavirus with a narrative about the media's fake news on the dangers of COVID-19[50] and the Democrats' use of the virus to unsettle the public, the economy, and the Trump administration[51], building a narrative for re-election purposes.

The lack of a hands-on approach at the central level raises concerns of a US domestic isolationism – people and other authorities were left to deal with COVID-19 themselves. States and the federal government were competing for medical equipment due to supply shortages[52]; state officials had disconcerted measures in place and disputes over safety rules[53]; there were testing delays and conflicting messages from the administration. These overshadowed the fewer accomplishments: the economic relief bill and the research done on the virus and a vaccine[54].

The United States' coronavirus crisis is primarily centred on domestic issues, but the country has had notable, albeit limited, interaction with foreign actors. The ongoing frustration with China's power and economic growth potential, coupled with its role in the pandemic and less-than-expected results from the trade détente[55], has given reason for the US to both reassert its foreign agenda and deflect responsibility. Trump named the virus the "Chinese virus" or "Wuhan virus"[56], went as far as requesting the UN Security

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47 Ibid.

48 Ibid.

49 M. Reston, *Trump Turns Blind Eye to Pandemic and Focuses on Political Grievances*, "CNN", 11 July 2020 [https://edition.cnn.com/2020/07/11/politics/us-election-trump-coronavirus-florida-roger-stone/index.html access: 16 July 2020].

50 M. Coppins, *Trump's Dangerously Effective Coronavirus Propaganda*, "The Atlantic", 11 March 2020 [https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2020/03/trump-coronavirus-threat/607825/ access: 16 July 2020].

51 E. J. Gomez, S. Galea, *Politics May Kill Us, Not the Coronavirus*, "ThinkGlobalHealth", 22 April 2020 [https://www.thinkglobalhealth.org/article/politics-may-kill-us-not-coronavirus access: 16 July 2020].

52 A. Zurcher, *Coronavirus: Things the US Has Got Wrong – and Got Right*, "BBC", 1 April 2020 [https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-52125039 access: 16 July 2020];

53 B. Walsh, *The U.S. Divide on Coronavirus Masks*, "Axios", 24 June 2020 [https://www.axios.com/political-divide-coronavirus-masks-1053d5bd-deb3-4cf4-9570-0ba492134f3e.html access: 16 July 2020].

54 Zurcher, n52.

55 K. Johnson, *China Puts the Final Kibosh on Trump's Trade Deal*, "Foreign Policy", 1 June 2020 [https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/06/01/china-ends-trump-trade-deal-phase-one/ access: 16 July 2020].

56 *Trump Says Coronavirus Changed 'Great' Relationship with China*, "Aljazeera", 11 August 2020 [https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/08/trump-coronavirus-changed-great-relationship-china-200811154645551.html access: 11 August 2020].

Council to confirm this origin in a COVID-19 resolution[57], and argued that the limited death toll is owed to his early decision to ban travel from China[58].

China, in continuation of its international propaganda, was fast to claim that the US had brought the virus to the country and described its COVID-19 domestic failures as "signaling the end of the American century"[59]. The exchange itself is signalling a more alienated relationship between the two, amid the US distancing from WHO, an organisation it heavily funded and that is considered by the administration as having had a part in the "mismanaging and covering up" of the spread of the virus[60]. The following US appeals for an immediate investigation into the origins of COVID-19 in China and the WHO's change of action were ultimately not successful[61], with the country ultimately initiating the process of withdrawal from the organisation. These dynamics might be significantly exploited in the election campaign as well as future US policies[62].

The United States continues to fulfil at least some formal role as an international actor, through its existing agencies and partners. Early on, USAID and the State Department mobilised assistance in fighting the pandemic for countries in Africa, Latin America, the Caribbean, Europe, and Asia.

The action was headlined: The US is "leading the humanitarian and health response to COVID-19"[63]. This narrative, however, is apparently not upheld by the administration, which downplays the amplitude of the involvement and the importance given to it.

> **As the pandemic continues, China, the European Union, and the United States will have to be less political and more practical. None of them can afford internal isolationism or more economic losses**

The United States' response to the novel coronavirus and its lack of leadership did not inspire the international community. Most criticism might have been put on hold, in anticipation of the future presidential election. It may be that international actors will elaborate and act on their approach towards the US once it becomes clear who will define the next four years of American politics. Alternatively, it may be that the US, which is progressively shrinking to its own institutions, is becoming of less interest for other international actors. But even a US with a diminished role in international politics will in itself affect international security.

57 R. DiResta, *For China, the 'USA Virus' Is a Geopolitical Ploy*, "The Atlantic", 11 April 2020
[https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2020/04/chinas-covid-19-conspiracy-theories/609772/ access: 25 July 2020].

58 Peters, n46.

59 Gilsinan, n7.

60 Peters, n46.

61 C. Lynch, *Trump Stumbles in Effort to Confront China at WHO*, "Foreign Policy", 19 May 2020
[https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/05/19/trump-stumbles-confront-china-who-coronavirus-world-health-organization/ access: 25 July 2020].

62 The US is considering to pursue further economic decoupling from China and reduce its dependence on key materials, including medical products. See Cabestan, n9.

63 *State Department: The United States Is Leading Humanitarian and Health Assistance Response to COVID-19*, USAID, March 2020
[https://www.usaid.gov/news-information/fact-sheets/mar-2020-us-leading-humanitarian-and-health-assistance-response-covid-19 access: 25 July 2020].

The Potential (or Not) of Alleviating the Crisis

National/regional and international responses to COVID-19 have shown mostly how unreliable countries and institutions have been in managing the crisis. The received or distributed foreign aid and multilateral calls for joint action illustrate just how inward-oriented and strategic the international agendas of major actors are, just as is international isolationism. In the long term, none of these approaches benefit the international environment.

As the pandemic continues, China, the European Union, and the United States will have to be less political and more practical. None of them can afford internal isolationism or more economic losses, especially with the lack of a vaccine so far. China might continue to employ restrictive measures to combat the oncoming waves, and will likely respond quicker to new clusters. The EU promises to react faster and with greater coordination, with a short-term health care-focused plan for potential future outbreaks already elaborated by the EU Commission[64]. The US population will likely have to rely on or make the most of the management at the state or local levels (a few of those leaderships have been lauded for their pertinent calls[65]).

International aid will become critical, especially as countries are working on a vaccine. But the global prevention of COVID-19 may be once again politicised. President Xi pledged to invest in strengthening the global response to the pandemic and the developing countries' health care systems[66]. The Chinese researchers are doing good progress in developing a vaccine, and Xi will be expected to make it a "global public good", as announced[67]. The European Union seeks to provide member states with a potential vaccine, but remains committed to act globally, under the Coronavirus Global Response for universal access to vaccines, alongside with tests and treatments. It is also exploring possible alternatives, including reserving future vaccines from companies with other partners[68]. Meanwhile, the US appears in a rush to provide a vaccine to its citizens. Under the Operation Warp Speed, the country is assuming financial risks to speed up the manufacturing of a successful vaccine[69], as "part of President Trump's multi-faceted strategy for safely reopening [the] country and bringing life back to normal"[70].

Efforts to ensure national/regional and international security seem to be competing and overlapping, rather than concerted,

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64 *Coronavirus: Commission Strengthens Preparedness for Future Outbreaks*, European Union, 15 July 2020 [https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_20_1340 access: 25 July 2020].

65 A. Zurcher, n52.

66 C. Lynch, n61.

67 Ibid.

68 *Coronavirus: Commission Concludes Talks to Secure Future Coronavirus Vaccine for Europeans*, European Union, 31 July 2020 [https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_20_1439 access: 7 August 2020].

69 C.T. Lopez, *Operation Warp Speed Accelerates COVID-19 Vaccine Development*, US Department of Defense, 16 June 2020 [https://www.defense.gov/Explore/News/Article/Article/2222284/operation-warp-speed-accelerates-covid-19-vaccine-development/ access: 7 August].

70 *Trump Administration's Operation Warp Speed Accelerates AstraZeneca COVID-19 Vaccine to Be Available Beginning in October*, US Department of Health & Human Services, 21 May 2020 [https://www.hhs.gov/about/news/2020/05/21/trump-administration-accelerates-astrazeneca-covid-19-vaccine-to-be-available-beginning-in-october.html access: 7 August 2020].

thorough, and ultimately safe for people. The outcome of such efforts – who will live up to the global pledge, when or how the vaccination will come about – remains to be seen.

Management of Regional and International Security Crises: Patterns of Action and Interest

Management of regional or international security crises is seemingly expected of the leading, influential, or resourceful global powers: countries or institutions. Such actors as China, the EU, and the US will have to recognise that their unilateral, domestically driven or oriented actions, beyond their international agendas and extent of cooperation, will have greater implications. The COVID-19 pandemic was an unfortunate case for these actors. Their immediate and in some instances long-term responses were narrow, and depicted a wrongful assessment, politicisation, and lack of accountability for the issue.

China is decisively pursuing power and validation as a power on the international scene. The country's leadership will likely continue to explore multilateralism to secure its image, attract partners, and sort out the competition with the US. China may act globally not necessarily to serve globally, but to secure international (and domestic) acceptance of its political rationale and behaviour first. It remains to be seen how open or welcoming the world will be towards China's future endeavours.

The European Union has sought to become more relevant as an international actor, irrespective of the situation at home. There is now, however, more recognition of the importance of EU and member states' performance as a regional body. It is uncertain whether the EU will manage to balance both its domestic resurgence and global participation, or gain political traction at the domestic and international levels as much as the US or China does.

The US will, apparently, not lead any response to current and future regional or international security crises for anyone else, for the time being. It will continue to act separately and will be selective and direct in its foreign engagements, particularly those that either benefit or endanger an "America first" agenda (e.g. with China). Although the country's official interest lies in building a stronger country rather than stronger international communities, its actions attest to a failed prioritisation of "America first" and the primacy of the Trump administration's interests.

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NATO AND COVID-19: LESSONS LEARNED AND CHALLENGES AHEAD

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The pandemic caused by COVID-19 arguably came as a shock and will have profound consequences. It has already created exceptional circumstances in NATO capitals and in other NATO structures at all levels – strategic, operational, and tactical. The objective of this article is to analyse Alliance's reaction to the pandemic, with a focus on lessons learned and a way ahead. Bearing in mind that the Alliance has not faced a pandemic before, three following main domains should be analysed: the institutional domain (how the Alliance will adapt its activities at the strategic level), the operational domain (how NATO will adapt the Command and Control structure, plan and conduct of military exercises, and the changing business within the command structure), and the information domain (how the Alliance has been waging the information campaign in order to dispel myths and rumours/perceptions and to promote own interests and agendas for the future).

Introduction

Severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2) causes an infectious disease, which was named COVID-19 by the World Health Organisation back in February this year[1]. Despite all the activities that were taken by states and international and regional (sub-regional) organisations across the world, the COVID-19 pandemic continues to spread across new territories and infect more and more people.

The global pandemic has become an unprecedented challenge, and its consequences will be perpetually reflected within the policies of all affected countries, and in various organisations, including NATO. For example, dealing with the immediate necessity of health care with economic constraints and scarce resources in the background, it will be indescribably difficult for any politician in member nations to advocate increasing spending taxpayers' money on defence.

Bearing in mind the unexpected and unprecedented characteristics of the pandemic, many experts underline a certain level of unpreparedness of NATO to react as quickly as it was required by the circumstances. For the sake of comparability, the same assessment is also true for other international organisations, such as the United Nations, the World Health Organisation, etc.

Furthermore, NATO was not created to face this kind of challenge, and a possible threat from any virus that can cause a global pandemic was not mentioned in the

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1   The World Health Organisation (WHO) declared COVID-19 a pandemic on 11 March 2020.

Alliance's Strategic Concept back in 2010[2]. At the same time, the relatively embryonic readiness for robust actions should not be mixed up with or misinterpreted as perplexity, confusion, and reluctance, which never happened in Brussels.

Furthermore, NATO can be praised for quick reaction at the strategic level. Thus, on 2 April 2020, NATO foreign ministers issued a declaration where they promised, "Even as we do the absolute maximum to contain and then overcome this challenge, NATO remains active, focused and ready to perform its core tasks: collective defence, crisis management, and cooperative security."[3] The other quick win of the Alliance is the success in preventing the pandemic crisis from transforming into a crisis of collective defence, deterrence, and security of the member nations. Moreover, emerging activities, such as "airlifting critical medical supplies", "providing medical personnel, essential materials, and vital equipment", and "harnessing our medical, scientific, and technological knowledge and resources" were announced by the Allied foreign ministers at the same meeting with considerable support at the political level.

Furthermore, for a comprehensive and sober approach, the Secretary General of NATO, Jens Stoltenberg, launched on 8 June 2020 an initiative named "NATO 2030 – Strengthening the Alliance in an Increasingly Competitive World". The results of the initiative are aimed to provide assurance that NATO is ready today and will be ready in ten years to meet future threats, risks, and challenges. The reflection report should be presented by the end of 2020.

From the very beginning of this pandemic, NATO led (with direct contribution from the Supreme Allied Command Transformation Headquarters – SACT HQ) with the following main lines of efforts regarding COVID-19[4]:

> **NATO was not created to face this kind of challenge, and a possible threat from any virus that can cause a global pandemic was not mentioned in the Alliance's Strategic Concept back in 2010**

1. Decreasing and, if possible, mitigating of risks of being infected by the virus for the personnel involved in planning and executing of Allied activities at all levels;

2. Maintaining of an appropriate level of working effectiveness in NATO as a whole, and in some of its components, mainly – the Command and Control (C2) System;

3. Gradual but resilient adaptation to the recent realities and new environment in which NATO will operate in the upcoming decade.

At the same time, emphasis was placed on maintaining close ties among the NATO Supreme Commands[5], operational headquarters, NATO Education and Training Facilities[6] (NETFs), NATO Centres of Excellence (COEs), as well as the Partnership Training and Education Centres (PTECs), agencies, academia, and industry.

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2   The first appearance of the so-called "human security", which can be considered as a weak attempt to think about a pandemic, was at the London NATO summit in December 2019.

3   *Declaration by NATO Foreign Ministers Issued Following Their Meeting of 2nd April 2020*, NATO HQ, July 2020 [https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_174855.htm access: 20 July 2020].

4   *Re-Configure & Re-Connect the Headquarters (R2HQ)*, Supreme Allied Command Transformation HQ, June 2020 [http://hqsact.collab.act.nato.int/CTFLibrary/R2HQ%20-%20Narrative-final.pdf access: 30 June 2020].

5   Allied Command Operations (ACO) and Allied Command Transformation (ACT).

6   The NATO Defence College in Rome (Italy) and the NATO School in Oberammergau (Germany).

For better understanding, and for a more analytical approach, the main NATO activities, planned as well as executed, will be divided into the following three areas:

- **the institutional area** – how the Alliance is adapting its activities at the strategic level, including the decision-making process, appropriate level of openness, and cooperation between the nations;
- **the operational area** – how NATO is adapting the Command and Control (C2) structure, plan and conduct of military exercises, daily routine business within the HQs at all levels, and changes in NETFs, COEs, PTECs, etc.;
- **the information area** – how the Alliance has been waging the information (counter-propaganda) campaign in order to dispel myths and rumours/perceptions and to promote its own interests and agendas for the future.

The abovementioned classification was apparently adopted in both Strategic Commands – the Allied Command Operations and Supreme Allied Command Transformation. Furthermore, necessary guidance has been provided to the NATO Command Structure and NATO Force Structure at the operational level. This division has enabled the Alliance (on the one hand) to cover a whole spectrum of possible consequences and (on the other hand) to coordinate efforts across the different nations in order to maximise effectiveness and avoid waste resources[7].

On 7 May 2020, James Appathurai, Deputy Assistant Secretary General for political affairs, underlined to NATO parliamentarians two immediate objectives for the Alliance[8]: to guarantee that the Alliance's core function – credible collective defence and deterrence – remained unaffected and to assist the hardest-hit member nations.

Institutional Domain

In order to reach these declared objectives, the Alliance implemented the following measures at the institutional level:

- the North Atlantic Council for the first time activated[9] the Rapid Air Mobility[10] initiative in order to support military aircraft transporting doctors and equipment into the critically hit places;
- NATO and EU coordinated actions[11] were launched in order to increase objective situation awareness and to counter adversarial information narratives;
- the Supreme Allied Commander Europe (and the US EUCOM Commander) General Tod D. Wolters was appointed at the beginning of April at the Allied foreign ministers' meeting to ensure sufficient contribution, timely coordination, and targeted assistance within the activities aimed at combating COVID-19;
- the Euro-Atlantic Disaster Response Coordination Centre (EADRCC) was activated in order to coordinate activities among more than 70 member nations and partners;
- NATO's Strategic Airlift Capabilities (SAC) and Strategic Airlift International Solutions (SALIS) initiatives were invoked in order to replace civilian air transport capacities, locked on the

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7   Harmonisation and coordination are essential among the different nations within NATO in order to mitigate possible consequences of duplication of efforts.

8   Lord Campbell of Pittenweem, *COVID-19 and Transatlantic Security*, "Draft Special Report", NATO, June 2020 [https://www.nato-pa.int/document/2020-covid-19-and-transatlantic-security-105-pc-20-e-campbell-pittenweem access: 18 July 2020].

9   Actual date of activation is 31 March 2020.

10 The Rapid Air Mobility process was established in 2018 for movement of any military aircraft during crisis deployment.

11 The EU has an appropriate structure within its External Action Service.

ground as a consequence of restricting transport measures;

- the Committee of the Chiefs of Military Medical Services in NATO (COMEDS) was engaged within a wide spectrum of activities directed chiefly at coordination of military medical aspects for combating the pandemic among NATO members and partners;
- NATO Science & Technology Organisation (STO) launched the NATO Chief Scientist Challenge initiative with more than 6,000 participants. It unified the global scientific community to share information, knowledge, and skills in virus detection and handling.

At the same time, the main, existential task for NATO and for the Allied nations will be maintaining unity. This unity should be maintained in different dimensions such as the following: general understanding[12], lines of efforts[13], and visions of future developments[14].

Although radical changes within the decision-making system should not be expected in the near future, it will not be business as usual anymore, and some improvements, based on the lessons learned, will be implemented in order to comprehend recently emerging challenges.

Due to the institutional and procedural changes, more NATO civilian and military personnel will be invited to "work from home" and "stay out of the office", which requires high-quality internet and,

therefore, more reliable protection services. Extensive use of communication assets remotely and employing civilian providers for home internet communications will lead to increased risk for a potential attack on the cyber domain.

Whilst institutional changes and administrative adaptation have not been completed yet, Allies and key partners will be called on to work tightly and closely in order to increase the resilience and sustainability for providing collective defence and mutual protection.

Operational Domain

Although COVID-19 does not threaten NATO nations from a military perspective, the following supplementary activities aimed at combating the global pandemic have been launched within the operational domain[15]:

- timely assessment of available stocks was conducted by all Allies and partners in order to have a clear picture of accessible lifesaving equipment, masks, protective tools, and items;
- in the framework of SAC[16] and SALIS,[17] Allies and partners have conducted more than 350 sorties, transporting medical personnel as well as moving hundreds of tonnes of cargo;
- more than 100 field hospitals were deployed with 45,000 treatment beds;
- about 500,000 military personnel, including about 14,000 doctors, have been routinely involved in combating COVID-19;

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12 This requires a universal approach to the security threats/risks/challenges assessment.

13 This requires a united vision on the current and future priorities, as well as readiness to sacrifice national interests for the sake of collective defence and security.

14 This requires political willingness of NATO nations to increase defence spending as well as intensification of research and development within the military-industrial complex.

15 *NATO and Allied Response to COVID-19 by the Numbers,* "YouTube", NATO, June 2020 [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nIlJfzRgvVc access: 2 August 2020].

16 Three C-17 "Globemaster" aircraft were operated from the Papa Air base in Hungary.

17 Five "Antonov" An-124-100 cargo transport aircraft were engaged, coordinated by the Strategic Airlift Coordination Cell, the Movement Coordination Centre Europe, Eindhoven, the Netherlands.

- advanced medical assistance has been provided on bilateral basis between member nations: Czech Republic, Estonia, Lithuania, Luxemburg, Norway, Slovakia, and Turkey provided support for Italy and Spain; Poland and Turkey sent medical personnel and essential supplies to the United States in order to share lessons learned and provide expertise;
- critical medical support was provided by Allies to the partners[18]: the Afghan Army and National Police received donations in remote and unstable regions of the country; Moldova received considerable medical assistance from Hungary, and Bosnia and Herzegovina requested assistance from Hungary, Slovenia, and the United States;

> *NATO and the EU were selected as the primary targets for propaganda and disinformation campaigns from Moscow, Beijing, and, to some extent, from Tehran*

- significant changes have been implemented within the area of joint training and international military exercises: the planned NATO exercise "Cold Response 2020" (Norwegian lead, March 2020) was terminated; the scale of the "Defender-Europe 20" exercise (July 2020) was significantly downgraded[19];
- NATO Educational Training Facilities such as the NATO School Oberammergau and the NATO Defence College are working

on changes to the content and teaching methodologies of their courses.

