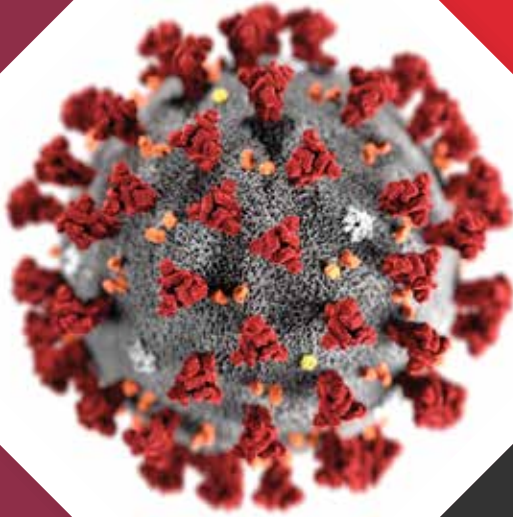




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LETTER FROM THE DIRECTOR:

COVID-19 PANDEMIC: ECONOMIC, POLITICAL AND GEOSTRATEGIC CONSEQUENCES

The COVID-19 pandemic that erupted in China's Wuhan city at the end of 2019 has precipitated a global crisis of epic proportions. Eight months into Chinese public health officials' identification of the genome of the virus, 33 million people around the world have been infected and more than 996,000 have died. The future trajectory of the pandemic is uncertain. Unless and until there are scientific breakthroughs in the area of vaccines and anti-viral cures, it appears that the avoidance of further catastrophic loss of life can only be accomplished through comprehensive measures and economic shutdowns in the context of the deepest recession since the World War II.

Many aspects of the infection have been studied and available epidemiological, clinical



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and impact data have been used to design preventive interventions. Unfortunately, the spreading of the virus is ongoing, and the impact of the infection is still growing, despite the application of very restrictive preventive interventions. What is more, that impact is huge, both from a clinical but also socio-economic, political and geostrategic points of view.

Social science research will play an important role in understanding and solving the COVID-19 pandemic. Political science is no exception – institutional trust, partisanship, and elite cues are but a few factors potentially relevant to important outcomes, such as compliance with public health guidelines, beliefs about COVID-19, support for COVID-19 related policies. The COVID-19 breakout also challenges all areas of economics including, but not only, health, industrial organization, macroeconomics, finance, history, development, inequality, political economy and public finance, and concerns theory as well as empirical evidence. And from a geopolitical

perspective, COVID-19 is set to have an impact on the US foreign policy, US-China relations, and great power politics in the post-pandemic world. In that respect, the handling of the crisis by the intergovernmental institutions also appears to have stirred some heated debates regarding the liberal order and current understandings of internationalism.

Sait Akşit and İbrahim Ayberk's work starts the discussion in this second issue of the Near East Bulletin dealing with COVID-19, by providing a critical assessment of how "de facto states" could offer a bold and critical research agenda in times of uncertainty. More specifically, the authors suggest that, it is essential to pause and assess the relatively "normal" and often robust responses to COVID-19, as exemplified in the case of the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus (TRNC) and utilize research to create a better understanding of the organizations, communities and nations that are left on the margins of the global fight against the pandemic. Most interestingly, Akşit and Ayberk also offer an important line of inquiry with emphasis on social justice, leadership and civil society activism in such contexts.

Hüseyin Baykan's brief follows a similar line of inquiry by tackling the economic policy responses to the COVID-19 pandemic in Cyprus, drawing on evidence available up to September 2020. Focusing in particular on the TRNC, Baykan warns that the services sector most affected by the ongoing pandemic — above all, higher education and tourism — is a significant cause for concern for the future economic prospects of the country. The rapid

reaction of policymakers in the TRNC to buffer the initial blow to incomes and jobs prevented an even larger drop in economic output but Baykan also says it is essential for the government to continue to provide fiscal, financial and other policy support at the current stage of the recovery and for 2021. Such measures should be flexible enough to adapt to the changing conditions and become more targeted. Baykan's message for Cyprus is that building confidence will be crucial to ensure that economy recovers and adapts.

In her brief, Assel Tutumlu examines the Western response to the pandemic through the cases of France, Sweden, and the Czech Republic. Tutumlu says that most Western states were unprepared to face the pandemic, and delayed the imposition of rigorous approaches. Many of them are also struggling to sustain these approaches when faced with popular resistance. Responses to the challenge have varied greatly, with Sweden trying to minimize social and economic disruption while cultivating wider immunity, and the Czech Republic locking down well before its first casualty. Tutumlu's work — drawing on the conceptual toolkit of development studies — suggest important lines of inquiry into each of these features and their interrelatedness from a critical perspective.

Erdi Şafak also engages with the conceptual discussion of COVID-19 by focusing on the critical nexus between security and the pandemic. For Şafak, the pandemic has significant bearings on state security, non-state terrorism, and ethnic conflict, and that we have

entered into a “new normal” which requires reevaluating security paradigms and reconsidering what national and global priorities should be with in the context of limited resources. Şafak also warns that the proliferation of emerging technologies and heavy reliance on internet technology – accelerated by COVID-19 – have created unforeseen and increasingly complex security challenges in both the cyber and physical domain.

COVID-19 also created a new kind of stress test, bringing into question democratic decision-making, and ultimately the ability of the democratic model to cope with devastating events. In this vein, Nur Köprülü examines the impact COVID-19 is having on democracy around the world – in the form of “democratic backsliding” and the dangerous convergence in how democratic and authoritarian governments respond to the pandemic and offers policy recommendations for democratic resilience. Köprülü’s brief identifies various threats to democracy as many governments are restricting human rights and fundamental freedoms, such as freedom of assembly and of movement, under the guise of battling the pandemic. Köprülü highlights how some governments are interrupting elections, clamping down on political opponents, discriminating against minority and vulnerable groups, censoring media and increasing digital surveillance. The brief also underscores the importance of value-driven leadership, and consistent and coherent communication in crisis management, exemplified in the crisis communication approach of Jacinda Ardern, the New Zealand Prime Minister, during the

pandemic.

The international system is the focus of the brief penned by our guest contributor Volker Perthes. The brief notes that the pandemic has distinct political implications across different policy domains “as accelerator or multiplier of existing dynamics and trends, as well as strongly-held beliefs”. For Perthes, the response of the United States seems to confirm the diminution of its global hegemony, while Beijing seems to enjoy the boon to promote China’s international reputation and agenda. And as for the EU, while its immediate reaction to COVID-19 was not exemplary, there is still hope Perthes says, that the crisis may strengthen cohesion within the EU. Perthes’s piece also suggests with regret that the international community as a whole is likely to devote less energy to crisis diplomacy and conflict resolution. Yet the shape of the new global order, the author concludes, is inchoate and remains subject to “political will, leadership, and the ability of international actors to cooperate”.

As this collection of policy briefs demonstrate, social sciences have a vital role to play in dealing with the COVID-19 pandemic. Developing an effective response will require effective use of research to improve policy, enhance public services, and contribute to the overall quality of debates on bigger questions including democracy, peace and security. Suggested policy responses and lines of future inquiry highlighted by this collection are thus vital to address both the current crisis and its wider ramifications for the future.

THE COVID-19 CHALLENGE IN “DE FACTO STATES”: THE CASE OF THE TURKISH REPUBLIC OF NORTHERN CYPRUS

On 28 August 2020, Prime Minister of the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus Ersin Tatar declared Northern Cyprus to be “the most successful state” in Europe in the struggle against the novel coronavirus (COVID-19) that was officially declared as a (global) pandemic by the World Health Organization (WHO) on 11 March 2020. Prime Minister Tatar argued that the TRNC was one of the safest countries in terms of the number of cases, number of tests conducted, and the number of deaths encountered by population.¹ Indeed, TRNC officials responded swiftly to the first case on 10 March taking measures to limit the spread of the virus — implementing an effective lockdown and self-isolation. By September 2020 however, a global resurgence of COVID-19 cases — especially in Turkey, the main gateway for Northern Cyprus — has presented a significant



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challenge for the country in tackling the virus’ spread.

The Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus shares similar features with other “de facto states” in terms of fragile and age-worn healthcare infrastructures, volatile economic conditions. Limited resources, and the relatively high numbers of elderly that has put a strain on the struggle against the COVID-19, severely risking lives and livelihoods of people in other contexts.² What made Northern Cyprus stand apart during the pandemic nonetheless, is that it took timely and aggressive safety measures to limit the spread of the virus while other “de facto” state authorities were slow to adopt the required safety measures, and the precautions in most cases were “overly lax”.³ In Abkhazia



and Nagorno-Karabakh, for example, effective safety measures and restrictions (including the declaration of the state of emergency) were put into practice only after the presidential elections in late March and early April whereas in the TRNC the 26 April 2020 presidential elections were rescheduled on the 16 March by a joint decision of all candidates for 11 October 2020.