Whilst the Alliance achieved quick wins in the operational domain and reasonable success in mutual assistance activities, the main task of finding a reliable and affordable vaccine is yet to be achieved. Many scientists and military medical establishments across the member nations have been working on vaccination development and testing, including the Defence Science and Technology Laboratory in the UK and the Center for Infectious Disease Research (Walter Reed Army Institute of Research) in the US.

Information Domain

Unfortunately, the Alliance has to not only mitigate the negative consequences of COVID-19 but also combat hostile propaganda campaigns. Since the beginning of the crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, some countries, chiefly the Russian Federation and China, had launched a wide spectrum of information activities aimed to decrease reliability, confidence, and effectiveness of NATO's responses as well as to erode Allied internal cohesion (including transatlantic links). NATO and the EU were selected as the primary targets for propaganda and disinformation campaigns from Moscow, Beijing, and, to some extent, from Tehran.

The Kremlin has been leading the propaganda campaign by developing anti-NATO myths at an early stage of combating the coronavirus[20]: For example, COVID-19 will be fatal for the future of NATO; NATO

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18 A. Mesterhazy, *The Role of NATO's Armed Forces in the COVID-19 Pandemic*, "Draft Special Report", NATO, June 2020 [www.nato-pa.int/document/2020-role-natos-armed-forces-covid-19-pandemic-mesterhazy-091-dsc-20-e access: 20 July 2020].

19 As of 22 July 2020, the exercises related to "Defender-Europe 20" – "Dynamic Front", "Joint Warfighting Assessment", "Saber Strike", and "Swift Response" – will not be conducted.

20 *Russia's Top Five Myths about NATO & COVID*, NATO HQ, April 2020 [www.nato.int/nato_static_fl2014/assets/pdf/2020/4/pdf/2004-Factsheet-Russia-Myths-COVID-19_en.pdf access: 16 July 2020].

is failing to support its member states in combating COVID-19; the virus is a weapon created by NATO; NATO has been widely exploiting military exercises to spread COVID-19; NATO suggests increasing spending on defence, not health care.

Furthermore, the myths were supplemented by other narratives, which were developed in order to diminish the level of effectiveness of the EU struggling against the pandemic[21]: The coronavirus was exported to China by the US military; China, Russia, and Iran have been managing to combat the virus quite well, unlike the US and the European states[22]; the outbreak is caused by migrants who spread the virus in the EU; the coronavirus is a conspiracy to control population growth, etc.

While Moscow focused its narratives on blaming NATO, the EU, and the US, Beijing concentrated its efforts on three main narratives[23]: first, shifting blame away from China, which has been recognised as the origin of COVID-19; second, underlining slow reaction and insufficient response from the West; third, promoting the Chinese response as the most effective one.

Since the beginning of encountering the global pandemic, NATO has adopted a two-way approach to resist propaganda and disinformation campaigns, concentrating on the "understand" and "engage" functions[24]. While the "understand" domain includes regular "information environment assessments", aimed at monitoring and analysing information areas of interest for the alliance, the "engage" one has been exploiting the gathered information in order to enable NATO to communicate effectively in combating disinformation at all levels.

> **Since the beginning of encountering the global pandemic, NATO has adopted a two-way approach to resist propaganda and disinformation campaigns, concentrating on the "understand" and "engage" functions**

In the "engage" domain, the following actions have been taken in order to counter the hostile propaganda campaign[25]:

- digital communications on the pandemic response across all platforms were gradually intensified;
- online engagements were increased in order to accelerate the current and future policy dimensions debate both within NATO media platforms and on external media platforms;
- the audience of Russian-speaking customers has been purposely enhanced, including articles, translations of factsheets, videos on the Alliance's Russian-language YouTube channel, and so forth.

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21 N. Bentzen, *COVID-19 Foreign Influence Campaigns: Europe and Global Battle of Narratives*, "European Parliamentary Research Service", April 2020 [www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2020/649367/EPRS_BRI(2020)649367_EN.pdf access: 5 July 2020].

22 Thus, the member states have to rely on China and Russia to save them.

23 A. Mesterhazy, *The Role of NATO's Armed Forces in the COVID-19 Pandemic*, "Draft Special Report", NATO, June 2020 [www.nato-pa.int/document/2020-role-natos-armed-forces-covid-19-pandemic-mesterhazy-091-dsc-20-e access: 20 July 2020].

24 *NATO's Approach to Countering Disinformation: A Focus on COVID-19*, NATO HQ, July 2020 [www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/177273.htm access: 28 July 2020].

25 Ibid.

There is no simple solution to fight against disinformation; international organisations, national governments, private enterprises, non-governmental organisations, free and independent media, and public opinion leaders should be engaged for cross-functioning activities, directed mainly at two tasks: first, to inform about the developments within the Alliance, member states, and key partners; second, to mitigate possible negative consequences of adversaries' propaganda.

> **To ensure the document "NATO 2030 – Strengthening the Alliance in an Increasingly Competitive World" includes comprehensive political guidance related to crisis management and civilian protection based on the outcomes of COVID-19**

Not surprisingly, during NATO foreign and defence ministers' meetings, the issue of the Alliance's readiness to face a second wave of the pandemic before the end of the current year was raised. Among the other problems to be solved, the main challenge is a rapid increase of the level of social resilience and early situation awareness, as well as finding a reliable and affordable vaccine.

Future Plans

Based on initial analysis, and on the potential of dealing with the next phase of the pandemic, SACT HQ[26] proposed the following lines for enhancing resilience of military forces:

- adapting the joint forces' formations for enhancing military resilience in order to ensure NATO's ability to maintain current posture of defence and/or deterrence;
- increasing the level and awareness of medical readiness capabilities in order to provide sufficient support in case of future similar risks, threats, and challenges;
- re-thinking and re-assessing the place and role of the armed forces in combating epidemics and other diseases.

Having analysed action taken by the Alliance, as well as the current global environment, including calls for shifting military engagements to disaster relief operations, humanitarian aid, state security, and border protection, some recommendations can be provided in order the enhance NATO awareness, cohesion, and resilience[27].

In the institutional domain:
- To accelerate current discussions within NATO's networks of experts and/ or relevant organisations[28], aimed to have lessons identified, learned, and implemented for long-term planning and, consequently, more effective collective adaptation of the Alliance;
- To ensure the document "NATO 2030 – Strengthening the Alliance in an Increasingly Competitive World" includes comprehensive political guidance related to crisis management and civilian protection based on the outcomes of COVID-19;
- To develop a strategy of cooperation and coordination with international, regional, and sub-regional organisations, emphasising significant importance of NATO-UN and NATO-EU engagements;

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26 *"Food for Thought" (FFT) Paper on Post COVID-19 Global Security Landscape*, Supreme Allied Command Transformation HQ (SACT HQ), 16 June 2020, pp. 14-15.

27 Ibid., pp. 17-18.

28 First of all, Centres of Excellence (COEs), NATO Education Training Facilities (NETFs), Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs), the United Nations, the European Union, etc.

- To enhance flexibility in defence/ operational planning at the strategic level, therefore enhancing the Alliance's capacity to predict future crises, as well as to transform anticipations into actions in an acceptable timeframe;
- To adapt and adjust routine working practices in the NATO Command Structure and in all structures affiliated with the Alliance in order to provide the necessary level of safety for military and civilian personnel at all levels.

Given the necessity for significant changes at the strategic level, and the unpreparedness of the Alliance for such a challenge in the past, the next NATO summit, scheduled for October 2020 in Beverly Hills (California, USA) must be the turning point for dealing more seriously with future threats similar to the pandemic.

The number of deaths caused by COVID-19 across the world and the absence of any possibility to conduct "business as usual" within the post-epidemic global environment will force NATO to take unprecedented measures for its transformation and adaptation. These measures not only will touch on the military component of the Alliance but will also require strategic changes in ways of thinking – transformation of the mindsets of the key decision-makers.

In the operational domain:
- To ensure smooth and effective transformation of the Alliance to be fully adapted to a new reality sketched by the post-pandemic global strategic environment;
- To use the NATO Warfighting Capstone Concept (NWCC) as the major catalyst for the adaptation of the NATO Command Structure (NCS) and NATO Force Structure (NFS) to a new approach, ensuring collective defence, providing crisis response capabilities, and maintaining peace and stability within the key for Alliance areas;
- To develop capabilities of the High Readiness Forces in order to enhance their resilience, sustainability, and preparedness to accomplish tasks by the Alliance in future pandemic-like environments;
- To prioritise development of military operational capabilities with more emphasis on medical, logistics, (military) policing, ISR (intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance), and CBRN (chemical, biological, radiological, and nuclear) protection aspects;
- To identify the "bottlenecks" of the member nations as well as individual cases of failure of the Alliance in order to concentrate future efforts on minimising or even mitigating them or their consequences within a short timeframe.

At this level, it will also be important to have the measures, capacities, and/or procedures for the member nations' continuation of force contribution to current and planned NATO operations and missions. Many NATO initiatives and mechanisms, such as the Mediterranean Dialogue, Partnership for Peace Programme, Science and Technology Programme, etc., must be revised, adapted, and transformed in order to bring more tangible and, therefore, more useful results for the participants.

Furthermore, artificial intelligence development, big data analysis, targeted genetic modification, and synthetic biology employment must stop being buzzwords and fancy slang for young disruptors[29]. The

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29 K. Jones, *COVID-19, International Security, and the Importance of NATO's Science and Technology Network, "Draft Special Report"*, NATO, June 2020
[https://www.nato-pa.int/document/2020-covid-19-international-security-and-importance-nato-sto-draft-report-jones-090-stc-20 access: 22 June 2020].

new lines of effort must assist scientists across the globe as well as experts to find an appropriate vaccine for COVID-19, as well as to provide possible solutions for handling different scales of epidemics in the future.

In the informational domain:

- To develop sufficient and up-to-date information capacity with proactive, not reactive, approaches as well as capabilities for conducting deep strategic analysis of current and future hostile information campaigns;
- To employ information networks for better situation awareness and actions taken (lessons learned) of the Alliance, its member nations, and key partners concerning the pandemic and related threats, risks, and challenges;
- To engage actively with subject matter experts within the area of strategic communication (StratCom) for counter-propaganda activities, especially from China and the Russian Federation.

> **Many NATO initiatives and mechanisms, such as the Mediterranean Dialogue, Partnership for Peace Programme, Science and Technology Programme, etc., must be revised, adapted, and transformed in order to bring more tangible and, therefore, more useful results for the participants.**

It is rather clear that neither Russia nor China will stop their information and propaganda activities aimed at loosening cohesion within the Alliance and questioning the strength of transatlantic links. Having an understanding of the unpredictability and hostile intentions of such information campaigns from Moscow and Beijing, Brussels will have to work on enhancing its own public diplomacy capabilities in order to mitigate unavoidable consequences of such operations.

Such capacities need to be developed at national levels as well as within NATO structures, including strategic communication tools, proactive information campaigns, timely information dissemination, and counter-propaganda measures. Moreover, a pool of well-trained and equipped personnel from NATO nations and partners should be prepared for future engagements in various circumstances and in many domains of the comprehensive information operations.

Conclusions

It is too early to draw final conclusions; however, one statement can be made: The Alliance successfully prevented the transformation of the pandemic caused by COVID-19 into a more dangerous and unpredictable crisis of the collective defence system.

Whilst Brussels successfully achieved some "quick wins" in its struggle against the global pandemic, the main challenges lie ahead of the organisation. They mostly relate to: the different perceptions of future security threats; temptations of solving national health care problems at the expense of the defence; and references to NATO as an obsolete, slow, and ineffective organisation.

Some NATO nations, chiefly from the Baltic region and Eastern Europe, continue to consider Moscow the main challenger of Allied security and collective defence, whilst others, led by France, Italy, and Spain, advocate switching Brussels' attention from the Russian Federation to the challenges from the Mediterranean Sea, North Africa, and the Middle East.

One of the main victims of these different perceptions of security issues is NATO's open-door policy, declared in the aftermath

of the Cold War. The number of people opposed to the enlargement is growing not only in Western European states, who were traditionally sceptical about full-fledged NATO membership of Georgia and Ukraine, but also among the traditional open-door policy supporters such as Poland and the Baltic states[30]. Consequently, NATO must work to ensure unity and a cohesive approach.

The cohesion of the Alliance is also under a threat from changing national priorities taking precedence over NATO's; for example, the United Kingdom has set an astonishing precedent for the other contributing nations by withdrawing personnel from the NATO mission in Iraq. This is a dangerous example, underlined by the COVID-19 pandemic, of national precedence above that of the Alliance's collective defence and security interests.

Additionally, senior political leadership calling NATO a "brain-dead" organisation[31] is not adding any stability and resilience to the current situation; this can be considered only as fuelling the fire, which was ignited and is maintained by the Alliance's existential enemies. Thus, the main focus should be placed not on declarations and buzzwords, but rather on improvements, developments, evolution, and resilience of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation.

Looking to the future, experts and high-level officials within NATO agree that the Alliance, as the main provider and guarantor of collective defence for its members, will never be the same again after March 2020, and continued cohesion and unity are a priority.

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30 Алена Гетьманчук, *Евроатлантический Трек (The Euro-Atlantic Track)*, "Weekly Mirror", 20 July 2020 [https://zn.ua/international/evroatlanticheskij-trek.html access: 16 July 2020].

31 *Emmanuel Macron Warns Europe: NATO Is Becoming Brain-Dead*, "The Economist", 7 November 2019 [http://www.economist.com access: 20 June 2020].

NEW WORLD OF PANDEMICS AND COMMUNICATIONS STRATEGIES

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The latest pandemic has become a new challenge for the whole world, in which world leaders were forced to communicate in new conditions and amid disinformation and proliferation of fakes. They need to protect the population, defend their nations' security, stop the pandemic and infodemic, and keep calm. They appeal to their nations' beliefs, symbols, and traditions, and augment the number of public addresses and speeches, underscoring the need to be united and to accept restrictions, obey new rules, and adapt to the new world order. Basic state functions, such as external, political, and social security, have become evident.

On 3 January 2020, the World Health Organisation (WHO) recorded 44 cases of pneumonia in Wuhan, Hubei, China. This day, actually, marked the pandemic spread of COVID-19. Then, on 11 May, WHO announced a global pandemic, which is one of the worst in recent human history. In July 2020, the global number of patients reached 14 million. Moreover, the virus hit global economy and stopped many industries all over the world, affecting small and large businesses, many enterprises, tourism, airlines, entertainment industries. The global pandemic has changed the principles of communications, primarily regarding security, health, mutual assistance, and locality. Many world leaders conduct crisis communications by trying to be honest, sincere, and socially responsible.

In our article, we analyse the crisis response of world leaders in this new reality, which is usually opposed by the people. Any crisis is a challenge, but it gives an opportunity to demonstrate diplomacy, strengthen society's support, gain some political advantage, and transmit strategic narratives and messages. This year, especially, it is necessary to fill the information vacuum to avoid irresponsibleness and clearly explain to people the true pandemic-related situation in specific countries and in the world.

China

The "Black Swan" of the coronavirus made a serious impact on technological industry, as a lot of industrial capacities are deployed in China. It affected the whole world, transporting people more into the cyber world than in the physical world.

On 31 December 2019, China reported to the WHO about a cluster of cases of pneumonia in Wuhan. A novel coronavirus was eventually identified. On 4 January 2020, the WHO reported on social media about this situation. In the first two weeks since the WHO's report, China's leaders failed to impose any restrictions or take

any measures. At the Politburo Standing Committee meeting on 7 January 2020, Chinese leader Xi Jinping did not indicate that he, or any other top leader, was alarmed by the reported outbreak in Wuhan.[1]

Since 21 January 2020, China started to introduce preventive measures against the virus. The country's leader worked on its world image by stating China was responsible about the new challenge, acted promptly, and was ready for cooperation with other states to fight this crisis. On the same day, participants of the Politburo's extraordinary meeting defined the priority task to stop the virus and decided to close educational establishments in Wuhan, to stop transport, and to limit the number of employees.

> **The global pandemic has changed the principles of communications, primarily regarding security, health, mutual assistance, and locality**

Already within a month after this, the Chinese leader spoke about serious effects on the Chinese economy and society because of COVID-19, but he was sure they would not last long.[2]

On 26 March 2020, during the G20 summit, China stated its readiness to share its experience in disease prevention and control with interested countries.[3] On 18-19 May 2020, at the 73rd World Health Assembly, the first ever to be held virtually, a landmark resolution was adopted, bringing the world together to fight the COVID-19 pandemic. The resolution called for the intensification of efforts to control the pandemic. The Chinese leader reported that China took all necessary measures to fight the infection.

During the quarantine, China's population reportedly did not panic and supported the country's leadership. According to the Lancet Public Health survey, 74.5% of the population wore masks in January; in March this rate reached 98.8%, and the index of crowd avoidance was 61.3% and 85.1%, respectively. The internet is limited in China; thus, the survey was done based on Hong Kong information.

In analysing the Chinese leader's actions, the US experts can be split in two groups. The first group stands for the statement that China concealed data and facts about the virus and should be held fully responsible for the global pandemic. The second group states that the creeping government reaction was related to preventing panic. Meanwhile, Beijing needed some time for virus research. The US government supported the first group.

The USA

Today, the US role as a global leader influences the world policy and world economy. Moreover, this country is the key partner of Ukraine, considering the current political situation, so the

1   Minxin P., *How Has the Coronavirus Crisis Affected Xi's Power: A Preliminary Assessment*, "China Leadership Monitor", 01 June 2020
[https://www.prcleader.org/pei-1 access: 30 June 2020].

2   *Си Цзиньпин назвал коронавирус крупнейшей проблемой здравоохранения с момента основания КНР (Xi Jinping States Coronavirus Is the Most Serious Problem of the Health Care System since China Foundation)*, "DW", 23 February 2020
[http://surl.li/eswh access: 01 July 2020].

3   *Си Цзиньпин призвал лидеров G20 объединить усилия по разработке вакцины от коронавируса (Xi Jinping Calls G20 Leaders to Join Efforts in Coronavirus Vaccine Development)*, "IZ.ru", 26 March 2020
[https://iz.ru/991883/2020-03-26/si-tczinpin-prizval-liderov-g20-obedinit-usiliia-po-razrabotke-vaktciny-ot-koronavirusa access: 05 July 2020].

pandemic consequences in the USA also influence Ukraine. Below, we have analysed statements and actions of the US leaders.

On 22 January 2020, the first US patient was diagnosed with the novel coronavirus. President Trump said in an interview at the World Economic Forum in Davos (Switzerland) that the situation was under control with just one patient[4]. He seemed truly sure about only one patient and tried to reassure his nation in absence of any pretext for panic as the situation was under control. Later, many tourists from Asia and China particularly were diagnosed COVID-19 in the USA. Most of the world leaders in early 2020 were not ready for communications in case of a long-lasting pandemic and a constant change of the situation. President Trump was not an exception despite his communications expertise.

> **Most of the world leaders in early 2020 were not ready for communications in case of a long-lasting pandemic and a constant change of the situation. President Trump was not an exception**

Thus, on 10 February 2020, during a rally in Manchester, New Hampshire, Donald Trump expressed his hope the pandemic would end soon and underscored his cooperation with China in fighting COVID-19: "Looks like by April the virus miraculously goes away. China, I spoke with president Xi and they are working very, very hard. ... We only have 11 cases. But our trade agreement with China will defend our workers, protect our intellectual property, and substantially boost exports of American made goods".[5] Following this statement, experts see some politicising of the coronavirus, including involving statements on new US-China war or US-Russia war. As we mentioned in the beginning of the article, the new global challenge significantly affected the political sphere too.

On 11 March 2020, Trump, in his remarks to the nation, stated:

I want to speak with you about our nation's unprecedented response to the coronavirus outbreak. ... Our team is the best anywhere in the world. At the very start of the outbreak, we instituted sweeping travel restrictions on China and put in place the first federally mandated quarantine in over 50 years. We declared a public health emergency and issued the highest level of travel. ... The European Union failed to take the same precautions and restrict travel from China and other hotspots. As a result, a large number of new clusters in the United States were seeded by travellers from Europe. ... I have decided to take several strong but necessary actions to protect the health and wellbeing of all Americans. We will be suspending all travel from Europe to the United States for the next 30 days.[6]

In this statement, the president emphasised having the best team of American specialists, reassuring people and demonstrating a seemingly better US response to the pandemic than the European one. He

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4   M. Calia, *Full Interview: President Trump Discusses Trade, Impeachment, Boeing and Elon Musk with CNBC in Davos*, "CNBC", 22 January 2020
    [https://www.cnbc.com/2020/01/22/davos-2020-cnbcs-full-interview-with-president-trump.html
    access: 05 September 2020].

5   *Donald Trump New Hampshire Rally Transcript*, 10 February 2020
    [https://www.rev.com/blog/transcripts/donald-trump-new-hampshire-rally-february-10-2020 access: 20 June 2020].

6   *Remarks by President Trump in Address to the Nation*, White House, 11 March 2020
    [https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/remarks-president-trump-address-nation/ access: 20 June 2020].

appeared to people's emotions using words "unprecedented", "best team anywhere", and "strong actions". Such communication helps to unite people and makes it easier to face new challenges, making them more responsible and attentive to the situation, and helping them to understand collective responsibility for consequences.

On 16 March 2020, the US president changed his message and gave new guidelines for virus combat: "We're asking all of them to hold their gatherings to under 10 people, not just in bars and restaurants, but in homes. We really want people to be separated at this time, for which we do not have a vaccine or a therapeutic. … These guidelines will only work if every American takes this together to heart and responds as one nation and one people to stop the spread of this virus".[7]

On 24 March 2020, the US reported 53,736 patients and 706 deaths. However, despite the increase in numbers, Trump said to *Fox News*: "Easter is a very special day. … My first priority is always the health and the safety of the American people. We're working … for the interests of our fantastic country." He selected Easter as the day he wanted businesses to reopen, saying he would like to see "packed churches all over our country".[8] Within three days, the country reported 101,000 patients. Trump underscored his priority is safety and health of people, while inviting people to go to churches, despite the quarantine limitations. In this case, his speech was for those people who held religious freedom rallies sending powerful messages.

With a significant and rapid growth of new cases, in the beginning of April, the president nevertheless announced that masks were just a recommendation and were voluntary. Even his administration was confused by this statement, and the US surgeon general acknowledged that the change in the position had stoked some uncertainty considering the daily increasing number of patients[9].

Since then, the presidential rhetoric has been controversial. On 14 April 2020, the US reported 607,670 patients and 25,843 deaths, and Trump criticised the WHO for allegedly failing to respond to the pandemic and stopped funding it. In June, when the country's daily cases doubled to about 50,000, Trump reassured the nation that the pandemic was fading away: "The pandemic is getting under control".[10] Trump's tweet of 6 July 2020 says: "The Mortality Rate for the China Virus in the US is just about the LOWEST IN THE WORLD! … (and, our Economy is coming back strong!)".[11] Meanwhile, as of 13 July, the COVID-19 mortality rate was 4.1%, placing the USA at the top of the global rating list, so the above-mentioned statement was a manipulation.

7   *Remarks by President Trump, Vice President Pence, and Members of the Coronavirus Task Force in Press Briefing*, White House, 16 March 2020
    [https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/remarks-president-trump-vice-president-pence-members-coronavirus-task-force-press-briefing-3/ access: 20 June 2020].

8   A. Rupar, *The Fox News Moment That Revealed a Dangerously Confused President*, "Vox", 24 March 2020
    [https://www.vox.com/2020/3/24/21192812/fox-news-virtual-town-hall-donald-trump-coronavirus access: 20 June 2020].

9   K. Liptak, *Trump Announces New Face Mask Recommendations after Heated Internal Debate*, "CNN", 04 April 2020
    [https://edition.cnn.com/2020/04/03/politics/trump-white-house-face-masks/index.html access: 05 September 2020].

10 C. Paz, *All the President's Lies About the Coronavirus*, "Atlantic", 13 July 2020
    [https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2020/07/trumps-lies-about-coronavirus/608647/ access: 20 July 2020].

11 D. Trump, *BREAKING NEWS: The Mortality Rate for the China Virus in the U.S.…*, "Twitter", 6 July 2020
    [https://twitter.com/realDonaldTrump/status/1280209106826125313].

As the pandemic coincided with the presidential campaign in the US, which had been already very polarised, statements from the other candidates were expected. On 18 July 2020, presidential candidate Joe Biden tweeted: "Eleven. That's how many times we've broken the single-day record for new COVID-19 cases in the last month. This virus isn't going to 'just disappear' as President Trump wants. It's surging – and we need real leadership from this White House to slow its spread".[12] His key message was to demonstrate the necessity of the White House instructions instead of a statement of COVID-19 patients. Joe Biden implied the lack of number and quality of measures taken by President Trump to fight COVID-19. This situation could negatively affect Trump's image.

Considering the statements of the US top officials, such as Joe Biden and Donald Trump, we see drastic changes in the White House's attitude to the pandemic and its effects, as well as the candidates' use of COVID-19 as a tool in the election campaign when they blamed each other. Since January 2020, all Trump's statements have been about the overestimation of the pandemic's seriousness. Later in February, there were statements about US-Chinese cooperation in virus response and confidence of solving the problem by April. However, this mood disappeared in March, when Trump and his administration fully realised the responsibility before the nation and introduced some restrictions about working from home and limiting people's gatherings to small groups. At the same time, there was the strange suggestion to go to churches on Easter. In April, the statements' tonality changed again and Trump announced the suspension of cooperation with the WHO and started to criticise China for unwillingness to take responsibility for virus

spread. Amid the increase in the number of patients and mortality, the US president still neglected masks and allowed everyone to choose whether to wear them or not. In July, he claimed the situation was under control and the economy was recovering.

Thus, the pandemic and the crisis have been a platform for the election campaign, sometimes without the leaders' realising the true effects and problems of the outbreak. The attempt to stabilise and recover the economy results in undermining people's safety and national security and contributes to a growing number of patients and increased mortality.

Germany

The first case of the novel coronavirus in Germany was recorded on 27 January. European countries with the pandemic outbreak followed Asia's example of strict quarantine restrictions in March 2020.

Germany is one of the most active global actors. Since 1 July 2020, Germany has held the presidency of the EU Council, facing two challenges: first, containing the coronavirus crisis and working towards a European economic recovery, and second, initiating a lasting dynamic towards European solidarity and autonomy.

On 11 March 2020, Chancellor Angela Merkel declared in her statement that Germany was taking over the Council presidency at a time when the EU was facing "the greatest challenge in its history". According to her, the pandemic still revealed some fragility of the European project and showed the vulnerability of Europe. Merkel appealed for cohesion and solidarity in Europe as important elements of the response to the ongoing challenge: "But together ... we will

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12 J. Biden, *Eleven. That's how many times...*, "Twitter", 17 July 2020
[https://twitter.com/JoeBiden/status/1284243982747414529].

succeed in mastering this gigantic challenge. … It is still important to remain disciplined in order to effectively combat the coronavirus pandemic".[13]

On 19 May 2020, Chancellor Merkel, together with the French president Emmanuel Macron, presented a Franco-German initiative, where it was said: "We must act – we must act European, so that we can get out of this crisis in good shape". Merkel added: "The corona pandemic is the most serious crisis the EU has ever faced in its history. The aim of the initiative is for Europe to emerge from this crisis strengthened, united and in solidarity. Europe must stand together."[14]

Domestically oriented statements of Merkel were also frequent. On 18 March 2020, Merkel addressed the citizens of Germany in a speech, saying: "It is serious. Since German reunification, no, since the Second World War, there has not been a challenge to our country that depends so much on our joint solidarity."[15] On 1 April, the joint resolution of heads of government of the German states said: "Citizens are urged to keep contacts with other people outside the members of their own household to an absolute minimum, even during the Easter holidays, in accordance with the applicable rules". Merkel appealed to citizens to refrain from private travel and visits – including those by relatives.[16]

On 7 April 2020, new travel and entry rules were introduced in Germany. "We now have 'the world as a risk area', Chancellor explained the decision."[17] On 16 April, Merkel in her video statement spoke about the necessity to continue restrictions in the context of the absence of appropriate therapies and vaccines: "The pandemic can only be defeated with a strong and coordinated international response". She also underlined the important role of the WHO and other international health organisations.

Later, on 25 April 2020, a new international initiative appeared aimed at advancing the development of vaccines and drugs against the coronavirus. From the German side, a "substantial contribution" was announced.[18] On 29 April, at the Petersberg Climate Dialogue, Merkel stated in regard to pandemics and climate protection: "The more we act together, the better we can avoid human suffering and economic disruption".[19]

During her meeting with the leaders of the federal states in Berlin on 17 June 2020, "the discussions focused on the further course of action to contain the corona pandemic and the package of measures to revive the economy. The Federal Government and the Bundesländer agreed that the minimum distance of 1.5 meters, wearing of a face mask in certain public areas, increased hygiene measures, and the instrument of contact restrictions should continue to apply. We must protect each other."[20]

Merkel has always stressed the seriousness of COVID-19 and insisted on keeping the

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13 *The Federal Government Informs about the Corona Crisis*, "Deutschland.de", August 2020
    [https://www.deutschland.de/en/news/german-federal-government-informs-about-the-corona-crisis
    access: 05 August 2020].

14 Ibid.

15 Ibid.

16 Ibid.

17 Ibid.

18 Ibid.

19 Ibid.

20 Ibid.

restrictions, as well as focused on the unity of European efforts to handle COVID-19. She said that Germany, France, and the EU were facing economic challenges of a kind never seen before. Chancellor Merkel stressed the joint efforts of Germany and France in the economic reconstruction of Europe after the coronavirus pandemic. "We can only move forward together", she said at a joint press conference with President Macron.[21]

> **Merkel has always stressed the seriousness of COVID-19 and insisted on keeping the restrictions, as well as focused on the unity of European efforts to handle COVID-19**

A separate important communication line was one of the Federal Minister for Foreign Affairs Heiko Maas. In the first set of statements in early spring regarding the Germans abroad, for example, he said, "We will do everything we can to enable the thousands of German travellers who are stranded abroad to return to Germany in the next few days."[22]

The second one was about global cooperation. For example, on 5 June 2020, Maas stated before a videoconference with his counterparts from the region: "Germany wants to step up its efforts to help countries in Latin America and the Caribbean to cope with the corona pandemic". He also spoke in favour of intensifying the partnership, calling for strong world trade relations with Latin America and support from multilateral institutions.

Germany was one of the first European countries where the virus was recorded.

Since January 2020, when Merkel reported the first cases, German leaders announced cooperation with world leaders in virus response and expressed confidence that the situation would change for the better. Merkel has not changed her statements since March and the administration encouraged the nation to work from home and avoid crowds. The pandemic demonstrated some economic readiness and political resilience of Germany, and Merkel's statements proved her as the true world leader.

The Russian Federation

Russia introduced preventive quarantine restrictions in March. Since the very beginning, it was impossible to assess the real epidemiological situation there, as hospitals did not have tests and there were reports that a lot of severe pneumonia cases were recorded back in February. It is interesting that the pandemic came to Russia not from China but from Europe.

We have analysed the Russian president's and other top officials' statements on COVID-19 and their influence on the development of the political situation. In the first months of the pandemic, Russia reported a low increase of patients, stating that only foreign travellers brought COVID-19 to the country. In March, Russian top officials emphasised that the coronavirus was the problem of other countries. Putin also tried to shift responsibility to regions' governors. In April and early May 2020, the growth in the number of patients became obvious. Since the first days of the pandemic's outbreak, the Russian leader declared Russia's readiness to find a coronavirus vaccine. Despite the reluctance to admit the start of the pandemic in the country, there were

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21 Ibid.

22 Ibid.

some measures to support business and communicate with the society to keep the people informed. But at the same time, the political rating of the Russian president has drastically reduced.

Analysis of the first months of the COVID-19 response demonstrates that nations need to revise their communications strategies in terms of consistency, timeliness, and credibility

Thus, 4 June 2020, President Putin claimed stabilisation and improvement of the situation.[23] Following this statement, on 8 June 2020, Russian Prime Minister Mikhail Mishustin said: "As of 8 June, the patient number increase is 2% the sixth day in a row, Moscow has only 1% patient number increase, which was the first to face the problem in Russia, and the number increase through Russia is just 1%".[24] Both top officials kept one line in communication, reporting a lower number of coronavirus patients and claiming the situation was improving in the region.

On 10 June 2020, Moscow was ready to ease the quarantine and its mayor Sergey Sobyanin said: "It is impossible to overcome the coronavirus completely; meanwhile, I consider it is possible to return to normal life".

Despite the situation, Putin announced a military parade on 24 June, constitutional amendments on 1 July, the "Immortal Regiment" march on 12 July.[25] Hesitancy of Vladimir Putin concerning the response to COVID-19 could be explained by his two key projects – the 75th anniversary of the victory in WWII and the planned amendments to the Constitution. He was not ready to admit the pandemic reality. The victory parade was critically important for Russian authorities, as this victory is the basis of the legitimacy of Putin's regime. As we know from the latest Putin's article in the *National Interest*[26], Putin was inspired by the Soviet foreign policy of 1939-1945, including for the annexation of Crimea and realisation of the post-Crimean ideas on restoration of Yalta-Potsdam world division in the 21st century. The constitutional amendments were also very important, as without them Putin would have to leave his post in 2024.

Conclusions

All world leaders called for their nations' unity and solidarity in fighting against the virus. Some of them used these statements to strengthen their political positions; others were true leaders taking care of

23 *Путин заявил об улучшении ситуации с COVID-19 в России (Putin Stated About Improvement of COVID-19 Situation)*, "RBC", 04 June 2020
[https://www.rbc.ru/rbcfreenews/5ed8ea249a7947973f63ab61 access: 10 June 2020].

24 *Мишустин заявил о стабилизации ситуации в России с коронавирусом (Mishustin Stated About Coronavirus Situation Stabilisation in Russia)*, "Interfax", 08 June 2020
[https://tourism.interfax.ru/ru/news/articles/70638/ access: 10 June 2020].

25 *Собянин заявил о невозможности победить коронавирус полностью (Sobyanin Stated About Impossibility to Overcome Virus Completely)*, "Lenta.ru", 10 June 2020
[https://lenta.ru/news/2020/06/10/unreal/ access: 10 June 2020].

26 *Vladimir Putin: The Real Lessons of the 75th Anniversary of the World War II*, "National Interest", 18 June 2020
[https://nationalinterest.org/feature/vladimir-putin-real-lessons-75th-anniversary-world-war-ii-162982 access: 05 September 2020].

their people. In any case, this new challenge forced them to make more statements and take preventive measures to slow down the spread of the new global pandemic. Sometimes, they needed to call for unity in regions, the way Merkel and Macron appealed for the EU unity and strength in the name of the future.

Analysis of the first months of the COVID-19 response demonstrates that nations need to revise their communications strategies in terms of consistency, timeliness, and credibility. The problems became obvious for those countries where the integral information policy is absent and which have an imperfect strategic communications system. The world truly faces new challenges, revealing problems in the information sphere, and the international security system particularly failed to respond appropriately to these challenges.

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DOUBLE CHALLENGE: THE CORONAVIRUS PANDEMIC AND THE GLOBAL INFODEMIC

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The coronavirus not only is challenging national health care systems but also creates a favourable environment for numerous information attacks. The global infodemic is another challenge to address. In the article, the author shows who benefits from spreading fakes and what goals these actors have (the most obvious actor is the Russian Federation). The article considers some fundamental principles in which an "info vaccination" may be grounded, considering national patterns of information perception. Among these principles, the following should be named: case studies of typical disinformation, mobilisation of opinion-makers for the sake of public interest, cooperation with the institutions of civil society, and, the most importantly, stressing that the public interest is the multiplied personal interest.

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic, which began with an outbreak in the Chinese province of Wuhan in late 2019, will determine the life of the humanity for at least another year or two – until a vaccination becomes cheap and effective enough. The pandemic has posed a number of challenges to humanity in a wide range of areas, from urban planning to access to food, and has raised the issue of the balance between civil liberties and a decent level of public safety. This list can be extended. However, in today's world, a critical resource is the access to information (reliable and up-to-date), which is the basis of decision-making – at both state and personal levels.

The use of information weapons has repeatedly proven its effectiveness. Therefore, it is quite natural that during the period of instability caused by the pandemic, at the same time there were opportunities for (dis)information campaigns by various international actors in order to achieve their own goals in the international arena. Usually, the Russian Federation and China are mentioned among such actors.

The purpose of this study is to analyse the impact of the coronavirus pandemic on changes in the world's information environment, the nature of threats to information security, and the role of Russia and China in this process. I will pay more attention to the Russian contribution to the rise of the infodemic. The article will conclude with propositions on possible ways to overcome the devastating effects of information attacks.

Undoubtedly, this topic is not brand-new in public discussion. Thus, there are open

debates about it[1]; there are already dozens of thematic journalistic publications[2]. Most of this content is descriptive. Now is a period of facts and experience accumulation, which is yet to be understood, analysed, and reflected.

Infodemic and Infodemiology

Famous words by Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, the director-general of the World Health Organisation (WHO), at a gathering of foreign policy and security experts in Munich, Germany, on 15 February 2020 introduced *infodemic* into global public and scientific discourse: "We are not just fighting an epidemic; we are fighting an infodemic". That was an acknowledgement of an obvious fact: Fake news about COVID-19 spread faster than the virus itself.

However, he was not the first to use this term. One of the latest editorials of *The Lancet* claims that the term *infodemiology* was first used in 2002[3]. The research area of this new discipline is at the intersection of public health and information security studies, where academics explore the "distribution and determinants of information in an electronic medium, specifically the Internet, or in a population, with the ultimate aim to inform public health and public policy".[4] The cited definition has been proposed by Gunther Eysenbach, an author of dozens of texts on infodemiology and problems of public health and e-health; he calls himself the first infodemiologist in his Google Scholar profile[5]. Moreover, the first conference on infodemiology (although, as we see, the research area has been existing since early 2000), hosted this summer by WHO,[6] proves the importance of infodemic studies and shows the future research perspective.

Infodemic management is another new research area, formed at the intersection of management and infodemiology, and it is "applying evidence-based interventions that bring understandable, localized evidence-based information to citizens and drive positive health-seeking behaviour".[7]

The professor of international relations and columnist for the *Washington Post* David Rothkopf coined the term *infodemics* in 2003 in his column: "What exactly do I mean by the 'infodemic'? A few facts, mixed with fear, speculation and rumour, amplified and relayed swiftly worldwide by modern information technologies, have affected

1   *Дезінформація проти України та ЄС у період пандемії COVID-19 (Disinformation against Ukraine and the EU in Times of the COVID-19 Pandemic)*, "Ukraine-Office.eu", 19 May 2020
    [https://ukraine-office.eu/disinformation-against-ukraine-and-the-eu-in-times-of-the-covid-19-pandemic-2/ access: 1 August 2020].

2   *Rosyjskie działania dezinformacyjne w dobie koronawirusa – jak Rosja próbuje wykorzystać koronakryzys do realizacji własnych interesów (Russia's Disinformation Efforts in the Era of Coronavirus – How Russia Tries to Use the Coronavirus to Pursue Its Own Interests)*, Instytut Nowej Europy, 15 May 2020
    [http://ine.org.pl/rosyjskie-dzialania-dezinformacyjne-w-dobie-koronawirusa-jak-rosja-probuje-wykorzystac-koronakryzys-do-realizacji-wlasnych-interesow/ access: 1 August 2020].

3   *The Truth Is out There, Somewhere*, "The Lancet", 1 August 2020
    [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736(20)31678-0 access: 12 August 2020].

4   G. Eysenbach, *Infodemiology and Infoveillance: Framework for an Emerging Set of Public Health Informatics Methods to Analyze Search, Communication and Publication Behavior on the Internet*, "Journal of Medical Internet Research", 11(1): e11, 27 March 2009 [doi:10.2196/jmir.1157].

5   G. Eysenbach, *Google Scholar Profile*
    [https://scholar.google.com/citations?user=UjKmMQcAAAAJ&hl=en access: 1 August 2020].

6   *1st WHO Infodemiology Conference*, WHO
    [https://www.who.int/teams/risk-communication/infodemic-management/1st-who-infodemiology-conference access: 1 August 2020].

7   *Infodemic Management – Infodemiology*, WHO
    [https://www.who.int/teams/risk-communication/infodemic-management access: 1 August 2020].

national and international economies, politics and even security in ways that are utterly disproportionate with the root realities. It is a phenomenon we have seen with greater frequency in recent years—not only in our reaction to SARS, for example, but also in our response to terrorism and even to relatively minor occurrences such as shark sightings".[8] As we see, Rothkopf was inspired in some way by the epidemic of SARS – another coronavirus, which, however, was not so terminal. The informational flood made its influence much more significant than it could be and the public health crisis harder to control.[9] In the next dozen of years the term *infodemic* seemed to be forgotten, only to come back with the new coronavirus outbreak.[10]

> **The infodemic and pandemic are interdependent, and an infodemic can make a pandemic worse**

The definition of *infodemic* is clarified by WHO in 2020 as "an excessive amount of information about a problem, which makes it difficult to identify a solution. They can spread misinformation, disinformation and rumours during a health emergency. Infodemics can hamper an effective public health response and create confusion and distrust among people".[11]

Another term that should be clarified is *infodemic management*, which means "applying evidence-based interventions that bring understandable, localized evidence-based information to citizens and drive positive health-seeking behaviour".[12]

The infodemic and pandemic are interdependent, and an infodemic can make a pandemic worse. That happens in several ways: The information flood influences the ability to find and analyse trustworthy sources, and this is especially dangerous for decision-makers. Reliable information seems to be buried under tonnes of fakes and horrors and conspiracy theories. The massive amount of negative information may cause anxiety, depression, et cetera.[13]

Why Is the Virus of Disinformation So Catching?

Let us consider the preconditions and reasons for the intensification of disinformation attacks in the first half of 2020 in the world, in general, and by Russia concerning Ukraine, in particular. Here are some general trends:

1. The destruction of the usual picture of the world creates despair and panic.

2. The unexpected nature of the challenges stimulates the spread of conspiracy theories and fear. In such conditions, the seeds of populism quickly sprout.