That said, a combination of factors including the forthcoming presidential elections, public awareness and popular pressure through social media, an active civil society and the nature of the economic structure in the TRNC have also played a significant role in facilitating the introduction of effective measures in the earlier phase of the battle against the pandemic.

¹ Ersin Tatar's official Twitter account [@ersintatar], 28 August 2020.

² Ramesh Ganohariti, "De Facto States Respond Quickly to Covid-19", *De Facto Borders*, 15 March 2020, <https://defactoborders.org/context/de-facto-states-respond-quickly-to-covid-19> [Last Accessed: 10 September 2020]; Michael Emerson et al., "Eastern Partnership-COVID-19 Bulletin No 6 Special Theme: COVID-19 in the Separatist Conflict Regions", 29 May 2020, <https://3dcftas.eu/publications/covid-19-bulletin-no-6> [Last Accessed: 10 September 2020].

³ International Crisis Group, *The COVID-19 Challenge in Post-Soviet Breakaway Statelets*, Brussels, 7 May 2020 p.3; Mete Hatay, *COVID 19 and North Cyprus: Pandemic, Politics, and Non-Recognized Struggles (Occasional Paper Series 4)*, Nicosia, PRIO Cyprus Centre, p. 14.

Indeed, the somewhat aggressive measures enabled the Turkish Cypriot authorities to control the spread and enjoy a tranquil period of 75 days — from 17 April to 2 July 2020 — within which no cases were detected. It is also possible to suggest that its isolation from the rest of the world, physically, politically, but also economically, presented some advantages for the TRNC (and also other “de facto” states) and that its isolation made international lockdown much easier — helping the authorities ‘dodge’ the first-wave of COVID-19 effectively, and with relatively less damage.

On the downside however, their contested status mean that most de facto states have been left ‘invisible’ and the TRNC (together with Somaliland, South Ossetia, Nagorno-Karabakh) remain omitted or are partially represented (Donetsk and Luhansk) on the current COVID-19 statistics/mapping sites. For the TRNC, its non-recognition has also created further problems in terms of securing vital medical materials and equipment, which have so far been by-passed through international links established by its businesspeople. In this regard, an influential businessperson, Halil Falyalı was widely praised by the Turkish Cypriot media for his help in finding and donating around €230 thousand worth of antiviral drugs (100 packs of Favipiravir and 96 packs of



Tocilizumab) to the TRNC Health Ministry. Another businessperson, and the owner of the local İktisat bank, Mete Özmerter was also applauded for transporting drugs and medical equipment from Turkey on multiple occasions, using his private jet.⁴

TRNC and other “de facto states” have also found it difficult to access international aid or other forms of intergovernmental support. In the Turkish Cypriot case, aside from Turkey, only the European Union (EU) has so far provided aid for tackling the pandemic and easing its economic consequences. More remarkably perhaps, a popular call initiated by the Turkish Cypriot civil society for the WHO to include Northern Cyprus in its database seem to have been largely ignored by the international body.

⁴ “Falyalı: ‘Beklenen ilaçları getirip teslim ettik, her şey KKTC için, her şey insanımız için [Falyalı: We delivered the expected medications, prepared to do anything for our people]”, *Gündem Kıbrıs*, 13 April 2020, <https://www.gundemkibris.com/kibris/falyali-beklenen-ilaclari-getirip-teslim-ettik-her-sey-kktc-icin-h293435.html>; “Özmerter, yeniden Türkiye seferinde [Özmerter on his way to Turkey again]”, *Yenidüzen*, 23 March 2020, <http://www.yeniduzen.com/ozmerter-yeniden-turkiye-seferinde-125271h.htm> [Last Accessed: 10 September 2020].

Figure 1. Covid-10 in de facto states*

	Confirmed COVID-19 Cases	Active Cases	Deaths
Abkhazia ⁵	674	482	6
Donetsk ⁶	2824	1209	158
Luhansk ⁷	789	89	23
Nagorno-Karabakh ⁸	337	39	2
Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus ⁹	607	268	4
Somaliland ¹⁰	911	108	31
South Ossetia ¹¹	90	0	0
Transnistria ¹²	2732	843	75

In view of the ongoing pandemic, and the upward trend on a daily basis in the number of confirmed cases in almost all “de facto states” (Fig. 1), it is not difficult to suggest that the TRNC authorities face an uphill battle.