8   D. J. Rothkopf, *When the Buzz Bites Back*, 2004 [http://www1.udel.edu/globalagenda/2004/student/readings/infodemic.html access: 1 September 2020].

9   *Words We're Watching: 'Infodemic'*, "Merriam-Webster Dictionary" [https://www.merriam-webster.com/words-at-play/words-were-watching-infodemic-meaning access: 1 August 2020].

10 Ibid.

11 *UN Tackles 'Infodemic' of Misinformation and Cybercrime in COVID-19 Crisis*, UN [https://www.un.org/en/un-coronavirus-communications-team/un-tackling-%E2%80%98infodemic%E2%80%99-misinformation-and-cybercrime-covid-19 access: 1 August 2020].

12 WHO, n7.

13 *Understanding the Infodemic and Misinformation in the Fight against COVID-19*, PAHO, 2020 [https://iris.paho.org/bitstream/handle/10665.2/52052/Factsheet-infodemic_eng.pdf?sequence=14 access: 1 August 2020].

3. A significant slowdown in the pace of global economic development becomes obvious. And the expectation factor of an economic catastrophe stimulates the desire to find the culprit quickly.

4. There is no universal protocol for the treatment of COVID-19; the search for a vaccine is still in progress; the question about the immunity of those who have already fallen ill remains open.

> **Some societies, e.g., the US or the Ukrainian one, are hyper-polarised and politicised. People are not very likely to believe representatives of the opposite political party, no matter whether they tell the truth or not**

5. Restriction of the rights and freedoms of citizens is perceived as an appropriate (though not always effective) method of combating the spread of the coronavirus. Therefore, many are willing to give up some civil liberties in exchange for imaginary security. The coronaviral reality is undermining the fundamental foundations of democracy, creating a temptation to severely restrict the rights and freedoms of citizens under the pretext of protecting their health.

6. Democratic procedures are also under attack: The dates of the parliamentary elections in Northern Macedonia have been postponed. The change of the date of the presidential campaign in Poland significantly altered its picture[14]. The coronavirus in the United States not only destroyed the economic achievements of

the Donald Trump administration but also became an unexpected third player in the presidential election.

7. False information about the coronavirus spreads much faster than accurate news does, and even faster than does the coronavirus itself.

8. Social media often replace traditional media, but the information is not always as reliable as it should be.

9. Some societies, e.g., the US or the Ukrainian one, are hyper-polarised and politicised. People are not very likely to believe representatives of the opposite political party, no matter whether they tell the truth or not.

In Ukraine, the situation is both in line with global trends and has its specifics. The fundamental precondition for the new round of the disinformation campaign is that the territory of the former USSR in general, and Ukraine in particular, is considered by the Kremlin to be a zone of its particular interests, so they decided to use the crisis to their advantage. Besides:

- The pandemic significantly increases feelings of anxiety; many recipients of information prefer to consume it in the language they know best. And we have to admit, there is much more relevant Russian-language content than Ukrainian-language one;
- There is a marked increase in the use of social networks and various messengers as sources of information. They compete with traditional media and are used, in particular, by the Russian Federation, which has recently spread the practice of using anonymous Telegram channels to Ukraine;
- Low prevalence of critical thinking makes the Ukrainian society more

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14 S. Walker, *Duda Narrowly Re-elected in Poland in Boost for Ruling Nationalists*, "Guardian", 13 July 2020 [https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/jul/13/incumbent-andrzej-duda-wins-polish-presidential-election-commission access: 1 August 2020].

vulnerable to various manifestations of misinformation;
- The traditional weakness of Ukrainian state institutions and institutions of civil society plays a role;
- The Ukrainian society remains emotionally vulnerable.

As we can see, the ground for spreading misinformation in Ukraine is more than favourable.

Cui Prodest?

Two of the most obvious actors are Russia and China. Both Vladimir Putin and Xi Jinping do not depend on election. This statement seems to be proven already by European think tanks. For example: "Foreign actors and certain third countries, in particular Russia and China, have engaged in targeted influence operations and disinformation campaigns around COVID-19 in the EU, its neighbourhood and globally, seeking to undermine democratic debate and exacerbate social polarisation, and improve their own image in the COVID-19 context".[15] The two non-democratic states have different strategic goals, but they turned into temporary allies[16].

What is the gain for the Russian Federation and China in spreading misinformation on COVID-19? The first thing to say is that both states have the infrastructure, methodology,

and experience in information operations. The second is that spreading fakes on COVID-19 would help both states to reach their strategic goals. The key one for Russia is to undermine the EU and its ability to cope with new, growing challenges. The key goals for China are to project a positive image of itself and show the advantages of its communist system.

Obviously, the executives of the tactical tasks differ. For example, in Ukraine, pro-Russian politicians are always ready to challenge the pro-European narrative. These executives may seek to achieve their own goals – financial gain, political gain, and experimental manipulation. Let us list some cases of misinformation of obviously Russian origin. This list may not be exhaustive, but it will help us illustrate some general trends.
- Vadym Rabinovych, the co-chairman of the pro-Russian political party Opposition Platform – For Life, stated in March 2020 that "Ukraine has been supplying our specialists to the EU for six years, and today it cannot get anything from them."[17] This and similar statements promote the message: "Europe will not help".
- Renat Kuzmin, a representative of the Opposition Platform – For Life, paid much attention to the functioning of "secret American bacteriological laboratories in Ukraine"[18]; his efforts were supported by Viktor Medvedchuk, the head of

15 *Tackling COVID-19 Disinformation – Getting the Facts Right*, Joint Communication to the European Parliament, the European Council, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions, 10 July 2020
[https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/info/files/communication-tackling-covid-19-disinformation-getting-facts-right_en.pdf access: 1 August 2020].

16 *Россия и Китай продвигают конспирологические нарративы о коронавирусе - агентство ЕС (Russia and China Promote Conspiracy Narratives about the Coronavirus – EU Agency)*, "Eurointegration", 21 April 2020 [https://www.eurointegration.com.ua/rus/news/2020/04/21/7108976/ access: 1 August 2020].

17 *Рабинович: После пандемии коронавируса мир уже не будет таким, как прежде (Rabinovych: After the Coronavirus Pandemic, the World Will Not Be the Same)*, "Interfax", 26 March 2020 [https://interfax.com.ua/news/press-release/650144.html access: 1 September 2020].

18 *ОПЗЖ инициирует уголовное расследование фактов незаконного функционирования в Украине американских военных бактериологических лабораторий (The Opposition Platform – For Life Is Launching a Criminal Investigation Into Facts of Illegal Functioning of American Military Bacteriological Labs in Ukraine)*, "112.ua" [https://112.ua/mnenie/opzzh-iniciiruet-ugolovnoe-rassledovanie-faktov-nezakonnogo-funkcionirovaniya-v-ukraine-amerikanskih-voennyh-bakteriologicheskih-laboratoriy-533959.html access: 1 August 2020].

the party's political council[19]. Such statements aim to undermine the image of another strategic partner of Ukraine – the United States.

- Also, there are many texts about the influence of George Soros and Bill Gates. The financial support these entrepreneurs and philanthropists provide to civil society institutions is a crucial reason for such information attacks. George Soros's concept of an "open society" globally contradicts the matrix of "sovereign democracy" on which Vladimir Putin relies. It is no coincidence that the pro-Russian media are incredibly active in demonising Soros in the post-Soviet space. The Russian propaganda machine also used Bill Gates's TED Talk speech[20] in 2015 against him. The philanthropist stated that a viral infection was a more significant threat to humanity than a nuclear war. Five years later, in just a few months, more than a million posts appeared on the internet linking Bill Gates and the coronavirus.

What Can Be Done?

The first "infodemiologist" Gunther Eysenbach writes about the four pillars of infodemic management:

1) information monitoring (infoveillance);

2) building e-health literacy and science literacy capacity;

3) encouraging knowledge refinement and quality improvement processes such as fact-checking and peer-review; and

4) accurate and timely knowledge translation, minimising distorting factors such as political or commercial influences[21].

Let us add some ingredients to this recipe.

One must take into account national specifics of information perception. Russian television channels are banned in Ukraine; Russian social networks and even movies are banned as well. However, the flow of disinformation has not stopped and will not stop soon – it is impossible to build an information "iron curtain", and the understanding of the need to protect oneself from Russian information aggression is not always strong enough.

> **The lack of a "single voice" has led to growing distrust toward government messages on both countering the coronavirus pandemic and domestic politics in general**

Submission of information "in one voice" is key. Unfortunately, after the election of Volodymyr Zelenskyy as the president of Ukraine, the "one voice" programme for executive authorities was curtailed. It seems problematic to deploy it in the conditions of the coronavirus. The lack of a "single voice" has led to growing distrust toward government messages on both countering the coronavirus pandemic and domestic politics in general.

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19 А. Робінсон, *Як Кремль відродив фейк про "американські біолабораторії" в Україні під час коронавірусу (How the Kremlin Revived the Fake About "American biolabs" in Ukraine During the Coronavirus)*, "BBC", 11 May 2020 [https://www.bbc.com/ukrainian/news-52615461 access: 1 August 2020].

20 B. Gates, *The Next Outbreak? We Are Not Ready.*, "TED" [https://www.ted.com/talks/bill_gates_the_next_outbreak_we_re_not_ready access: 1 September 2020].

21 G. Eysenbach, *How to Fight an Infodemic: The Four Pillars of Infodemic Management*, "Journal of Medical Internet Research" 22(6): e21820, 2020 [https://www.jmir.org/2020/6/e21820 access: 1 August 2020].

VIP speakers should use the Revolver principle in communications. The decline in the authority of the Ukrainian state governance makes it impossible to use this step effectively, but it should be taken into account given the indefinite duration of the coronavirus pandemic. It will be recalled that this is a probable second wave of coronavirus and there will be a long period of uncertainty before the invention of a vaccine against COVID-19. Thus, the task for the reformatted Ministry of Culture and Information Policy is to form a message box of government officials on the topic of the coronavirus.

Case studies for typical misinformation should be systematised. Ukraine's presence on the front line of a hybrid war with Russia presupposes the Kremlin's information activities in various spheres, among which the coronavirus is one of the main areas. It seems logical for Ukraine to try to systematise the experience of counteraction and broadcast it in the interest of other states – first of all, GUAM partners and representatives of the European Union. It will not be superfluous to establish a dialogue on this topic with Belarus, despite the use of contrasting models of combating the coronavirus at the state level.

To show the "light at the end of the tunnel" would make the perception of hard news easier. The instability of the coronavirus pandemic situation requires decisive and resonant steps from the Ukrainian authorities. Lack of financial capacity should push the government to asymmetric actions and consolidation of the society.

The interaction with civil society and relevant international initiatives is needed. Indeed, the initiative "On the Other Side of the Pandemic" is already operating in Ukraine (https://coronafakes.com/). It is a platform initiated and maintained on a volunteer basis, on which information is quickly checked and fakes about the coronavirus are refuted. International initiatives include https://shareverified.com/en, a UN initiative, and https://euvsdisinfo.eu/category/blog/coronavirus/.

To sum up, the goal of all these possible ways of countering an infodemic is to work on changing the environmental, political, and social factors that make spreading misinformation easy.[22]

Conclusions

The coronavirus pandemic has had a systemic impact on many areas of human existence and the information sphere – one of the key areas in this case. The situation of uncertainty and fear is typical for the whole world, but a number of factors make the Ukrainian information space more vulnerable to information attacks. Among these factors are the ongoing war with Russia, the Kremlin's particular interest in shaking up the situation in Ukraine and undermining information sovereignty, and the readiness of the Ukrainian audience to accept Russian-language content and messages favourable to the Russian side. These messages are diverse but all aimed at achieving several key goals: destabilising the situation inside Ukraine and undermining the confidence of Ukrainian citizens in Western partners and their state institutions. Therefore, it is time for an academic discussion on the essence of the infodemic, its specific manifestations in Ukraine, and the search for ways to counteract it.

This is the moment when the connection between misinformation and death is visible and prominent. We may see different variations in different parts of the world, but the result is more or less the same: Infodemic is a significant threat to public health.

22 *The Truth*, n3.

I would like to finish the article by citing "From Pandemic to Infodemic," a speech by the vice president of the European Commission for Values and Transparency Věra Jourová on countering disinformation amid COVID-19: "The COVID-19 pandemic is just a reminder about the vast problem of misinformation, disinformation and digital hoaxes".[23] Of course, Madam Jourová is right. Information security is already one of the critical elements of state and global security, and its importance is not going to shrink unless humanity should find itself in the stone age.

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23 *Speech of Vice President Věra Jourová on Countering Disinformation Amid COVID-19: "From Pandemic to Infodemic"*, EU, 4 June 2020
[https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/speech_20_1000 access: 1 August 2020].

COVID-19 AND THE SURVEILLANCE STATE: A NEW PRETEXT FOR LIMITING PERSONAL FREEDOMS AND DISSENT IN THE POST-SOVIET SPACE

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COVID-19 has seen a number of governments in the post-Soviet region enhance their law enforcement and surveillance capabilities. Governments are leveraging existing technologies to police COVID-19 lockdowns and using the pandemic as a test case for new forms of tracking citizens. In the absence of a clear end date to the pandemic, there is an emerging threat of governments' maintaining enhanced restrictions on fundamental freedoms and employing surveillance technology indefinitely as a means of suppressing dissent. The international community will need to improve its understanding of these threats, and integrate them into policy responses to democratic deficiencies in the region.

A Novel Threat, a Novel Pretext

The COVID-19 pandemic has prompted multiple changes in the behaviours and expectations of governments vis-à-vis their populations. It has seen populations and legislatures grant state bodies powers that in many countries were hitherto inconceivable. The mandatory closure of private businesses, restrictions on the movement of people across borders, within their own country and in some cases within their own cities, and the implementation of penalties for failing to wear face coverings in normal times would raise significant alarm. In the post-Soviet region, the adoption of many of these measures has generated less attention among populations than in Europe or North America, given that states in the region already in the pre-COVID-19 context enjoyed a high ability to control and restrict the population's activities and movement. Meanwhile, domestic checks and balances on government powers and policies are in many cases weak, and civil society organisations have limited resources to track and call out improper governance. This makes watching out for and identifying the abuse of pandemic-related measures in the post-Soviet region at an international level all the more vital.

We have identified three areas of particular concern regarding how post-Soviet governments are responding to COVID-19, which are – or could be – used to pursue non-epidemiological agendas. These areas are:
- The expansion of police powers and states of emergency;
- The passage of legislation without usual levels of scrutiny;
- The leveraging of existing surveillance capability, or testing and expansion of new surveillance tools, to police lockdowns and/or track propagation of the virus.

In the absence of a clear end date to the pandemic, there is a substantial threat that governments will maintain increased law enforcement activities and limitations on public assembly indefinitely as a means of suppressing opposition activity and protests. Meanwhile, the mobilisation of sophisticated surveillance capacities to tackle COVID-19 threatens to provide governments with a vast new means of monitoring and containing civic action and dissent, well beyond the need to track and trace epidemiological threats.

> **the mobilisation of sophisticated surveillance capacities to tackle COVID-19 threatens to provide governments with a vast new means of monitoring and containing civic action and dissent, well beyond the need to track and trace epidemiological threats**

Police Powers and Detaining Critics

The expansion of police powers was probably the first and most anticipated area in which COVID-19 was abused in the region. In Kyrgyzstan, for example, lockdowns and curfews in place at the beginning of the outbreak led to multiple anecdotal reports of abusive behaviour on the part of law enforcement personnel, including arbitrary detention.[1] Meanwhile, states of emergency put in place to tackle the virus have provided authorities with a convenient mechanism for containing their critics.

Abuse of COVID-19-related restrictions as a means to suppress the political opposition was evident in the early stages of the pandemic. In Azerbaijan, by April at least six opposition activists and pro-opposition journalists had been arrested on charges of violating quarantine or lockdown rules, and received up to 30 days imprisonment as a result. All had been vocal in their criticism of the government's response to the pandemic.[2]

Across Central Asia, at least 300 people have been detained for spreading false information about the virus, and a disproportionate number appear to have been journalists and opposition activists. In Kazakhstan, a prominent activist who had been organising anti-government protests before the pandemic broke out was convicted in June 2020 for spreading false information about coronavirus after he criticised the government's response online. He was prohibited from participating in political or social activism for five years.[3] In Kyrgyzstan, social media users who had posted content expressing criticism or concern about the state response reported having their homes searched.[4] As lockdowns have been eased, arrests on the basis of violating quarantines and stay-at-home measures have receded. However, legislation allowing for the detention of people accused of spreading false information about the virus remains in place across many countries, especially in Central Asia, and will remain prone to abuse or at the least subjective assessments.

1 A. Imanaliyeva, *Kyrgyzstan Law Enforcement Abusing Coronavirus Restrictions*, Activists Say, "Eurasianet", 24 April 2020
   [www.eurasianet.org access: 15 August 2020].

2 *Azerbaijan: Crackdown on Critics amid Pandemic*, "Human Rights Watch", 16 April 2020
   [hrw.org access: 15 August 2020].

3 *Kazakh Activist Convicted of Criticizing Government's Coronavirus Response*, "Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty",
   23 June 2020
   [www.rferl.org access: 30 August 2020].

4 E. Lemon, B. Jardine, *Across Central Asia, Police States Expand Under the Cover of COVID-19*, "World Politics Review",
   14 July 2020
   [www.worldpoliticsreview.com access: 15 August 2020].

States of Emergency

Concerns about the misuse of COVID-19-related states of emergency by governments have been observed across the world. The prohibition on public gatherings mandated under most states of emergency has also generated concern about abuses in some post-Soviet nations. In Armenia, the government has extended a state of emergency each month since March 2020, all the while demonstrating strong reluctance to impose any new lockdown measures since May 2020. This has attracted criticism from opposition politicians. They view the renewal of states of emergency, and specifically the prohibition within them on public assembly, as a pretext for warding off anti-government protests, amid growing criticism of the government's handling of the pandemic. The government upon announcing yet another extension of the state of emergency in August 2020 finally removed restrictions on political rallies, but concern about the legal freedom that the state of emergency affords the government persists.[5]

In Kazakhstan, law enforcement in April 2020 detained a number of journalists for violating the terms of the state of emergency, after they shot footage in the courtyard of a hospital for a report about a controversial transfer of patients; the journalists said that all their documents were in order.[6] A number of government critics in Central Asia were also charged with spreading false information during the state of emergency on what rights activists described as spurious grounds.[7]

A Murky Environment for the Passage of Legislation

The virus has also seen threats to the legislative process emerge in more subtle ways in the post-Soviet region. Opportunities for MPs, public watchdogs, and industry stakeholders to scrutinise government and legislation are typically poor in many jurisdictions in normal times. The lack of transparency surrounding governance and the legislative process is being exacerbated in the current conditions. In some cases, governments are using COVID-19 and the states of emergency linked to it to distract from – or as a justification for – the adoption of controversial legislation, or to pass measures without requisite consultation of affected parties.

> *Across Central Asia, at least 300 people have been detained for spreading false information about the virus, and a disproportionate number appear to have been journalists and opposition activists*

For example, the Tajikistan government in March 2020 introduced a requirement that all electronic devices be registered with a government body, for security and defence purposes.[8] The controversial measures have been in the works for several years, and there are few mechanisms in place in ordinary

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5   *Armenia Extends Coronavirus State of Emergency*, "Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty Armenia service", 12 August 2020 [www.azatutyun.am access: 15 August 2020].

6   Z. Iskaliyeva, *Журналистов КТК забрала полиция – медики облбольницы не успели сказать им свою правду (Journalists from KTK Detained by Police – Doctors Unable to Tell Them Their Rights)*, "Ақ Жайық", 11 April 2020 [www.m.azh.kz access: 30 August].

7   *Central Asia: Respect Rights in Covid-19 Responses*, "Human Rights Watch", 23 April 2020 [www.hrw.org access: 30 August].

8   *Total Control over Mobile Devices in Tajikistan*, "Cabar Asia", 18 May 2020 [www.cabar.asia access: 15 August 2020].

times for lawmakers or interested parties to scrutinise and comment on legislation. Nonetheless, their introduction in the early days of the global COVID-19 panic meant that they received even less scrutiny from both local and international monitors and created fewer opportunities for industry input than usual. With presidential elections scheduled for October 2020, there is justified speculation that the law provides the authorities with another tool to control citizens and their communications.

> **Perhaps of greatest, longer-term concern is the way in which governments are leveraging existing – or developing new – surveillance technologies to police their lockdowns and to track the epidemiological situation**

More ambitiously, there is a threat that some political forces may seek to pass significant political changes under COVID-19 lockdowns. In Kyrgyzstan during the COVID-19 state of emergency, an MP in March 2020 proposed holding a referendum on introducing a presidential rather than parliamentary voting system. It was widely viewed as an attempt to extend presidential term limits.[9] While it gained little traction with other lawmakers, it is an example of how the crisis provides an opportunity to introduce far-reaching political changes without even the relatively low levels of opposition and media scrutiny usually in place in the region.

Sophisticated Surveillance

Perhaps of greatest, longer-term concern is the way in which governments are leveraging existing – or developing new – surveillance technologies to police their lockdowns and to track the epidemiological situation.

Russia is a prominent example. Russia had already over several years been developing an increasingly vast and sophisticated artificial intelligence (AI) capacity. It adopted a national AI Strategy in October 2019, calling for an ambitious programme for the development of AI up to 2030, including the development of a population database and the production of a proprietary hardware platform. The government saw COVID-19 as an opportunity to test the emerging technology in place under this strategy, and in turn, an opportunity to use that technology to manage the virus and police popular adherence to suppression measures.[10]

To that end, the Russian authorities since mid-March 2020 have been expanding surveillance measures in order to enforce COVID-19 lockdowns. In the capital Moscow alone, a network of tens of thousands of cameras, already installed with facial recognition software as part of a Safe City initiative, was used in conjunction with a personal digital pass system, under which people wishing to leave their home during lockdown were required to log their requested outings via a digital pass, a QR code system installed on their mobile phone. In total, 23 regions used the digital pass system to oversee COVID-19 lockdowns.

9   E. Kazibekov, *Эксперт: Общество воспримет референдум как попытку узурпации власти Жээнбековым (Expert: Society Views the Referendum as an Attempt by Jeenbekov to Usurp Power)*, "Vesti.kg", 2 April 2020 [www.vesti.kg access: 15 August 2020].

10 J. Paul Goode, *Russia and Digital Surveillance in the Wake of COVID-19*, Ponars Eurasia Policy Memo 640, May 2020 [www.ponarseurasia.org access: 15 August 2020].

These measures, which facilitate the collection of personal data, allowed the authorities to identify breaches of the lockdown. The Moscow police in mid-March 2020 said that they had detained 200 residents during the first two weeks of using the city's 178,000 facial recognition cameras for violations of stay-at-home requirements. In the Krasnodar region, the regional authorities said they had identified 504,000 vehicles breaking quarantine in the first day of the system's operation alone.

Such surveillance has clear implications for data security, and raises the potential for abuse of personal data by the authorities. Several Russian rights groups have voiced concerns about the enhanced surveillance measures, arguing that the government deployed the surveillance technology without putting in place safeguards to ensure that the measures were legal and proportionate to the crisis. Agora International Human Rights Group has said several of the measures violated the right to a private life, medical confidentiality, and freedom of movement.[11]

Kazakhstan has also allowed the use of existing video surveillance footage equipped with facial recognition technology – also, like in Russia, installed on the basis of improving traffic safety – to police its lockdown. Footage of people's movements recorded on cameras has been used by local courts to establish violations of restrictions of movement around cities during lockdowns.[12]

Looking forward, the deployment of technology of this kind creates a simple mechanism for surveillance to last well beyond the COVID-19 crisis, especially once it has been installed. The head of the World Health Organisation in Russia in an interview stated that surveillance tools "can be useful as long as they are used in the appropriate way", and emphasised the importance of COVID-19-related restrictions and measures more broadly being "commensurate with the risk and be time limited".[13]

However, in the context of the Russian government's steady increase since 2012 of control over internet freedoms under the pretext of combatting extremism and other vague security commitments, there can be little confidence that these enhanced surveillance measures will not be used for purposes that stretch well beyond tackling and containing COVID-19. Russia has overseen a proliferation of legislation aimed at increasing its ability to censor content, block websites, and retain, and interfere in the privacy of, communications. Human rights defenders have documented multiple cases of these laws being used on spurious grounds for political purposes, and in many instances in contravention of citizens' freedom of expression.[14] Pertinently, facial recognition technology was used in Russia in September 2019 to identify participants at an authorised rally. Activists in Russia have since failed in their attempts to ban the use of such technology at protests on the grounds that it violated rights to privacy and freedom of assembly, but in July 2020 took

11 D. Gaynutdinov, *Пандемия слежки (A Pandemic of Surveillance)*, "Agora International Human Rights Group", July 2020 [www.agora1.legal access: 15 August 2020].

12 E. Lemon, B. Jardine, *Across Central Asia, Police States Expand Under the Cover of COVID-19*, "World Politics Review", 14 July 2020 [www.worldpoliticsreview.com access: 15 August 2020].

13 C. Maynes, *Behind Russia's Coronavirus Fight, a Surveillance State Blooms*, "Voice of America", 6 May 2020 [www.voanews.com access: 15 August 2020].

14 *Online and on All Fronts: Russia's Assault on Freedom of Expression*, "Human Rights Watch", 18 July 2017 [www.hrw.org access: 15 August 2020]; *Russia: Growing Internet Isolation, Control, Censorship*, "Human Rights Watch", 18 June 2020 [www.hrw.org access: 15 August 2020].

their case to the European Court of Human Rights.[15]

Tracking and Tracing

Meanwhile, the development of mobile (cell) phone applications to track and trace COVID-19 cases opens up a new source of concern. Central Asian governments have been particularly active in this respect. Kyrgyzstan in April released its STOP COVID-19 KG application, in principle an effective tool to track and trace confirmed and suspected cases of the virus. The application combines an individual's geolocation data and digital profile – including passport data, and also allows those managing it to listen to a user's conversations and even to take control over the device.

> *The tension between security and public health responses, on the one hand, and respect for human and social rights, on the other, is a complex issue that governments and populations across the world must regularly examine and balance*

In practice, the application appears to have been used mostly to issue fines to COVID-19 violators rather than to allow the authorities to oversee targeted self-isolated and stay-at-home programmes for people who have been exposed to COVID-19.[16] While that may be justified as an important part of the Kyrgyzstan government's response to the virus, the focus on identifying violations rather than tracking and tracing the virus provides insight into how it can and might be used to police broader civilian behaviour outside of the context of the virus. A Kyrgyzstan-based monitoring group has described the application as gross violation of laws regarding personal data protection and cybersecurity.[17]

Beyond COVID-19

The tension between security and public health responses, on the one hand, and respect for human and social rights, on the other, is a complex issue that governments and populations across the world must regularly examine and balance. The stakes associated with striking the wrong balance are inevitably higher in countries with weak political institutions and authoritarian tendencies. Evidently, there is a considerable threat in much of the post-Soviet region that limitations on freedom of assembly and enhanced surveillance systems will be left in place beyond any credible epidemiological need.

The political environment in which these measures are being adopted substantially increases the threat of their misuse. In Russia, levels of trust in President Vladimir Putin have seen a steady erosion since 2019 amid a fall in living standards, to reach just 23% in July 2020, the lowest since 2017, according to independent polling by the

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15 A. Zlobina, *Moscow's Use of Facial Recognition Technology Challenged*, "Human Rights Watch", 8 July 2020 [www.hrw.org access: 15 August 2020].

16 K. Baymuratova, *Власти разработали приложение для отслеживания людей на карантине. Рассказываем, почему оно опасно (The Authorities Have Developed an Application to Track People during Quarantine. We Explain Why This Is Dangerous)*, "Kloop.kg", [27 April 2020 access: 15 August 2020].

17 *ОФ ГИИП подготовил анализ о соответствии законодательству применяемых мер по борьбе с COVID-19 (The Civil Initiative for Internet Policy Has Prepared an Analysis of Compliance of Measures to Tackle COVID-19 with the Law)*, Общественный Фонд «Гражданская инициатива интернет политики» (Civil Initiative for Internet Policy), 14 April 2020 [internetpolicy.kg access: 15 August 2020].

Levada Centre.[18] Meanwhile, gubernatorial elections are scheduled for September 2020 and parliamentary elections for 2021. Taken together with the emergence of unusual anti-government protest activity in Russia's Far East, and the unprecedented pro-democracy protests in Belarus since early 2020, the authorities are likely to look to use surveillance systems honed during COVID-19 to marginalise dissent and maintain full control of the political environment. The same calculations are likely to be made elsewhere in the post-Soviet space. As the combination of the pandemic and falling commodities prices increases socio-economic hardship and puts strain on the social contracts on which many authoritarian regimes are based, governments will look to enhance their abilities to control and repress political discourse through whatever means at their disposal.

> **While the motivation for abusing COVID-19-related surveillance is likely to be to monitor and control political opponents, individuals and organisations will face increasing threats to their data privacy from such measures being left in place in the longer term**

The lack of a clear end date to the threat from COVID-19 will make the extension of special powers adopted to tackle the disease relatively easy to justify internally. Our understanding of the virus has evolved to make its end date even harder to define. Where previously we anticipated distinctive waves of epidemiological crises in every country, it increasingly appears that the virus manifests in one continuous wave which peaks and troughs, requiring localised, short-term lockdowns and suppression measures. Under this evolved understanding of a constant, low-lying threat from COVID-19, it becomes even easier for governments to justify maintaining heightened suppression measures even where infection levels are stable and no nationwide lockdown is required.

While the motivation for abusing COVID-19-related surveillance is likely to be to monitor and control political opponents, individuals and organisations will face increasing threats to their data privacy from such measures being left in place in the longer term. States can abuse such tools for political or economic espionage. Cybercriminal threat actors may also increasingly focus their targeting efforts on government departments and third-party analytics providers known to store such personal data.

Policy Response

The international political community has generally been slow to understand and acknowledge how technology is becoming a fundamental tool in the maintenance and expansion of authoritarian governance. Understanding how technology can be misused requires some "tech literacy", making it harder for diverse policy audiences to detect and criticise these abuses than in the case of traditional forms of restriction on freedom of assembly and expression, such as arrests of protesters or censorship of print publications. However, the number of think tanks and civil society organisations dedicating resources to sharing these emerging problems is increasing. Several such organisations have been cited in this paper. Their work and insights provide a significant resource for policy-makers to

18 *Одобрение органов власти и доверие политикам (Approval of State Bodies and Trust in Politicians)*, Levada Centre, 29 July 2020
[www.levada.ru access: 15 August 2020].

draw on to allow them to increase their literacy.

Thereafter, policy-makers should generate and vocally promote a clear set of international standards for the proper use of surveillance for public health emergencies, and for the legislation enabling it. Requirements that retention of data be proportionate are commonplace, but greater guidelines over what "proportionately" should look like would be welcome. A clear time limit on the use of any surveillance technology and clear directives on who exactly may access the data associated with it, especially in circumstances of a complex and intangible virus, are critical. Requirements for the destruction of this data, and transparent advertising of such, should also be put forward. Specific standards aimed at preventing such data being linked to voter data are also important ahead of elections in the region.

More broadly, governments and international organisations must integrate assessments of the use of surveillance technology into their broader assessments of the protection and promotion of fundamental freedoms in the post-Soviet space, and elsewhere. This will facilitate prompt, clear commentary following the adoption of new legislation or measures, lending greater weight to any international response and providing local monitors and activists with greater leverage in their own attempts to confront such abuses.

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BELARUSIAN AUTHORITIES' RESPONSE TO THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC AS A SECURITY THREAT: FROM VIOLATING INDIVIDUAL RIGHTS TO DEEPENING THE STATE'S VULNERABILITY

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Taking into consideration that many legal systems qualify a pandemic as a state of emergency justifying limitations of citizens' and human rights, the questions worth asking are: To what extent may the opposite (not taking any actions and downplaying the problem) lead to human rights violation and what are the possible consequences thereof for the security of both the individual and the state? This issue will be addressed through an assessment of the response of Belarus to COVID-19 from the perspective of internal (human rights and well-being of individuals) and external (hybrid threats) security.

Introduction

Despite some degree of coordination declared by European states, illustrated by sending masks or disinfectants, their approach was far from uniform in terms of both the depth of the lockdown and the schemes for reporting new cases and deaths. With regard to the former, a liberal Swedish reaction contrasted with firm French regulations preventing citizens from leaving homes without a special information card.[1] Divergences arose also in the manner deaths were reported: from Belgium, accused of overestimating the death toll, to Poland, which hesitated as to how to qualify COVID-19-related deaths in the event of comorbidities.[2] Despite those differences, however, the overwhelming majority of European states approached the problem seriously.

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1 Y. Plantey, *Non-confinement: aux origines de l'exception suédoise (Non-containment: The Origins of the Swedish Exception)*, "France Culture", 02 May 2020
[https://www.franceculture.fr/societe/non-confinement-aux-origines-de-lexception-suedoise access: 10 August 2020];
Coronavirus: ce qui est permis et ce qui est interdit pendant le confinement en France (Coronavirus: What Is Allowed and What Is Prohibited During Confinement in France), "Le Monde", 17 March 2020
[https://www.lemonde.fr/planete/article/2020/03/17/coronavirus-le-point-sur-les-interdictions-et-les-autorisations-liees-au-confinement-en-france_6033337_3244.html access: 14 August 2020].

2 A. Delvoye, *Pourquoi la Belgique est-elle toujours le pays où il y a eu le plus de morts par habitant du Covid-19 au monde? (Why Is Belgium Still the Country Where There Have Been the Most Deaths per Capita From COVID-19 in the World?)*, "rtbf.be", 06 July 2020
[https://www.rtbf.be/info/dossier/epidemie-de-coronavirus/detail_coronavirus-la-belgique-est-elle-vraiment-le-pays-le-plus-touche-par-le-covid-19-au-monde access: 14 August 2020].

Legally, a pandemic may be qualified by many systems as a state of emergency formally justifying general limitations of human rights. Nevertheless, it is also worth considering to what extent the omission of restrictions and downgrading of the scale of the pandemic may be perceived as a human rights violation and what the possible consequences are from the standpoint of security of the individual and the state. It seems that such an approach may endanger the right to life, health, or information.

> **❝ Unlike Stockholm, Minsk actively downplayed the problem. For instance, President A. Lukashenka criticised other countries for exaggerated reactions and advised his citizens to go to sauna, work out physically, and drink vodka**

To amplify on the aforementioned, the present article will study the response of Belarus to COVID-19 from the angles of internal (human rights and well-being of citizens) and external (hybrid threats) security. It starts with a brief overview of the approach of state leadership, proceeding with an analysis of the legal basis for human rights' protection and their possible infringements, and ends by placing the findings within the broader scope of Belarusian state vulnerability and security.

Belarusian Response to COVID-19

While Minsk admitted to having the first case of COVID-19 on 27 February 2020[3], it started international reporting only from 18 March 2020.[4] From the end of April until early June, the number of new cases hardly went below 900 daily.[5] The only measure taken was mandatory isolation of people coming from abroad. At the end of April, state authorities maintained that there had been no need to introduce any other limitations apart from prolonging school holidays to three weeks and advising people to avoid bigger gatherings.[6] Moreover, any restrictions (e.g. calling to keep distance of at least 1.5 metres between restaurant tables) remained non-binding recommendations.[7] Also, actions undertaken by the authorities themselves could go against the abovementioned without impediments (e.g. Belarusian citizens were promised to get triple base salary if they came to the 9 May Victory Day parade without masks[8]).

Although it may be disputed to what extent there exists any obligation for states to enact a lockdown proactively in addressing a pandemic, which is to be seen on the Swedish example, the Belarusian problem lies elsewhere. Unlike Stockholm, Minsk actively downplayed the problem. For instance, President A. Lukashenka criticised other countries for exaggerated reactions and advised his citizens to go to sauna,

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3   J. Olchowski, *Białoruś wobec COVID-19 – bezradność i bezczynność (Belarus towards COVID-19 – Helplessness and Inaction)*, "Komentarze IEŚ", April 2020, p. 1.

4   Worldometers, *Coronavirus Belarus*
    [https://www.worldometers.info/coronavirus/country/belarus/ access: 03 August 2020].

5   Ibid.

6   Olchowski, n3, p. 1.

7   Ibid.

8   R. Sikorski, *O Białorusi z Alesiem Zarembiukiem rozmawia Radosław Sikorski (Radosław Sikorski Talks to Ales Zarembiiuk about Belarus)*, "Wolne Radio Europa", 09 May 2020
    [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ma8jiitMQqA access: 09 July 2020].

work out physically, and drink vodka.[9] The Belarusian head of state repeatedly praised the state's public health care system[10], giving a misleading impression of its exceptional preparedness to handle the situation. On 21 March, he allegedly decided that a priority for the KGB[11] shall be countering the diffusion of information on the development of the pandemic, and medical staff were ordered to sign a special commitment not to reveal any professional secrets under the threat of criminal sanctions.[12] The aforementioned was further supported by increasing numbers of patients diagnosed with pneumonia.[13]

Concerns regarding the steps undertaken by Minsk were raised also at the international level. For instance, on 21 April, the World Health Organisation (WHO) recommended "strong government commitment and leadership to implement a blend of containment and mitigation measures" and "public engagement by all levels of government to clearly, transparently and regularly communicate the risks, health advice and response measures, including postponing gatherings and curtailing movement".[14] This suggests that the authorities did not inform the population

properly, let alone took adequate steps to handle the problem.

Why did Minsk decide to adopt such an approach? First, the consequences of a lockdown for the domestic economy would be disastrous.[15] Second, the narrative of a strong and stable state constituted a part of the electoral campaign for Lukashenka, creating an image of a good leader, allowing him also to criticise the Kremlin for poor internal management of the situation.[16] The outcome, however, has been different, as the COVID-19 crisis management was compared to the Soviet reaction to the Chernobyl disaster, pointing out the incapability of the decision-makers to handle an extraordinary situation properly.[17] This, in turn, raises another question: How does such an approach translate into effective protection of human rights?

Legal Consequences: Human Rights in Normative Framework Binding on Belarus

Human rights violations may consist of either action or omission. The Belarusian case qualifies rather as the former, since the authorities have not been passively

9   A. Åslund, *Responses to the COVID-19 Crisis in Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus*, "Eurasian Geography and Economics", June 2020, p. 2.

10   K. Kłysiński, P. Żochowski, *Zaklinanie rzeczywistości: Białoruś w obliczu pandemii COVID-19 (Conjuring Reality: Belarus Facing COVID-19 Pandemic)*, "Komentarze OSW", April 2020 [https://www.osw.waw.pl/en/node/27951 access: 03 August 2020].

11   State Security Committee of the Republic of Belarus.

12   Kłysiński, Żochowski, n10.

13   Åslund, n9, p. 11.

14   WHO Expert Mission to Belarus Recommends Physical Distancing Measures as COVID-19 Virus Transmits in the Community, World Health Organization Regional Office for Europe, 21 April 2020 [https://www.euro.who.int/en/countries/belarus/news/news/2020/4/who-expert-mission-to-belarus-recommends-physical-distancing-measures-as-covid-19-virus-transmits-in-the-community access: 04 August 2020].

15   L. Jegelevicius, *Belarus and Coronavirus: Lukashenko's Business-As-Usual Approach Is "Mind-Blowing Negligence"*, "Euronews", 21 April 2020 [https://www.euronews.com/2020/04/21/belarus-and-coronavirus-lukashenko-s-business-as-usual-approach-is-mind-blowing-negligence access: 01 August 2020].

16   Kłysiński, Żochowski, n10; V. Maheshwari, The Leader of Belarus Is Using the Coronavirus Crisis to Troll Putin, "Politico", 19 May 2020 [https://www.politico.eu/article/belarus-lukashenko-is-defying-the-coronavirus-and-putin/ access: 01 August 2020].

17   Kłysiński, Żochowski, n10.

observing the proliferation of the pandemic, but actively agitated to downgrade the scale of the problem.[18] In order to properly assess the degree of respect of human rights in the light of Minsk's response to COVID-19, legal instruments binding on Belarusian authorities, as well as particular rights, will be identified first.

> **This illustrates a paradox of human rights protection and violation in Belarus. Whereas restrictions and infringements of human rights seem for Minsk "business as usual", when faced with a situation allowing for limitations of the aforementioned rights on universally accepted legal basis, it refrains from taking adequate steps**

The Constitution of Belarus of 1994 states in Article 2 that "[t]he individual, his rights, freedoms and guarantees to secure them are the supreme value and goal of the society and the State". Apart from the right to life, it provides citizens with "the right to receive, store and disseminate complete, reliable and timely information on the activities of state bodies and public associations, on political, economic, cultural and international life". Whereas "[s]tate bodies, public associations and officials shall provide citizens ... with an opportunity to familiarise themselves with materials that affect their rights and legitimate interests", "[t]he use of information may be restricted by the legislation with the purpose to safeguard honour, dignity, personal and family life of the citizens and the full exercise of their rights".[19]

Although the provision does not explicitly refer to a pandemic, due to its global character it can potentially be regarded as *information on international life* and – together with accurate information on the health care system – should qualify for *materials that affect rights and legitimate interests* of citizens, confirming duty of the state to make it available. The aforementioned is further supplemented with presidential duty to address the people on "the state of the nation and on the guidelines of the domestic and foreign policy",[20] which is particularly striking in the light of Lukashenka's statement that "no one has died from COVID-19, everyone is dying from chronic illnesses because all viruses strike those who are weak and have no immunity".[21]

Moreover, there is no such thing as a constitutional right to health or security; the only reference to them is made in Article 23, which clarifies that "restriction of personal rights and freedoms shall be permitted only in the instances specified by law, in the interests of national security, public order, protection of the morals and health of the population". This illustrates a paradox of human rights protection and violation in Belarus. Whereas restrictions and infringements of human rights seem for Minsk "business as usual", when faced with a situation allowing for limitations of the aforementioned rights on universally accepted legal basis, it refrains

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18 Moreover, from the perspective of potential claims, such an approach may be more effective as it is easier to prove (e.g. by referring to particular statements of A. Lukashenka) than negligence, where the level of adequate care remains harder to define.