It should also be noted that considering their limited testing capacities and the “tightly controlled information”, the situation for some of these countries and entities (particularly South Ossetia) is far more dim than the official

⁵ “COVID-19: Georgia Live Blog”, <https://civil.ge/archives/342486> (Last Access Date: 10 September 2020).

⁶ Official Website of Ministry of Health of the Donetsk’s People’s Republic, <http://mzdnr.ru/news> [Last Accessed: 10 September 2020].

⁷ Official Website of Ministry of Health of the Luhansk’s People’s Republic, <https://mzlnr.su/informaciya-o-novoj-koronavirusnoj-infekcii-covid19/> [Last Accessed: 10 September 2020].

⁸ Official Website of Ministry of Healthcare of the Republic of Artsakh, <http://moh.nkr.am/> [Last Accessed: 10 September 2020].

⁹ Official Website of Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus Ministry of Health, <https://saglik.gov.ct.tr/> [Last Accessed: 10 September 2020].

¹⁰ “Somaliland COVID-19”, <https://somalilandcovid19.com/Home> [Last Accessed: 10 September 2020].

¹¹ “Coronavirus (COVID-19) Infections in the Caucasus”, <https://abkhazworld.com/aw/covid-19-abkhazia> [Last Accessed: 10 September 2020].

¹² Official Website of Ministry of Health of the Pridnestrovskiaia Moldavskaia Respublika, <http://minzdrav.gospmr.org/covid-19/> [Last Accessed: 10 September 2020].

statistics suggest.¹³ For the TRNC though, a more positive development has been a clear and substantial increase in testing is largely based on the “double PCR” testing policy of the government on all persons arriving at the island from 1 July onwards. Indeed, the authorities carried out 37.817 tests by 1 July, mostly to persons that presented COVID-19 symptoms, and to those civil servants and private sector employees who were allowed to go back to work from 1 May following the partial opening. And robust testing conducted since has focused on international travellers.

That said, the lifting of travel restrictions by the TRNC government as part of the partial opening has been far from criticism. For their part, the authorities have argued that economic concerns blocked the possibility of a longer shutdown both domestically and toward international travel in view of the fact that the TRNC economy relies heavily on tourism and higher education revenues. For its critics however, the new measures regarding travellers have been “overly lax” and that all people arriving in Northern Cyprus should be subject to (at least seven days obligatory) quarantine not to burden the already fragile and deficient healthcare system. Which they say lacks a pandemic hospital, antiviral drugs and qualified personnel.¹⁴ Recent

developments have only amplified such fears and criticisms. At the time of writing, the TRNC has started to witness a steep increase in the total number of daily cases reported, from 331 to 607 cases within a 14-day period. The widespread concern is that the healthcare system will soon reach its full capacity forcing the second lockdown, thus longterm economic hardship.

For many onlookers, the challenges “de facto” states face amidst the ongoing pandemic stem from their non-recognition. While this holds true to some extent, the TRNC — despite being effectively ostracised from global efforts to tackle the pandemic, and with limited resources to stem it — has nonetheless responded swiftly to prevent the spread of the coronavirus. Yet the recent spike in numbers have left many to wonder whether it was too soon to re-open the country for business. And while the officials have pledged that their battle will continue, it is difficult to anticipate the precise repercussions of a prolonged pandemic. In that respect, the TRNC and other “de facto” states are no different than other states: they face the same dilemma as the rest of the world. Mustafa, the footnotes are missing in the text. Should be marked, otherwise, it is not clear which sources belong to which statements.

¹³ International Crisis Group, *The COVID-19 Challenge*, p. 1; Mete Hatay, *COVID 19 and North Cyprus*.

¹⁴ “1 aydan fazladır evde neyi bekliyoruz? [What are we waiting for under lockdown for the past month?]”, *Yenidüzen*, 17 April 2020, <http://www.yeniduzen.com/1-aydan-fazladir-evde-neyi-bekliyoruz-126139h.htm>; “Sendikal Platform ve 3 birlik Başbakanlık önünde eylem yaptı [Trade Unions Platform and 3 Unions hold protest at PM’s Office]”, *Kıbrıs*, 23 June 2020, <https://www.kibrisgazetesi.com/kibris/sendikal-platform-ve-3-birlik-basbakanlik-onunde-eylem-yapti-h91676.html> [Last Accessed: 10 September 2020].