19 *Constitution of the Republic of Belarus of 1994*, Art. 24 and 34, 1994 [http://Law.By/Document/?Guid=3871&P0=v19402875e access: 01 August 2020].

20 Ibid., Art. 84(13).

21 Åslund, n9, p. 2.

from taking adequate steps. Why is that? One could claim that the constitution does not foresee the case of a pandemic. Just as many other national basic laws, the Belarusian one provides basis for temporary suspension of rights and freedoms in case of emergency or martial law. However, a pandemic seems not to be encompassed by legal definition of the former, provided in Article 84(15) and covering only "the event of a natural disaster, a catastrophe, or unrest involving violence or threat of violence on the part of a group of persons or organizations that endangers people's life and health or jeopardizes the territorial integrity and existence of the State".[22]

Taking the aforementioned and the general political climate in the country into consideration, it seems that its domestic standards do not provide adequate protection. Since Article 21 of the Belarusian constitution declares that "[t]he State shall guarantee the rights and freedoms of citizens of Belarus that are ... specified by the State's international obligations", it is justified to analyse the international acts binding on Minsk.

It should be noted that Belarus is the only European country that is not a member of the Council of Europe and has not signed the European Convention on Human Rights, which is currently perceived as the most effective international instrument to defend rights and freedoms of individuals. Therefore, other international mechanisms shall be taken into consideration. The first of them is the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Its Article 3 indicates that "everyone has the right to *life*, liberty and the *security* of person".[23] The denial of the proliferation of the pandemic within Belarusian territory could be said to jeopardise, and in numerous cases violate, rights to life and security. While infringement of the right to life faces the same problems as in the case of the Belarusian constitution, i.e., it remains challenging to prove (e.g. the problem of establishment of an adequate causal link between coming to the 9 May events and getting the infection), violation of the right to security (not covered by the basic law), i.e., by forcing doctors to diagnose patients with pneumonia instead of the coronavirus, resulting in placing COVID-19 patients in the same wards with non-corona-positive ones, is more evident.

The International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) of 1966, in turn, contains more detailed references to health and extraordinary situations. Apart from the right to life (Article 6[1]), it provides for freedoms of expression and assembly. Although both are covered also by the Belarusian constitution, the ICCPR regulates the former more broadly as "freedom to seek, receive and impart information and ideas of all kinds, regardless of frontiers, either orally, in writing or in print, in the form of art, or through any other media".[24] This right is not absolute; it may be subject to some restrictions provided by law, if they are necessary "for the protection of national security or of public order (ordre public), or of public health or morals"[25] (*nota bene*, similar regulation concerns the right to peaceful assembly, provided in Article 21).

What makes an even more considerable difference is the regulation of the state of emergency embodied in the Article 4 of the ICCPR. Unlike the Belarusian constitution, it does not contain a precise legal definition of emergency, referring broadly to the "time

22 *Constitution*, n19, Art. 84(15).

23 United Nations, *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*, 10 December 1948, emphasis added.

24 United Nations, *International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights*, 16 December 1966, Art. 19(2).

25 Ibid., Art. 19(3).

... which threatens the life of the nation and the existence of which is officially proclaimed".[26] Although it is more intuitive to link it to violent conflicts, one may not exclude an interpretation referring to any other circumstances that could endanger the survival of the population.

> **On the one hand, the absence of limitations on public gatherings endangered the life and health of Belarusians, while, on the other, a restriction of freedom of information, which could have been legally introduced due to the pandemic, would have also threatened the life and health of individuals**

The use of the ICCPR remains problematic, as in terms of perception of the role of health, the logic of the former matches the Belarusian constitution. For the purpose of the ICCPR, it constitutes a value rather than a right of an individual. While there exists no explicit basis for its protection, it constitutes an important factor determining whether some other rights will find their full application. Moreover, it remains a double-edged sword. On the one hand, the absence of limitations on public gatherings endangered the life and health of Belarusians, while, on the other, a restriction of freedom of information, which could have been legally introduced due to the pandemic, would have also threatened the life and health of individuals. The right to health as such should be, however, sought elsewhere.

According to the International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights (ICESCR) of 1966, everyone has the right "to the enjoyment of *the highest attainable standard* of physical and mental health".[27] Article 12(2)(c) further explains that one of the steps to achieve this goal is in "prevention, treatment and control of epidemic". While one may have doubts as to how to measure the highest attainable standard, it goes without saying that this provision was violated by Belarusian authorities. Nevertheless, it becomes more problematic if read together with Article 2(1) of the ICESCR, according to which "each State ... undertakes to take steps ... to the maximum of its available resources, with a view to achieving progressively the full realization of the rights recognized in the present Covenant".[28] Therefore, the mere fact of making health a self-standing right does not automatically translate into its effective protection. The WHO Constitution, however, fills this lacuna.

Despite focusing on internal arrangements of the organisation, the constitution of the WHO contains some norms directly addressed to its member states, including Belarus. Special attention shall be given to its preamble, which states that its principles are basic "to the happiness, harmonious relations and *security* of all peoples".[29] What is of particular relevance for the issue at stake, the preamble conveys, in the first place, a definition of health, which is understood broadly as "a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity".[30] Although it would be too far-fetched to claim that this definition may serve as a legal basis

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26 Ibid., Art. 4.

27 United Nations, *International Covenant on Social, Economic and Cultural Rights*, 16 December 1966, Art. 12(1).

28 Ibid., Art. 2(1).

29 World Health Organization, *Constitution of the World Health Organization*, 22 July 1946, emphasis added.

30 Ibid.

for the claims of Belarusian citizens, it does, however, constitute an important indication as to the direction of interpretation of state parties' commitments under the WHO basic law, not limiting health to its purely medical dimension. The principles contained in the preamble should be therefore read with this very particular definition in mind.

The WHO Constitution stipulates that "the enjoyment of the highest attainable standard of health is one of the fundamental rights of every human being without distinction of race, religion, political belief, economic or social condition".[31] This postulate highlights that health should be perceived as a stand-alone human right. Importantly, it is closely related to the right to information. The preamble states that "the extension to all peoples of the benefits of medical, psychological and related knowledge is essential to the fullest attainment of health" and that "informed opinion and active co-operation on the part of the public are of the utmost importance in the improvement of the health of the people".[32] This is illustrated by the Belarusian example: Had the society been properly informed of the dangers relating to the coronavirus, the mortality rate could have potentially been lower.

Second, the preamble places the issue of health in a broader context, indicating that "the health of all peoples is fundamental to the attainment of peace and security and is dependent upon the fullest co-operation of individuals and States"; that should be read together with the principle according to which "unequal development in different countries in the promotion of health and control of disease, especially communicable disease, is a common danger".[33] Whereas the former may be interpreted as referring to public security and touching upon state population as a whole (preventing vulnerabilities to reduce hybrid threats), the latter may be perceived as referring first to the well-being of an individual (which, in turn, translates into the health security of the respective groups of individuals formed within a state and beyond). This dimension should not be underestimated. Although it would be too far-fetched to accuse Belarus of proliferating a biological weapon that could be used against another international actor, one should not forget the preventive outcome of the approach adopted by Lukashenka. The gravity of the pandemic in Belarus, on the one hand, discouraged the OSCE from sending its observation mission to the presidential election out of concern for the health of its officers, while, on the other, it gave Minsk a reason to dismiss accreditation applications of journalists coming from infected abroad.[34]

Furthermore, the WHO Constitution contains a series of more precise obligations of WHO members (Articles 61-65), consisting of a duty to provide various health and health care-related information to the organisation. This group of obligations is of a different character than the commitments embodied in the preamble. Whereas the latter constitute standards and postulates for the benefit of society as such, the former are inherently bound to the membership in the WHO and designed to facilitate the cooperation within the organisation. Therefore, this does not directly affect the

31 Ibid.

32 Ibid.

33 Ibid.

34 *Białoruś: Ostatnia prosta przed wyborami prezydenckimi. Część osób może zagłosować już dzisiaj (Belarus: The Final Straight before the Presidential Elections. Some People Can Already Vote Today)*, "Onet", 04 August 2020 [https://wiadomosci.onet.pl/swiat/bialorus-ostatnia-prosta-przed-wyborami-prezydenckimi/djksq6b access: 04 August 2020].

rights and duties of the member states to individuals under their respective jurisdictions. What is, however, common to both groups, is their unenforceability in practice.

The WHO has actually no means to make its member states fulfil any of the aforementioned commitments. The only case in which states may face a concrete sanction (suspension of voting privileges and services on the basis of Article 71) is not fulfilling financial obligations.[35] For questions or disputes regarding the interpretation or application of the WHO Constitution, Article 75 foresees negotiations or decision of the Health Assembly and, should those measures prove ineffective, a referral to the International Court of Justice if the parties do not agree to any other way of reaching settlement.[36] This powerlessness of the WHO was illustrated by Minsk's ignoring its recommendation to cancel all public events and suspend classes at schools and universities as well as activity of all non-essential organisations and businesses[37], or the appeals to cancel the Victory Day parade, warning that it may be particularly dangerous for elderly people.[38]

The aforementioned demonstrates that notwithstanding the formal mentioning of the right to life, health, security, or information in legally binding acts, their implementation in practice cannot be taken for granted and relies upon the good will of respective states. The Belarusian example demonstrates, however, that despite the absence of legal responsibility, a state may face considerable political consequences for violation of those rights.

Political Consequences: Increasing Vulnerability to Hybrid Threats

Violations of human and citizens' rights of Belarusians, especially the right to life and health, destabilised the position of Lukashenka's regime; for the first time people started to protest on such a scale and openly expressed their dissatisfaction with his leadership.[39] In the context of August 2020 presidential election, the overall situation made Belarus even more liable to hybrid threats,[40] understood as "methods and activities … targeted towards vulnerabilities of the opponent," which may be "created by many things, including historical memory, legislation, old practices, geostrategic factors, strong polarisation of society, technological disadvantages or ideological differences".[41] Interestingly, as the events after the presidential election demonstrate, despite presenting Lukashenko as the only guarantor of state's sovereignty against Russia and the

35 World Health Organization, n29.

36 Ibid., n29, Art. 75-76.

37 R. Szoszyn, *Epidemia na Białorusi. Jak przekonać Aleksandra Łukaszenkę (An Epidemic in Belarus: How to Convince Alexander Lukashenka)*, "Rzeczpospolita", 02 May 2020 [https://www.rp.pl/Koronawirus-SARS-CoV-2/304299847-Epidemia-na-Bialorusi-Jak-przekonac-Aleksandra-Lukaszenke.html access: 03 August 2020].

38 *Łukaszenko zaprasza na paradę zwycięstwa innych prezydentów (Lukashenka Invites Other Presidents to the Victory Parade)*, "Rzeczpospolita", 05 May 2020 [https://www.rp.pl/Bialorus/200509733-Lukaszenko-zaprasza-na-parade-zwyciestwa-innych-prezydentow.html access: 03 August 2020].

39 J. Forbrig, *Lukashenko's Coronavirus Election*, "Politico", 02 July 2020 [https://www.politico.eu/article/aleksander-lukashenko-belarus-coronavirus-covid19-pandemic-election/ access: 05 August 2020].

40 For the sake of clarity, by no means is the author's intention to criticise the protests; the present remark refers to what is often called "stability (or security)–democracy dilemma".

41 *Countering Hybrid Threats*, the European Centre of Excellence for Countering Hybrid Threats, [https://www.hybridcoe.fi/hybrid-threats/ access: 12 August 2020].

opposition candidates (V. Babaryka and V. Tsepkalo) as Kremlin collaborators[42], a considerable part of the Belarusian society was ready to take the risk and oppose the autocrat.

Moreover, everyday violations of the right to information translated into the state's vulnerability to dissemination of propaganda, threatening, in turn, the rights to life, health, and security. Since Russian media are widely available in Belarus, they affect the shape of the message conveyed.[43] Initially, they marginalised COVID-19 as a domestic problem of China, South Korea, and Italy.[44] It could be argued that, at least initially, their impact was further catalysed by Belarusian legislation prohibiting "defaming the honour and dignity of the Belarusian president or disseminating information on behalf of unregistered organizations, for example, certain opposition groups".[45] Although contradicting the obviously wrong information spread by the head of state does not amount to his defamation, this provision could have been easily abused by the authoritarian regime to fight people expressing dissenting opinions, in consequence indirectly validating the narrative created by the Russian media. Therefore, as long as the latter had spoken in one voice with Lukashenka, there were no legally effective means to fight it. The consequences of this are particularly visible in comparison with the COVID-19 management in Ukraine, where the Russian discourse undermining the gravity of the pandemic was promptly challenged and mitigated by free media warning the society about the gravity of the pandemic.[46]

> **everyday violations of the right to information translated into the state's vulnerability to dissemination of propaganda, threatening, in turn, the rights to life, health, and security**

Last but not least, as far as security is concerned, in the context of this domestic crisis, one should not undermine signals coming from abroad, suggesting "the need to save the brotherly Belarusian people from the impending humanitarian catastrophe— if need be, by force"[47], particularly in the context of the arrival of "Wagner Group" members to Belarus just before the presidential election.

Conclusion

The present article demonstrates that not taking adequate measures and downplaying the gravity of a pandemic may lead to human rights violations. The rights that are most susceptible to and directly endangered by such a response by state authorities

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42 A. Szabaciuk, *Białoruska kampania wyborcza w cieniu pandemii COVID-19 (The Belarusian Election Campaign Overshadowed by the COVID-19 Pandemic)*, "Komentarze IEŚ", June 2020, pp. 1-2.

43 Ibid., p. 3.

44 Åslund, n9, p. 6.

45 J. Szostek, *Russian Influence on News Media in Belarus*, "Communist and Post-Communist Studies", 48 (2-3), 2015, p. 124.

46 Åslund, n9, p. 6.

47 A. Shraibman, *Minsk and Moscow Fail to Unite against Common Foe*, "Carnegie Moscow Center", 08 July 2020 [https://carnegie.ru/2020/07/08/minsk-moscow-fail-to-unite-against-common-foe-pub-81900 access: 07 August 2020].

are the rights to life, health, information, and security. All of them vary in terms of character and legal basis for protection. What they have in common, however, is that they are of particular value to the society. Faced with an absence of effective means of their protection, the population becomes eager to challenge state authorities that manifestly violate them. This, in turn, may result in deepening vulnerability to hybrid threats.

At the time of writing of this article, the demonstrations, originated right after the August 2020 presidential election, are still ongoing and their final outcome is unknown.

What is certain, however, is that the reaction of Lukashenka to COVID-19 had caused the cup of bitterness to overflow and Belarus will never be politically the same after the pandemic.

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HYBRID WARFARE AS A THREAT TO INTERNATIONAL SECURITY

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In the 21st century, states employ concealed ways to destabilise adversaries and achieve geopolitical goals, thus resorting to hybrid warfare. This may include economic pressure, interference in political affairs, cyber-attacks, disinformation, and other means. Considering the most recent manifestations of hybrid warfare between states, the dilemma is how to build nations' resilience to such threats. Additionally, international law does not have a robust system to face the contemporary threat of hybrid warfare. This paper focuses on hybrid warfare, drawing on the example of the conflict between the Russian Federation and Ukraine, and analyses it from the international law perspective.

Introduction

The notions of war and peace are blurred. Understanding of peace as the absence of military conflicts is obsolete, since confrontations have moved into a different dimension. Pursuing strategic interests, destabilising adversaries, or achieving subordination of certain states can be completed in a concealed way without an armed attack.

With a rapid development of technology, it has become possible to launch a harmful attack against an enemy via the internet. Cyber-attacks can cause damage on a large scale. Information and political contexts can be turned into a weapon and used against a rival. Similarly, economy and trade can become a powerful leverage in shaping international relations. These are the means of modern mode of war, which is hybrid warfare. International reputation of states plays an important role in international relations, and wrongdoings of states

can make them accountable. In such an environment, hybrid warfare offers a perfect solution. In a nutshell, lately the character of conflicts has evolved into a combination of physical and psychological means where even non-combatants play a role.[1]

Hybrid warfare tools may include a combination of various means, such as information war, propaganda, political and economic pressure, cyber-attacks, and usage of proxies. With the variety of means of war, it is rather impossible to give an exhaustive list of weapons used in hybrid war. Any measure that is able to shape political discourse in a particular manner, inflict fear, spread panic, work as a provocation, produce a desired public opinion, or distort public order can and will be used by a state waging hybrid warfare against the other. Therefore, even military exercises at the borders with another state, active militarisation of illegally annexed territories, movement of military units to the border with another state, and performance of combat readiness

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1   F. Hoffman, *Hybrid Warfare and Challenges*, "Joint Force Quarterly", January/March 2009, p. 34.

checks should be regarded as components of a wider framework of hybrid war.

The primary target in hybrid warfare is the population, which is different from a traditional war, where the main targets are military forces and infrastructure. Targeting the minds of the adversary's population through information war is highly damaging, because grievances within a country can undermine security, discredit the government, and cause widespread distrust towards the regime. The effects of an outburst from within a country are long-lasting.

> *military exercises at the borders with another state, active militarisation of illegally annexed territories, movement of military units to the border with another state, and performance of combat readiness checks should be regarded as components of a wider framework of hybrid war*

The annexation of Crimea by the Russian Federation in 2014, which was rapidly and bloodlessly executed, attracted attention. It was illegal from international law perspective and condemned by the majority of nations but has become a vivid case of hybrid warfare. Since the annexation, the term "hybrid warfare" is being frequently used in the security discourse. From the analytical point of view, hybrid warfare provides an interesting subject to study due to its multi-vectoral manifestation. Russia's hybrid warfare against Ukraine is an example of that.

Cyber Warfare

Cyber warfare became a concern to international security at the end of the 20th century; then, after being dormant for some time, it re-entered the security agenda following a series of damaging cyber-attacks against Estonia in 2007.[2] Due to the scale, it has become one of the most notorious attacks. Additionally, there were other cases of cyber-attacks in 2008 in Lithuania and Georgia. Each case had a political context to it, where cyber-attacks played a role of expressing discontent. In Estonia, the government made a decision to demolish a Soviet-era monument devoted to World War II, which provoked unrests from the side of ethnic Russian population and triggered outrage in the Russian government.[3] In the Lithuanian case, the government of Russia vocally condemned the amendment to the national Lithuanian law that forbade public display of Nazi German and Soviet symbols as well as playing Nazi and Soviet anthems at public meetings.[4] In Georgia, cyber-attacks were coordinated with the timing of the military invasion by the Russian Federation into South Ossetia.[5]

In the Estonian case, it has been identified that some cyber-attacks in the wider cyber campaign came from Russian IP addresses, including ones belonging to state institutions.[6] According to iDefense, a security intelligence firm in the US, possibly

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2   M. N. Schmitt, *The Law of Cyber Warfare: Quo Vadis?*, "Stanford Law & Policy Review", June 2014, p. 269.

3   E. Tikk, K. Kaska, L. Vihul, *International Cyber Incidents: Legal Considerations*, Cooperative Cyber Defense Centre of Excellence: Tallinn 2010, p. 15.

4   Ibid., p. 51.

5   Ibid., pp. 67-68.

6   I. Traynor, *Russia Accused of Unleashing Cyberwar to Disable Estonia*, "The Guardian", 17 May 2007 [www.theguardian.com/world/2007/may/17/topstories3.russia access: 6 July 2020].

nationalist Russian hackers executed the attacks in Lithuania, owing to the participation of a popular website of Russian hackers in the organisation of the cyber campaign.[7] In the Georgian case of a massive cyber campaign, instructions written in Russian on how to conduct cyber-attacks were shared on Russian-speaking websites, forums, and blogs, similarly to the situation in Estonia.[8]

Ukraine's cyber space has fallen victim to numerous cyber-attacks. Similarly to the Russian military invasion of Georgia, the annexation of Crimea by Russia was timed with a cyber-attack that shut down governmental websites in Ukraine and hacked cell phones of the members of the Parliament of Ukraine.[9] The Central Election Commission of Ukraine website was infected with malware on several occasions before elections were to take place. In the winter of 2015 and 2016, Ukrainian power grid experienced major cyber-attacks that deprived the population of electricity for many hours.