COVID-19 IN CYPRUS: ECONOMIC POLICY RESPONSES



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The COVID-19 pandemic is projected to inflict the worst recession since the Great Depression, sparing no country or region in the world. Small island economies in particular are likely to experience a severe recession in 2020, pummeled by the falling tourism revenue, capital flows and pressures of high and growing debt servicing costs. As such, the economies of the still-divided island of Cyprus has also been experiencing the negative impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Tourism has become one of the leading economic activities in many small island developing states. Hence, changes in tourism demand can have considerable economic impacts, both at the macroeconomic level and on different sectors within the economy. Indeed, in the South (i.e. the de-facto Greek Cypriot controlled Republic of Cyprus), possibly the worst-hit industry by the pandemic is the tourism industry which constitutes a large part of the country's GDP. The revenue from the tourism industry was €25.6 million in March 2020 when compared to €96.6 million in March 2019, a fall by 73.5%. In addition to this, the unemployment rate reached 10.2% in May.¹ As a result of the economic crisis the Greek Cypriot authorities have taken some measures in an

attempt to relieve the economy which is set to experience a contraction in its GDP of 7.7% in 2020 and a growth of 5.3% in 2021.²

To provide relief, the decree released by the Greek Cypriot authorities on 30 March 2020 stated that 70% of newly formed start-ups' employees' wages will be subsidized by the government. The authorities also ordered all licensed banks operating in the South to suspend the collection of loan installments, including interest, until the end of the year, subject to the borrower submitting a written request to this end and no default amounts to have existed on the relevant loans, over 30 days past due as on 29 February 2020.³ Under the scheme, the sum of the suspended installments on the principal, as well as the interest for the period in question, will not be immediately due on December 31st 2020, but the loan duration will be suitably extended to accommodate the suspension. For self-employed people in accordance with the given terms and conditions the Greek Cypriot authorities also said they would provide a self-employed special benefit package.



For the North, the picture is also bleak. The economy in the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus (TRNC) is dominated by the services sector (over 80% of GDP), which includes the public sector, trade, tourism and higher education.⁴ Despite the constraints imposed by the lack of international recognition, the Turkish Cypriot economy turned in an impressive performance. The nominal GDP growth rates of the Turkish Cypriot economy in 2014-2017 were 4.8%, 4%, 3.6% and 5.4%, respectively. The real GDP growth rate in 2018 was 1.3%.⁵ This growth has been buoyed by the relative stability of the Turkish Lira until recently and a boom in the education and construction sectors.

While different estimates exist on the revenues generated by the higher education sector comprising of 21 universities (800 million USD for 2018),⁶ the universities are without a doubt one of the leading sectors of the Northern Cyprus economy employing thousands of academic and other supporting staff. With students spending not only on tuition but also on food, accommodation, transport, travel and

entertainment, it is a welcome revenue for a country economically isolated from the world by international trade sanctions and travel embargoes. Yet the sheer number of international students (87,000 with 55,000 students from the Republic of Turkey) and the return of these students back to their home countries following the Covid outbreak has delivered a significant blow to the economy.

This also holds true for tourism, defined as a “locomotive sector” that has been hit hard (as in the South) as a result of the ongoing pandemic. After 2011, tourism sector in the TRNC has shown certain progress, particularly with respect to tourism income, the number of tourists, the counterbalance of the trade deficit, the added values and employment. And while the sector normally accounts for around 15 percent of gross domestic product, it has dried up in past months amid global measures to combat the spread of the novel coronavirus. Though the partial lifting of restrictions especially toward Britain⁷ (a key sender) is an important step. The arrivals are expected to be down by 80 percent this year due to the chaos brought by the pandemic and it is thus a leap of faith for Northern Cyprus to generate a significant revenue from tourism this year.

Furthermore, the collapse in tourist arrivals not only directly affects ground transport and hotels, but also adversely affects the rest of the

¹ “COVID19: Cyprus jobless rate climbed to 10.2% in May”, *Financial Mirror*, 2 July 2020, available online at: <https://www.financialmirror.com/2020/07/02/covid19-cyprus-jobless-rate-climbed-to-10-2-in-may/> [Last accessed: 17 August 2020].

² “Economic Forecast for Cyprus”, *European Commission*, available online at: https://ec.europa.eu/info/business-economy-euro/economic-performance-and-forecasts/economic-performance-country/cyprus/economic-forecast-cyprus_en [Last accessed: 17 August 2020].

³ “Cyprus: Government and institution measures in response to COVID-19”, *KPMG*, 14 May 2020, available online at: <https://home.kpmg/xx/en/home/insights/2020/04/cyprus-government-and-institution-measures-in-response-to-covid.html> [Last accessed: 17 August 2020].

⁴ TRNC State Planning Organisation, <http://www.devplan.org/>



economy, including agriculture and construction. Coronavirus-induced losses in tourism have a knock-on effect on other economic sectors that supply the goods and services travellers seek while on vacation, such as food, beverages and entertainment. Falling tourism, and subsequently, a significant drop in tax revenues, is expected to exacerbate the fiscal balances of the Turkish Cypriot economy and also reduce the flow of foreign direct investment (FDI), as the tourism sector is typically the largest recipient of FDI.

In this context, on March 11, the TRNC authorities adopted a package of four measures to deal with any economic disruptions associated with COVID-19. These measures broadly include: tax cuts and tax deferrals, rent deferrals for publicly owned buildings, wage and income supplements to individuals, including expanding unemployment insurance. Bank lendings to businesses at low interest rates, and an extension of credit card spending limits.⁸

In terms of fiscal policy the TRNC government

also proposed a fund on March 11, 2020, that included nearly 100 million Turkish liras in fiscal spending to counter the adverse economic effects of the pandemic to be offered to small and medium businesses to cover their interest payments for up to three months. The plan provided a “job retention interest break” to companies that employ up to 10 people and a 1,500TL contribution to all qualifying TRNC and Turkish citizen employees of private establishments shut as part of coronavirus pandemic, to ensure that the businesses continue to operate without having to lay-off employees.

The TRNC authorities introduced a phased reopening of businesses on 4 May, but over 3,000 people have applied for state support of their wages, dampening hopes that the economy will bounce back quickly. This has also been reflected in the second phase of the economic measures introduced by the Turkish Cypriot authorities on 21 June 2020 shortly after the partial reopening.⁹ A TL1,154 million package was announced, which consisted of TL442 million for supporting employment as well as a TL356 million for the fiscal measures, and TL356 million for sectoral loans. In addition, a TL1,500 million sovereign guarantee fund for companies was announced to access overdrafts in the banking system up to TL4 million with the fund to guarantee 80 percent of the loans payable after 6 months for a maturity of up to 3 years. The government said it will bear the interest costs capped at 3

⁵ *Ibid*

⁶ “Eğitimden bu yıl 1 milyar dolar gelir bekleniyor [Higher education expected to generate 1bl USD this year]”, *Gündem Kıbrıs*, 21 August 2019, <https://www.gundemkibris.com/kibris/egitimden-bu-yil-1-milyar-dolar-gelir-bekleniyor-h280310.html> [Last accessed: 17 August 2020].

⁷ “Northern Cyprus to open to Brits from next Thursday”, *The Sun*, 9 July 2020, available online at: <https://www.thesun.co.uk/travel/12074896/northern-cyprus-july-holiday-coronavirus-test/> [Last accessed: 17 August 2020].

percent with a full weaver on the credit facilitation costs to improve access. For loans over TL6 million, the authorities have also asked the banks to modify loan conditions to extend maturity from 15 months up to 36 months without a need to provision and at no additional costs. According to the measures, businesses will be allowed to use these credit lines to cover payroll costs, working capital and investment, including financing the existing debt and tax payments pertaining to 14 March – 4 May 2020.

In an effort to navigate through the negative impact of the pandemic, the TRNC authorities also announced a set of tax breaks in the form of a ten percent discount on income tax, corporate tax, sales tax, gambling tax and all rents for the period 31 March 2020 and 30 June 2020. Yet from a budgetary and fiscal perspective, such tax breaks are a clear indication of an economic contraction due to the loss of tax revenue. Indeed the announcement that came shortly after the introduction of tax breaks regarding a 25 percent cut on municipalities budgets is a case in point.