The climax of Russia's cyber war was the NotPetya attack, which is considered the world's most damaging cyber operation in history, according to Dr. Kenneth Geers, NATO Cyber Centre ambassador. The malware was unleashed in June 2017, on the day preceding Ukraine's Constitution Day, primarily infecting systems of financial institutions and causing catastrophic loss of data. Moreover, it shut down ministerial, postal services', and telecommunication companies' websites. The cyber operation affected the systems of the Kyiv international airport, Chernobyl site, energy companies; it impaired the functioning of Kyiv metro, ATMs, and card payment systems. This cyber-attack was a nationwide disaster that paralysed the country and then spilled over to other large businesses around the globe. The NotPetya operation, along with other cyber-attacks in Ukraine in 2015-2016, was attributed to the Kremlin-linked group of hackers known as Sandworm.[10]

Information Warfare

Information war is not novel in the 21st century. The traces of manipulation of public consciousness date back to World War I, when political leaflets were widely distributed.[11] The Cold War provides another good example of an intense, strategically powerful, and protracted information war.[12] Nowadays, with the reliance on the internet, being disinformed has become easy as never before. A single image with a piece of news shared on social media, regardless of whether the news is accurate or the picture is original, can influence opinions of many citizens. The information flow that every individual is exposed to can be overwhelming, where false information is easily mingled with facts. This makes public opinion an easy target for manipulation.

It is suggested that in 2013, the Russian focus shifted from mere cyber-attacks to conducting information operations, because

7 E. Tikk, K. Kaska, L. Vihul, n. 3, p. 55.

8 Ibid., p. 73.

9 T. Maurer, *Cyber Mercenaries. The State, Hackers, and Power*, Cambridge University Press: Cambridge 2018, p. 98.

10 A. Greenberg, *The Untold Story of NotPetya, the Most Devastating Cyberattack in History*, "Wired", 22 August 2018 [https://www.wired.com/story/notpetya-cyberattack-ukraine-russia-code-crashed-the-world/ access: 18 July 2020].

11 G. Pocheptsov, *Психологические войны (Psychological Wars)*, Vakler: Kyiv 2002, p. 42.

12 Ibid., p. 473.

from the Russian perspective, information manipulation performed by the West in the post-Soviet countries proved to be an effective tool.[13] This shift is attributed to the emergence of the so-called Gerasimov Doctrine, which is considered the blueprint of hybrid warfare.[14] This new Russian strategic focus reflects visibly in Ukraine's information space. Disinformation and pro-Kremlin propaganda are spread widely on social media through the Kremlin's trolls, who use fake accounts.[15] Every day hundreds of trolls have a goal of posting more than a hundred comments, and since the autumn of 2013 their activity has intensified.[16] This coincides with the time of the EuroMaidan demonstration in Kyiv.

Hybrid warfare does not exclude a military conflict taking place in parallel. In fact, information warfare has become a supplement to an armed conflict. The conflict between Russia and Ukraine in Donbas is surrounded by a disinformation campaign. It is worth recalling that when the conflict in eastern Ukraine broke out, international public believed that Ukraine was going through a civil war, despite Russia's involvement in this conflict. It is now known to the international community that not only was the separatist movement in eastern Ukraine fomented by the Kremlin, but the separatists were also supported by Russia through financing, training, and provision of arms through the notorious "humanitarian convoys". Typically for hybrid warfare, such an involvement was under the guise of a secessionist movement of Donbas from Ukraine.

> **Hybrid warfare does not exclude a military conflict taking place in parallel. In fact, information warfare has become a supplement to an armed conflict**

Russia's annexation of Crimea was also accompanied by an active dissemination of disinformation. Studies show that Wikipedia articles regarding these events were massively edited to convey Russian propaganda.[17] The central messages of this propaganda included the narratives that the turmoil in Ukraine was caused by the Ukrainian authorities and the West, the Russian Federation is attempting to calm tensions, and the Kremlin needs to protect Russian speakers of different nationalities residing in various countries.[18]

Economic and Political Warfare

Ukraine's dependence on energy supplies from Russia has backfired in many cases. Since Ukraine gained independence in 1991, the Russian Federation has attempted to keep Ukraine as a satellite state; hence,

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13 T. Maurer, n. 9, p. 61.

14 Ibid., p. 61.

15 D.-E. Mitu, *Information and Hybrid Warfare: Intelligence Challenges, Intelligent Response*, [in:] N. Iancu et al. (eds.), *Countering Hybrid Threats: Lessons Learned from Ukraine*, IOS Press: Amsterdam 2016, p. 62; A. Chen, The Agency, "New York Times Magazine", 2 June 2015
[https://www.nytimes.com/2015/06/07/magazine/the-agency.html access: 16 July 2020].

16 T. Maurer, n. 9, p. 61.

17 G. Pakharenko, *Cyber Operations at Maidan: A First-Hand Account*, [in:] K. Geers (ed.), *Cyber War in Perspective: Russian Aggression against Ukraine*, NATO CCD COE Publications: Tallinn 2015, p. 62.

18 D.-E. Mitu, *Information and Hybrid Warfare: Intelligence Challenges, Intelligent Response*, [in:] N. Iancu et al. (eds.), *Countering Hybrid Threats: Lessons Learned from Ukraine*, IOS Press: Amsterdam 2016, p. 61.

it used oil and gas prices as a leverage.[19] Russia threatened to raise oil prices and terminate gas supply to Ukraine on some occasions when Ukraine's political decisions were unfavourable to the Russian government or political concessions from Ukraine were needed to achieve Russia's objectives. These occasions surrounded the following developments: Ukraine's decision to leave the ruble zone, rejection of Russia's territorial claim over Crimea, clashes connected to the Black Sea Fleet ownership, and Russia's pressure to force Ukraine to dismantle Soviet-era nuclear weapons on its territory.[20]

Construction of the Nord Stream 2 gas pipeline is a continuation of the gas saga between Russia and Ukraine. This gas pipeline will have a sizeable impact on Ukraine. Firstly, it will deprive the country of the transit fees due to the fact that the pipeline will bypass Ukraine. Russia's allegations that Ukraine breached its transit obligations, which would create an objective reason to exclude Ukraine from the transit route, were not supported by evidence. Secondly, and more importantly, it will allow Russia to halt gas supply to Ukraine anytime without affecting the EU states. The recent example of such a practice was in 2009, when Russia discontinued gas supply to Ukraine in order to exert political pressure. The existence of Nord Stream 2 will mean that Russia's threats or actual termination of gas supply to Ukraine will remain as leverage in political or any other context.

The notorious Kerch Strait Bridge, built by the Russian Federation despite the EU and US sanctions and Ukraine's objections, has resulted for Ukraine in economic losses. The height of the bridge obstructs traffic of large international vessels in the Azov Sea headed to the Ukrainian ports. The cargo of these vessels comprised 43% of all cargo handled by Mariupol port.[21] Smaller cargo vessels that are able to pass under the bridge are subjected to unlawful inspections by Russian authorities, causing undue delays. Moreover, by reducing the allowed length of vessels permitted in the Kerch Strait, Russian authorities have again exceeded the powers and added another instrument to the economic warfare. Although it is impossible to present evidence that the primary goal of this bridge was to damage Ukraine's economy, the construction of the bridge did play a role in a wider framework of hybrid warfare, especially bearing in mind that economic pressure in a globalised world is an immediate alternative to the use of force.[22] It is worth mentioning that from the initial stages of the Kerch Strait Bridge construction, it was declared that it violates Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity, the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea, and a bilateral treaty between Russia and Ukraine on the Azov Sea and Kerch Strait.

19 F. Hill, P. Jewett, *Back in the USSR*, John F. Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University, January 1994, p. 66; F. Coldea, *Building National Capabilities and Countering Hybrid Threats: Lessons Learned*, [in:] N. Iancu et al. (eds.), *Countering Hybrid Threats: Lessons Learned from Ukraine*, IOS Press: Amsterdam 2016, p. 13; C. Eremia, *Main Features of the Hybrid Warfare Concept*, [in:] N. Iancu et al. (eds.), *Countering Hybrid Threats: Lessons Learned from Ukraine*, IOS Press: Amsterdam 2016, pp. 18-9.

20 F. Hill, P. Jewett, *Back in the USSR*, John F. Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University, January 1994, pp. 70-81.

21 *Обмеження для суден, які встановлює РФ, суперечать Конвенції ООН з морського права (Restrictions on Vessels Imposed by the Russian Federation Contradict the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea)*, Ministry for Reintegration of Temporarily Occupied Territories of Ukraine, 2017 [www.mtot.gov.ua access: 16 July 2020].

22 S. D. Ducaru, *Framing NATO's Approach to Hybrid Warfare*, [in:] N. Iancu et al. (eds.), *Countering Hybrid Threats: Lessons Learned from Ukraine*, IOS Press: Amsterdam 2016, p. 6.

Hybrid Warfare versus International Law

As has been demonstrated above, hybrid warfare is a sophisticated phenomenon comprising various elements. Despite the fact that hybrid threat is gaining prominence on the international security agenda, it is still challenging to coin an internationally accepted definition of this term. Legal remedies under international law do not grasp the whole picture and magnitude of hybrid war. Addressing separate instruments used in hybrid warfare would not suppress this type of war, as the aggressor can exploit other fronts to continue destabilising the target—even more so if the aggressor uses a fusion of capabilities in a synchronised campaign to achieve confusion and ambiguity.[23]

> *Hybrid warfare is characterised by the aggressor's denial of involvement and accountability for its actions in another state, and further attempts to legitimise its actions, bending the norms of international law.*

If looking solely at the cyber aspect of hybrid warfare, it becomes clear that there are promising developments in this field. Considering modern threats to international security via network, international organisations aim at building robust cyber security strategies and work on confidence-building measures. Growing attention to cyber threats will stimulate development of technological capabilities to enhance cyber resilience.

The series of cyber-attacks on Estonia in 2007 opened up a discussion on whether international law is applicable to cyber space and whether a cyber-attack violates a state's sovereignty. The International Group of Experts working on the *Tallinn Manual on the International Law Applicable to Cyber Warfare* concluded that cyber space is indeed under the state sovereignty. The landmark International Court of Justice (ICJ) *Nuclear Weapons Advisory Opinion* of 1996 suggests that any use of force, irrespective of the weapon used, is unlawful under the UN Charter.[24] Yet, it is not that straightforward to apply this principle to cyber-attacks. It is hard to trace the origin of cyber-attacks and even harder to find substantial evidence that would prove a link between a state and culprits to attribute the attacks to the state. In addition, Article 51 of the UN Charter envisages individual or collective self-defence only in case of an armed attack.[25] This demonstrates the absence of available remedies for states-victims of cyber warfare. Even if the *Tallinn Manual* suggests that states may apply countermeasures to cyber operations, international law does not provide guidance in this respect and there is no state practice.

Despite the capability of hybrid warfare to avoid open military aggression, there are international documents that address this type of war. The ICJ judgment in the case *Nicaragua v. United States* held that encouraging, financing, arming, and training of anti-government forces in another country is in breach of the principle of non-intervention in internal affairs of the other

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23 Ibid., p. 4.

24 ICJ, *Legality of the Threat or Use of Nuclear Weapons*, Advisory Opinion, [1996] ICJ Rep 1996, para. 39.

25 Charter of the United Nations and Statute of the International Court of Justice, San Francisco 1945, Article 51.

state.[26] The UN General Assembly (UNGA) Resolution 2625 (XXV), the Declaration on Principles of International Law concerning Friendly Relations and Co-operation among States, prohibits supporting, fomenting, inciting, or assisting terrorist or armed activities that aim at overthrowing a regime or intervene into civil conflict of another state. The UNGA Resolution 2131 (XX), Declaration on the Inadmissibility of Intervention in the Domestic Affairs of States and the Protection of Their Independence and Sovereignty, explicitly prohibits direct and indirect intervention in internal and external affairs of the other state, and usage of political, economic, and other types of measures with the purpose of coercing the other state into subordination or receiving any advantages from it. These resolutions cover many tools of hybrid warfare and thus shape the principles of customary international law, but do not possess binding force and rely on states' good faith.

Needless to say, waging hybrid warfare goes against the fundamental principle of state sovereignty. The Permanent Court of Arbitration in the Island of Palmas case established: "Sovereignty in the relations between States signifies independence. Independence in regard to a portion of the globe is the right to exercise therein, to the exclusion of any other State, the functions of a State".[27] Independence and sovereignty of Ukraine were upheld in the

Budapest Memorandum of 1994, signed by the UK, the US, Russia, and Ukraine as a security guarantee for Ukraine after the country's accession to the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons. Ironically, one of the parties to this treaty, namely the Russian Federation, became the state infringing on Ukraine's sovereignty and independence.

Hybrid warfare is characterised by the aggressor's denial of involvement and accountability for its actions in another state, and further attempts to legitimise its actions, bending the norms of international law. This is well demonstrated by the takeover of Crimea. The annexation started with "little green men", with no insignia, entering Crimea and seizing the administrative buildings and military sites. On 17 April 2014, President Putin admitted that the "little green men" were in fact Russian military.[28] The Kremlin played a card of legitimising its actions in Crimea: It was claimed that Russians were in danger and Russia had to militarily intervene to protect them on the basis of the Russian Military Doctrine[29], which was authorised by the Federation Council[30]. This stirred a debate regarding people's self-determination and secession provided in international law, which in reality was irrelevant for the Crimean case. Residents of Crimea did not belong to a distinct people entitled to self-determination; the evidence of discrimination or abuse of human rights

26 ICJ, *Case Concerning Military and Paramilitary Activities in and Against Nicaragua (Nicaragua v United States of America)*, Merits, [1986] ICJ Rep 1986, para. 292.

27 PCA, *The Island of Palmas Case (or Miangas) (USA v The Netherlands)*, Award (4 April 1928), p. 8.

28 *Putin Admits Russian Forces Were Deployed to Crimea*, "Reuters", 17 April 2014 [https://uk.reuters.com/article/russia-putin-crimea/putin-admits-russian-forces-were-deployed-to-crimea-idUKL6N0N921H20140417 access: 16 July 2020].

29 *Военная доктрина Российской Федерации (Military Doctrine of the Russian Federation)*, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 2014 [https://www.mid.ru/foreign_policy/official_documents/-/asset_publisher/CptICkB6BZ29/content/id/589760 access: 16 July 2020].

30 *Об использовании Вооруженных Сил Российской Федерации на территории Украины (On the Use of Armed Forces of the Russian Federation on the Territory of Ukraine)*, Federation Council of the Federal Assembly of the Russian Federation, 1 March 2014 [http://council.gov.ru/activity/documents/39979/ access: 18 July 2020].

of Crimea's population was never presented by Russia; and self-determination and secession movement was not initiated by the population itself, but by the Russian military, which resembles an occupation. The referendum in Crimea, orchestrated by the Kremlin, was another effort to legitimise its annexation of the peninsula. It looked legal on the surface, but the result of this referendum was declared illegal by the international community, because it was against the Ukrainian national law and was conducted with the presence of Russian troops.

Although in theory hybrid warfare violates fundamental principles of international law, adjusting international legal norms to hold states accountable for this warfare is practically impossible. Hybrid warfare lacks clarity to identify all its forms, impose a threshold of violence to tailor international law, and hold states responsible. The main challenge stems from the core purpose of hybrid warfare of keeping the aggression covert, so that it does not amount to the threat or use of force under Article 2(4) of the UN Charter. Therefore, mass international condemnation and the imposition of sanctions are the only ways to counter hybrid threats.

Conclusion

Since 1991 the Kremlin has been demonstrating that Ukraine is in Russia's "sphere of influence", which precludes Ukraine's aspirations and plans to build close ties with the West. Russia's intention to keep Ukraine under its control implies intervening in Ukraine's internal affairs. Political moves that would bring Ukraine closer to the EU or NATO trigger the intensification of Russia's hybrid warfare, be it pulling economic or political leverages to undermine Ukraine's reliability. The main goal of hybrid warfare waged by Russia is destabilising Ukraine to prevent its potential memberships in the EU and NATO.

It is important for the Russian Federation from the strategic and geopolitical point of view to keep Ukraine as a puppet state: Ukraine has been a buffer zone between Russia and the EU, particularly NATO states. The first attempt to sign the EU-Ukraine Association Agreement was thwarted by Ukraine's pro-Russian former president. This triggered demonstrations to express people's pro-EU choice, but it also provided an opportunity for Russia to unfold full-scale hybrid warfare against Ukraine.

Waging hybrid warfare means resorting to "smart war". Hybrid war has considerable advantages over the conventional one. First, it allows one to attack an adversary from numerous fronts, which makes predicting an attack impossible. Hybrid warfare entails all possible instruments to pressure and manipulate the target. Second, the use of the internet in waging war makes hybrid warfare cost-efficient. Third, hybrid war is less damaging to the aggressor's international reputation. In an open armed attack, it is easier to identify the state-aggressor, whereas using hybrid methods allows the perpetrator to stay unidentified and deny any responsibility. Fourth, methods of hybrid warfare bypass the norms of international law and render states-victims with no protection. Such countries can only work on their resilience to this threat. Ultimately, it has to be emphasised that hybrid warfare goes against the main purpose of the UN Charter of maintaining international peace and security. Even without an armed attack, hybrid warfare shakes international security by destabilising states, raising animosity and distrust in international relations.

Hybrid warfare exploits vulnerabilities of states and proves successful if nations have many weak spots. Ukraine is one of those states with vulnerabilities. The Ukrainian society is mainly susceptible to information war, owing to the wide mistrust towards

government, economic and political instability, and the common Soviet past with Russia, which makes it unthinkable for some that the brotherly nation can wage hybrid warfare. Therefore, the only way to be resilient to this hybrid threat is to fix current vulnerabilities within the country. This is a long-term process but the only solution.

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THE IRANIAN WAY TO THE STARS: WHY IRAN'S SPACE PROGRAMME CAN BE DANGEROUS FOR INTERNATIONAL SECURITY

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The article covers international and security dimensions of the Iranian space programme, which is rather successful despite economic sanctions. The article considers how the launches of the Iranian-made satellites from Iranian territory in 2009–2020 could accelerate Iran's programme of the intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBM) construction and how the potential threat of Iranian ICBMs could affect the security of NATO, Middle East countries, and other key players in the international arena. The correlation between the Iranian space and nuclear programmes will be also discussed. The article will consider international efforts to reduce security challenges from the Iranian space programme and further prospects of its development.

During the last two decades, Iran has remained under international pressure because of its nuclear programme, which could undermine the non-proliferation regime. The Iranian space programme is connected with its military nuclear projects because, thanks to its space-related activities, Iran has already constructed intermediate ballistic missiles, Shahab-3 and Shahab-4, which are able to deliver nuclear warheads to targets in Israel and South and Eastern Europe. Moreover, after launching several space satellites, Iran came very close to obtaining technologies needed to create intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs), which will be capable of reaching targets in the United States.

Furthermore, Iran is not a signatory to the Missile Technology Control Regime (MTCR).[1] Therefore, the Iranian space programme remains a matter of a deep concern for the United States and its allies. Iranian success in developing the space programme and ballistic missile technologies was one of the reasons why the United States renewed economic sanctions against Tehran, although Iran limited its nuclear programme according to its obligations under the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) signed in 2015 and the nuclear deal between Iran and China, France, Germany, Russia, United Kingdom, and the United States (P5+1).

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1 S. Shay, *Iran and the Middle East space race*, "Israel Hayom", 4 May 2020 [https://www.israelhayom.com/opinions/__trashed-7/ access: 10 August 2020].

History of the Iranian Space Programme

Iran managed to become one of the 24 founding members of the United Nations Committee on the Peaceful Uses of Outer Space (COPUOS), which was set up in 1958.[2] In the 1970s, Iran started its space programme, but it was stopped shortly after because of the Islamic Revolution of 1979. At this time, Iran had complicated relations with all countries that possessed advanced space-related technologies and could not benefit the international cooperation in this field. Also in 1980–1988, Iran was at war with Iraq and did not have resources to develop a space programme.

However, in the 1990s, the history of the current space programme of Iran began. It could be divided into three stages.[3] During the first stage, in the 1990s–early 2000s, Iran conducted research activities and used foreign assistance (mostly Russian) to develop its space programme. During the second stage, in 2009–2020, Iran launched homemade satellites and conducted space-related activities despite the international sanctions and growing isolation. The current, third, stage began in 2020, after Iran launched its first military satellite and pushed its space programme to a new level.

In 1997, Iran announced its launcher projects, Earth observation satellites, and telecommunications satellites.[4] The same year Russia reportedly sold to Iran components from the SS-4, a Soviet medium-range ballistic missile that had a known maximum range of 2,000 km.[5] This deal with Russia "helped Iran save years" in the development of the Shahab-3 missile, according to a CIA report in 2000.[6] Later, the Shahab-3 missile formed the basis of the Safir space rocket.[7]

> **The current, third, stage began in 2020, after Iran launched its first military satellite and pushed its space programme to a new level**

In 2003, Iran confirmed its intentions to further develop the space programme by creating the Iranian Space Agency (ISA). At this time, Russia continued to train Iranian rocket scientists and provide satellite components to Iran. On 27 October 2005, Russia and Iran jointly launched a research satellite from Plesetsk, Russia. This first Iranian satellite, Sina-1, was built by a Russian company Polyot and launched aboard a Russian-made Kosmos 3M rocket. After this launch, Iran became the 43rd country to possess satellites.[8]

However, under international pressure, Russia curtailed its cooperation with

2   *The Iranian Space Program*, "Space Legal Issues", 10 April 2019 [https://www.spacelegalissues.com/space-law-the-iranian-space-program/ access: 10 August 2020].

3   A. Hanna, *Iran's Ambitious Space Program*, "The Iran Primer", United States Institute of Peace, 23 June 2020 [https://iranprimer.usip.org/blog/2020/jun/23/iran%E2%80%99s-ambitious-space-program access: 10 August 2020].

4   *The Iranian Space Program*, n2.

5   *Shahab-4*, Federation of American Scientists (FAS) [https://fas.org/nuke/guide/iran/missile/shahab-4.htm access: 10 August 2020].

6   Statement by John A. Lauder, Director, DCI Nonproliferation Center of the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations on Russian Proliferation to Iran's Weapons of Mass Destruction and Missile Programs, Central Intelligence Agency, 5 October 2000 [https://www.cia.gov/news-information/speeches-testimony/2000/lauder_WMD_100500.html access: 10 August 2020].

7   Hanna, n3.

8   *First Iranian Satellite Launched*, "BBC News", 27 October 2005 [http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/4381436.stm access: 10 August 2020].

Iran on space-related activities. In March 2008, the UN Security Council Resolution 1803 restricted the transfer of "sensitive technologies" that could be used for Iranian nuclear and ballistic programmes.[9] In June 2010, another Security Council Resolution, 1929, banned all countries from transferring ballistic missile technologies to Iran.[10] As a result, in 2009, Russia declared that it had no plans to help Iran to launch another satellite.[11]

Nevertheless, Iran managed to launch the satellite without foreign assistance. In February 2009, Iran became the first Islamic country – and ninth country in the world – to launch a homemade satellite into orbit from its territory.[12]

During 2010s, Iran launched other satellites and, according to its officials, managed to successfully launch a monkey into space and return it safely to Earth.[13] However, many Western observers were not convinced that Iran's launch of a monkey was successful, because the monkey shown in the recovery photos was different from the one shown in pre-launch pictures.[14] Nevertheless, Iran announced plans to send humans into space.[15] However, in 2017, because of high costs (up to 20 billion USD),[16] Iran cancelled these plans.[17] Iranian officials, however, still hope to send Iranian astronauts into space in cooperation with foreign countries.[18]

On 22 April 2020, Iran launched its first military satellite, Nour-1.[19] This was a new turning point in the history of the Iranian space programme. Now Iran is reportedly able to conduct intelligence activities using space technologies. Iran tested this new ability for the first time during a large-scale military exercise in the Persian Gulf on 28 July 2020, when it tested manned and unmanned reconnaissance capabilities in a war game, while the entire operation was monitored by its first military satellite Nour-1.[20]

9   *Resolution 1803 (2008) adopted by the Security Council at its 5848th meeting, on 3 March 2008*, IAEA [https://www.iaea.org/sites/default/files/unsc_res1803-2008.pdf access: 10 August 2020].

10 *Resolution 1929 (2010) adopted by the Security Council at its 6335th meeting, on 9 June 2010*, IAEA [https://www.iaea.org/sites/default/files/unsc_res1929-2010.pdf access: 10 August 2020].

11 S. Weinberger, *Russians Say 'Nyet' to Another Iranian Satellite*, "Wired", 25 June 2009 [https://www.wired.com/2009/06/russians-say-nyet-to-another-iranian-satellite/ access: 10 August 2020].

12 *Iran Launches First Domestically Produced Satellite*, "Guardian", 3 February 2009 [https://www.theguardian.com/world/2009/feb/03/iran-satellite-launch-omid access: 10 August 2020].

13 M. Kramer, *Iran Says It Launched a Second Monkey into Space*, 16 December 2013 [https://www.space.com/23979-iran-space-monkey-launch.html access: 10 August 2020].

14 C. Moskowitz, *Did Iran Really Launch a Monkey Into Space?* "Space.com", 4 February 2013 [https://www.space.com/19629-iran-space-monkey-launch-questions.html access: 10 August 2020].

15 *Iran Plans to Send Humans into Space in 10 Years*, "Tehran Times", 6 October 2010 [https://www.tehrantimes.com/news/227961/Iran-plans-to-send-humans-into-space-in-10-years access: 10 August 2020].

16 *Iran Cancels Project for Sending Human into Space*, "The Times of Israel", 1 June 2017 [https://www.timesofisrael.com/iran-cancels-project-for-sending-human-into-space/ access: 10 August 2020].

17 *Iran's Piloted Program*, "GlobalSecurity.org" [https://www.globalsecurity.org/space/world/iran/piloted.htm access: 10 August 2020].

18 *Iran Pursuing Plans to Send Astronauts into Space*, "FARS News Agency", 5 October 2019 [https://en.farsnews.ir/newstext.aspx?nn=13980713000832 access: 10 August 2020].

19 J. Borger, *Iran Reportedly Launches First Military Satellite as Trump Makes Threats*, "Guardian", 22 April 2020 [https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/apr/22/iran-us-satellite-navy-boats-trump access: 10 August 2020].

20 *Iran Conducts Large-Scale Drills amid Flaring Tensions with US*, "Al-Monitor", 28 July 2020 [https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2020/07/iran-drills-persian-gulf-missiles-replica-us-naval-carrier.html#ixzz6UJZPkIkr access: 10 August 2020].

However, analysts say the intelligence capability of the first Iranian military satellite is rather limited because it appears to have a relatively low-resolution camera.[21] US General Jay Raymond doubted in his tweet that Iranian satellite could provide any intelligence information, although he admitted that the satellite most likely had been launched.[22] Anyway, the launch of Nour-1 means that Iran has moved closer to obtaining ICBMs capable of delivering nuclear warheads to targets on different continents.

This new success of the Iranian space programme was achieved a few months after the US State Department announced the United States was imposing sanctions on the Iranian Space Agency.[23] After the launch of Nour-1, US officials again criticised the Iranian space-related activities.[24]

Correlation between Iran's Space and Nuclear Programmes

Thus, the Iranian space programme is potentially dangerous, but the scale of this danger depends on Iran's decision whether to obtain or not to obtain nuclear weapons. If Iran is not going to produce nuclear warheads, its space and missile programme will still cause some tensions. However, the risks for international security will remain rather low and could be eliminated in the future if a new deal with Iran is reached. If Iran decides to acquire nuclear weapons, it will mean that, thanks to the achievements of the Iranian space programme, these weapons would be dangerous for the entire world. So we have to discuss again the highly debated question on whether Iran really will go nuclear.

> **If Iran is not going to produce nuclear warheads, its space and missile programme will still cause some tensions. However, the risks for international security will remain rather low and could be eliminated in the future if a new deal with Iran is reached**

According to the International Atomic Agency (IAEA) reports, until 2019, Iran followed its obligations under the JCPOA,[25] which limited its nuclear programme and put it under international control. This fact could prove that Iran did not have intentions to possess nuclear weapons. Tehran suspended fulfilling all JCPOA provisions only after the United States conducted an operation to kill the high-ranking Iranian general Kasem Soleimani in January 2020[26]

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21 S. Erwin, *Pompeo Blasts Iran's Space Program in Wake of Military Satellite Launch*, "Spacenews.com", 26 April 2020 [https://spacenews.com/pompeo-blasts-irans-space-program-in-wake-of-military-satellite-launch/ access: 10 August 2020].

22 Gen. Jay Raymond, @SpaceForceSCO, "Twitter", 26 April 2020 [https://twitter.com/SpaceForceCSO/status/1254158221243277315 access: 10 August 2020].

23 *New Sanctions Designations on Iran's Space Program*, U.S. Department of State", 3 September 2019 [https://www.state.gov/new-sanctions-designations-on-irans-space-program/ access: 10 August 2020].

24 T. Axelrod, *Pompeo Condemns Iran's Launch of Military Satellite*, "The Hill", 25 April 2020 [https://thehill.com/homenews/administration/494634-pompeo-condemns-irans-launch-of-military-satellite access: 10 August 2020].

25 *Iran Fulfilling Commitments Under JCPOA: IAEA Chief*, "Tasnim News Agency", 10 November 2018 [https://www.tasnimnews.com/en/news/2018/11/10/1872144/iran-fulfilling-commitments-under-jcpoa-iaea-chief access: 10 August 2020].

26 J. Haltiwanger, *Iran Is Withdrawing From the 2015 Nuclear Deal After Trump Ordered Deadly Strike on Its Top General*, "Business Insider", 5 January 2020 [https://www.businessinsider.com/iran-fully-withdrawing-2015-nuclear-deal-amid-nsions-with-us-2020-1 access: 10 August 2020].

and when the United States itself was not participating in that deal anymore. Thus, current Iranian activities to enrich uranium and limit IAEA control could be assessed as an attempt to pressure Washington to come back to the JCPOA or at least to force European countries not to support US economic sanctions.

Iran is still enriching uranium only up to 4.5%[27] and does not attempt to enrich it to a much higher percentage, which is necessary for producing a bomb[28]. Furthermore, according to the latest IAEA report, Iran continues to provisionally apply the Additional Protocol to its Safeguards Agreement with IAEA and cooperate with the agency on inspecting its current nuclear activities[29]. Thus, it can be assumed that Iran has decided not to go nuclear.

On the other hand, if Iran is not going to obtain nuclear weapons, it remains unclear why it spends so much effort and money on developing a space programme and producing ballistic missiles capable of delivering nuclear warheads. The actual collapse of the JCPOA increases the danger of Iran's going nuclear. Even during the times when the JCPOA successfully worked in 2015–2017, there was still a potential danger that Iran could go nuclear, and that was another reason why the United States decided to stop its participation in the nuclear deal with Iran. The JCPOA curtailed the Iranian programme, but it still allowed Iran to remain rather close to the nuclear threshold.

According to analysts, the JCPOA allowed Iran to maintain such a developed nuclear infrastructure, which could be used to produce a nuclear bomb in one year only.[30] Thus, the JCPOA was based not on real technical guarantees that Iran would not be able to obtain nuclear weapons soon but on Iran's promise not to do so. However, due to the long period of conflict relations, the United States and some of its allies (Israel and the Gulf monarchies) deeply distrust Iran and could not rely on its promises only. Iranian space and missile programmes, which continued after reaching the nuclear deal in 2015, only increased this distrust and pushed the Trump administration to withdraw from the JCPOA in May 2018.

It appears that other participants of the JCPOA, in contrast to the Trump administration, do not believe that Iran is ready to bear all the high costs and risks of obtaining nuclear weapons. The EU countries, and even more so Russia and China, advocate for saving the JCPOA and are interested in developing good relations with Iran. It appears that both Moscow and Beijing assess the probability of acquiring nuclear bombs by Iran as very low, because they understand that Iran would not be ready to live with nuclear weapons in almost complete isolation like North Korea. Moreover, if Iran went nuclear, it would probably find itself even in a much worse situation than North Korea, which is supported by China.

Unlike North Korea, nuclear-armed Iran would likely not be supported by anyone. In 2010, when the conservative

27 *Iran Stockpiled Enriched Uranium at Nearly 8 Times the Limit — UN*, "Deutsche Welle", 5 June 2020 [https://www.dw.com/en/iran-stockpiled-enriched-uranium-at-nearly-8-times-the-limit-un/a-53701845 access: 10 August 2020].

28 *Will the Iran Nuclear Deal Survive?* "YouTube Channel of the International Institute for Strategic Studies" [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AgTR87tAImc access: 10 August 2020].

29 Report by the Director General, *Verification and Monitoring in the Islamic Republic of Iran in Light of United Nations Security Council Resolution 2231 (2015)*, IAEA Board of Governors, 5 June 2020, p. 7 [https://www.iaea.org/sites/default/files/20/06/gov2020-26.pdf access: 10 August 2020].

30 F. Murphy, A. Mohammed, *Explainer: How Close Is Iran to Producing a Nuclear Bomb?* "Reuters", 17 January 2020 [https://www.reuters.com/article/us-iran-nuclear-explainer/explainer-how-close-is-iran-to-producing-a-nuclear-bomb-idUSKBN1ZG22P access: 10 August 2020].

administration of the Iranian president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad refused to make any concessions in the nuclear field, China and Russia did not veto the UN resolution 1929, which imposed economic sanctions on Iran. Although even then Russia still doubted that Iran really would go nuclear, Moscow suspended the delivery of S-300 rockets [31] to Iran and stopped cooperating with it on missile technologies. Thus, if Iran obtained nuclear weapons, Russia and China most likely would join the strict international economic sanctions.

Going nuclear would be a catastrophic scenario for the current ruling elite in Iran, and the regime of ayatollahs seems to be rational enough to understand this. Further development of the nuclear and space programmes could be explained by the regime's desire to distract public attention from the economic problems by increasing national prestige and pride. Moreover, the new achievements in the nuclear and missile programmes could be used by Tehran as a bargaining chip in further negotiations with the West.

It appears that Russia and China are taking these considerations into account and do not perceive the Iranian nuclear and space programmes as a real threat or as an obstacle to receiving benefits from economic cooperation with Iran. EU states also seem not to believe that Iran will go nuclear. However, the launch of an Iranian military satellite in April 2020 may change the position of Europe,[32] as it was condemned by the EU. The French Foreign Ministry stated that "this launch directly contributes to the extremely troubling progress made by Iran in its ballistic missile program" and is not in conformity with the UN Security Council Resolution 2231, which approved the nuclear deal with Iran in July 2015.[33] Germany stated that the Iranian missile and space programme had a destabilising impact on the Middle East region.[34] Now the EU does not have a unique position regarding the nuclear and missile programmes of Iran. While still trying to save the nuclear deal with Iran, the EU countries criticise Tehran for its missile and space programmes.

> **" Further development of the nuclear and space programmes could be explained by the regime's desire to distract public attention from the economic problems by increasing national prestige and pride. Moreover, the new achievements in the nuclear and missile programmes could be used by Tehran as a bargaining chip in further negotiations with the West**

For the United States, the relations with Iran will likely remain complicated even if Joe Biden wins in the presidential election in November 2020. Biden played a positive role in securing congressional approval for the

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31 *Russia to Repay Iran for Cancelled Missile Order*, "BBC News", 7 October 2010 [https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-11495172 access: 10 August 2020].

32 M. Dagher, *Iran Changes the Rules of the Game With Satellite Launch*, Washington Institute, 1 May 2020 [https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/fikraforum/view/Nur-Satellite-Space-Missile-U.S.-Iran-Security access: 10 August 2020].

33 *Resolution 2231 (2015) adopted by the Security Council at its 7488th meeting, on 20 July 2015* [https://www.undocs.org/S/RES/2231(2015) access: 10 August 2020].

34 O. Jalilov, Iran Slams U.S., *Europe Stances on Satellite Launch*, "Caspian News", 26 April 2020 [https://caspiannews.com/news-detail/iran-slams-us-europe-stances-on-satellite-launch-2020-4-25-15/ access: 10 August 2020].

JCPOA during the Obama administration.[35] Nevertheless, the recent achievements of the Iranian space programme make today's Iran look more dangerous than it was in 2015 during the signing of the JCPOA. Thus, achieving a new nuclear deal with Iran, in case Biden wins, would be still complicated.

Nevertheless, even if Washington, similarly to Moscow and Beijing, believed that Tehran was not going to obtain nuclear weapons, the United States would feel uncomfortable about lifting the sanctions on Iran. Even without any nuclear and space programmes, Iran would still be dangerous for the United States. The United States keeps military forces in Syria and Iraq, where pro-Iranian paramilitary troops are fighting against them. The US allies Israel and Saudi Arabia are also fighting against pro-Iranian groups in Lebanon and Yemen. As a result, Washington and its allies fear that if they lifted the sanctions, Iran would obtain more funds and use them to increase support of pro-Iranian groups in the Middle East and further destabilise the situation in Syria, Lebanon, Iraq, Yemen, and probably in some other countries. For example, Iran is also able to destabilise the situation in Saudi Arabia and other Gulf monarchies by manipulating by the Shia minorities in these countries.

Possible Options to Reduce the Danger of Iran's Space Programme

Thus, the USA and its allies in the Middle East region are interested in pressuring Iran by economic sanctions to avoid a situation where economically strong and rich Iran can conduct devastating proxy wars in a dozen countries. Achievements of the Iranian space and nuclear programmes create a reason for the White House to sanction Iran and prevent a scenario in which Iran becomes stronger and more dangerous.

However, it appears that there is no better alternative than conducting negotiations with Iran and making some concessions to it. US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo declared that US sanctions could lead Iran to economic collapse.[36] However, economic forecasts of the World Bank do not confirm the US administration's assessments. According to the World Bank, Iranian economy will start to recover in 2021 despite the economic sanctions and COVID-19. In 2021, Iranian GDP is expected to grow by 2.1%.[37]

On the other hand, the stability of the regime was brought into question during the mass protests in November 2019, which erupted after the government announced the price of petrol would be increased by 50%.[38] Although these protests were brutally suppressed by the government forces, they demonstrated that Iranian people were disappointed with the economic situation, which was getting worse amid the US sanctions. The expected slight economic growth in 2021 is unlikely to significantly improve the lives of most ordinary Iranian people. Therefore, new protests and instability may happen again. However, it appears that if Iran really faces collapse and regime change, this will not radically improve the security situation in the Middle East. The United States had already experienced the collapse of Saddam Hussein's Iraq, another strong

35 M. Dagher, n32.

36 A. Mohammed, H. Pamuk, *U.S. to End Sanctions Waivers Allowing Some Work at Iran Nuclear Sites*, "Reuters", 27 May 2020 [https://ru.reuters.com/article/idUSKBN2332W1 access: 10 August 2020].

37 *Global Economic Prospects: Middle East and North Africa*, "World Bank Report", June 2020 [http://pubdocs.worldbank.org/en/950801588788414569/Global-Economic-Prospects-June-2020-Analysis-MENA.pdf access: 10 August 2020].

38 *Iran Protests: Rouhani Claims Victory against 'Enemy' After Crackdown*, "BBC News", 20 November 2020 [https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-50486646 access: 10 August 2020].

adversary of Washington in the Middle East. Nevertheless, the regime change in Iraq after the war in 2003 did not radically strengthen US positions in the region.

Thus, diplomacy is the best option in dealing with Iran. Reaching a new deal with Iran could be even more complicated than in 2015, but pressure on Iran is unlikely to lead to positive results. Moreover, the economic crisis resulting from the global pandemic decreases the value of sanction relief for Iran, because during the global recession, the lifting of sanctions will not radically improve the Iranian economy.[39] Thus, Iran would not be highly interested in making big concessions on its nuclear or space programmes in return for sanction relief. Under these conditions, it would be very difficult to negotiate with Iran, and most likely, it would be possible to reach an agreement on the nuclear issues only as it was in 2015.

It is unlikely that Iran would be ready to limit its space activities either, because, as a spokesman for Iran's UN mission stated, the missiles and other weapons "are absolutely and under no condition negotiable".[40] Although the Iranian minister of foreign affairs Javad Zarif did not exclude the possibility that the Iranian missile and space programmes could be negotiated,[41] the moderate forces represented by Javad Zarif, together with president Hassan Rouhani, are gradually losing their power, faced by the growing US pressure, and the hardliner approach starts to dominate in Iranian policy.[42]

It appears that under the current conditions, the only realistic option to reduce international concerns around the Iranian missile and space programmes would be banning long-range missiles in the Middle East, as Michael Elleman suggested in his article for the *Arms Control Today journal*.[43] According to his study, all the Middle East countries, including Iran and Israel, could negotiate a treaty that would prohibit the production and proliferation of long-range missiles in the Middle East, and this would make the Iranian space programme more controlled and less dangerous for the international security. Reaching this deal soon would be a complicated task, but after renewing the JCPOA or signing its updated version, the talks on missile issues appear to be possible.

Thus, it could be concluded that the Iranian missile and space programmes will most likely remain a complicated issue in the relations between Iran and Western countries. Solving this problem would be possible only after reaching a new nuclear deal with Iran. Until that time, Iran would likely try to further develop its space activities but probably will not launch new satellites or create ICBMs, taking into account a complicated economic situation amid the COVID-19 crisis.

39 E. Geranmayeh, *Reviving the Revolutionaries: How Trump's Maximum Pressure Is Shifting Iran's Domestic Politics*, European Council on Foreign Relations, 23 June 2020 [https://www.ecfr.eu/publications/summary/reviving_the_revolutionaries_how_trumps_maximum_pressure_is_shifting_irans access: 10 August 2020].

40 *Iran Rejects Suggestion Its Missile Programme Is Negotiable*, "BBC News", 16 July 2019 [https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-49011836 access: 10 August 2020].

41 *Door Is 'Wide Open' to Negotiation If Trump Lifts His Sanctions*, Zarif Says, "NBC News", 15 July 2019 [https://www.nbcnews.com/news/mideast/door-wide-open-negotiation-if-trump-lifts-his-sanctions-iran-n1030021 access: 10 August 2020].

42 Geranmayeh, n39.

43 M. Elleman, *Banning Long-Range Missiles in the Middle East: A First Step for Regional Arms Control*, "Arms Control Today", 42 (4), May 2012.

Just strengthening or lifting sanctions would be unlikely to significantly change Iran's poor economic situation and thus would not convince the Iranian leaders to limit its nuclear and space programmes. However, Western countries could discuss with Iran some projects of economic cooperation, which could help to recover the Iranian economy and persuade the Iranian leaders to make concessions on Tehran's nuclear and space programmes.

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