For the critics, the stimulus package is simply not enough to stop the free-fall, and there are warnings of a long and painful road to economic recovery. According to the Chamber of Turkish Cypriot Shopkeepers and Artisans, in the last

seven months, over 700 businesses ceased their activities and only 30 new businesses were registered.¹⁰

A further cause for concern for the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus is the expected drop in international enrollment in the universities for the upcoming academic year against the ongoing pandemic. While a decline in international enrollment will financially hurt the universities, it will also decrease the profits of local businesses and the tax revenues of local municipalities and the central government. The long-term impact of fewer international students should the pandemic continue will ultimately mean a sharper contraction with a longer recovery period that will affect the growth trends.

While authorities on both sides of the island were quick to introduce a set of economic measures at the onset of the pandemic, without a quick resolution of the health crisis the economic crisis may persist longer than most forecasters have assumed. This will require policymakers in Cyprus but also elsewhere to explore all options, weigh the most effective mix of additional fiscal and monetary policies and bolster the ongoing efforts that may be required. Above all, governments will need to continue reassuring people that in the event of a downturn, there will be support for the economy.

⁸ "Son Dakika: Ekonomik Tedbirler ve Destek Paketi Açıklandı [Breaking News: Economic Stimulus Package announced]", Kıbrıs, 25 March 2020, available online at: <https://www.kibrisgazetesi.com/kibris/son-dakika-ekonomik-tedbirler-ve-destek-paketi-aciklandi-h85761.html> [Last accessed: 17 August 2020].

⁹ "Paket Açıklandı: Ekonomiye 1,144 milyon TL destek [Details of the Second Stimulus Package Revealed]", Yenidüzen, 22 June 2020, available online at: <https://www.kibrishaberci.com/ikinci-ekonomik-destek-paketinin-icerigine-ulasildi/> [Last accessed: 17 August 2020].

¹⁰ "Esnaf ve Zanaatkarlar: Korona virüsü ekonomik olarak KKTC'yi dünyadan daha çok etkiledi [Shopkeepers and Artisans: TRNC more affected by the coronavirus than the rest of the world]", BRTK, 3 June 2020, available online at: <https://www.brtk.net/esnaf-ve-zanaatkarlarkorona-virusu-ekonomik-olarak-kktcyi-dunyadan-daha-cok-etkiledi/> [Last accessed: 17 August 2020].

COVID-19: DEVELOPMENT STUDIES GO HOME

The COVID-19 pandemic posed an interesting set of questions about the nature of models adopted by various European states in their policies to stem the spread of the novel coronavirus while trying, at the same time, to keep their economies afloat. In that sense, some countries embraced ‘herd immunity’ to allow life to continue as normal, while others imposed strict quarantine measures and self-isolation, with many third countries in between these two radically different options. Although the comparative research evaluating the strengths and limitations of each option is ongoing, a conceptual differentiation between these approaches in view of the ongoing efforts merits attention.

Before delving into details, it is useful to conceptualize the pandemic as “a challenge”, which materialized into a “shock” when adequate measures were not taken. Challenge is a known threat that requires additional resources, change of policy, and immediate action in order to deal with its negative potential outcomes. Shock, on the other hand, is a negative materialization of a challenge. Countries that did not take the coronavirus seriously have seen a rapid increase in the number of deaths together with overburdened



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public healthcare services, leaving whole groups of people without care in dire conditions. Horror stories of Italy in March 2020 still circulate online to remind the importance of new social distancing rules in the era of the ‘new normal’.

There are three major “paradigms” in approaching a challenge. Paradigms reflect our worldview of what we think is right or wrong (and true or false) and, as a result, determine a comprehensive set of policy options. Approaches to COVID-19 in Europe reflect these paradigms that stem from development studies, where interventions, including those that tackle epidemics, are divided into three categories: “fragility”, “risk”, and “resilience”.¹ Fragility refers to state capacity to fulfill the needs and expectations of its citizens. In other words, in this paradigm, the state is the main actor that is capable and endowed with the sufficient resources to address any problem within its borders, including pan/epidemics. Some organizations that work with this



approach to development focus on strengthening the capacity of states by providing training and technical assistance. In contrast, consultants working within the “risk” paradigm tailor solutions to help the most vulnerable and/or address those challenges that may have long-lasting effects on the broader stability of the country. In this regard, risk specialists do not try to eradicate the problem (say malaria, for instance), but they provide mosquito nets to communities that are most vulnerable. They select communities based on existing data and work out the risk in terms of statistical probabilities. For example, international assistance against malaria will not target those who can afford protection against the disease, but only those who are more prone to death, often found in communities living in abject poverty. The last approach, “resilience”,

which has become the new buzzword in international development, treats challenge in the most comprehensive manner by ensuring that the communities not only recover from shocks, but also develop long-term capacity to reduce vulnerabilities to similar challenges in the future. Resilience specialists will often engage many more actors into relief efforts, and focus on sustaining stakeholder commitment to reduce vulnerabilities to future shocks. To that end, rather than reacting to a certain challenge or shock, resilience specialists will often anticipate such challenges (and shocks), and book the costs for every stage of the process, which include prevention, impact and recovery costs. By helping communities grow stronger and more active in determining their own predicament, resilience is said to be the most preferred method to tackling challenges.

Ironically, in the age of the pandemic, these three approaches are no longer restricted to the geography of the developing world, but are globally relevant, especially for countries in Europe, which have also suffered from the virus in an egalitarian fashion.

France serves as a good example of the fragility paradigm. A country that gave birth of dirigist public policy that always stood for strong state intervention and partial ownership of its “commanding heights”, France offered its

¹ Bossetti et al. (2016), “Fragility, Risk, and Resilience: A Review of Existing Frameworks”, United Nations University Centre for Policy Research, October 2016, available online at: http://scholar.google.com/scholar_url?url=http://i.unu.edu/media/cpr.unu.edu/attachment/2232/Assessing-Fragility-Risk-and-Resilience-Frameworks.pdf&hl=en&sa=X&ei=r6txX87pDLOTy9YPqrmYyA4&scisig=AAGBfm1v-fpRajoiMj9gNg_023bMtAvEXQ&nossl=1&oi=scholarr [Last accessed: 13 September 2020].

population an economic recovery plan in exchange for severe movement restrictions. More specifically, the French government poured money into the banking system to alleviate the debt burden of its population, providing state guarantees on loans.² It also provided tax relief to companies in need. It paid salaries to people who lost jobs or had to go on an unpaid leave through the wage guarantee scheme. It controlled the pace of the short-term work. It specified the type of employees who were obliged to stay at home, including elderly, obese, pregnant, and people with chronic disease. On top of these measures, people were provided with masks to ensure that the virus is contained.^{3t} In return, the French government reported that such strict confinement measures helped save 62,000 lives per month.⁴

In sharp contrast, another EU-member Sweden, adopted a risk perspective. It calculated that none of the available options, quarantine or partial shutdown offered solace to the eventual spread of the virus and decided to opt for “herd immunity”. The science behind “herd immunity” is that if a large group of people – the herd – is immune to a virus, then an individual in the middle of this group is unlikely to become infected. The virus has a very hard time getting through the herd. Herd immunity, then, happens when people in a community are protected from a virus and its associated



disease to a degree that people who are not immune are still protected because of the high population immunity. The most critical aspect of the risk paradigm in the Swedish case was a calculated understanding of its benefits and limitations, whereby the government was prepared to lose lives and face strong public pressure to introduce partial quarantine measures. When the COVID-19 challenge materialized into a shock, the Swedish government only offered medical treatment to those with very severe conditions and did not react to calls among the elderly people – most of whom were in nursing homes – to provide them with isolation and extra protection. Since ethics within the risk paradigm operate through calculation, the Swedish government believed that lockdown, travel ban, and restrictions on

² “France: Government and institution measures in response to COVID-19”, KPMG, available online at: <https://home.kpmg/xx/en/home/insights/2020/04/france-government-and-institution-measures-in-response-to-covid.html> [Last accessed: 13 September 2020].

³ “Coronavirus: What are the key points of France’s lockdown exit plan?”, Euronews, 29 April 2020, <https://www.euronews.com/2020/04/28/coronavirus-what-are-the-key-points-of-france-s-lockdown-exit-plan> [Last accessed: 13 September 2020].

⁴ *Ibid.*

population movements would cause tremendous economic crisis and undermine state capacity to maintain welfare state in the near future. In addition, strong social control and enforcement requires additional police force and was simply seen as incompatible with democracy. Most importantly, Swedish authorities chose to speed up the progression of the disease to ensure that the majority of population became immune to the virus. They did allow citizens to choose how they want to work (travel to work or work from home). While the death toll of Sweden per capita remained high (compared to neighboring Norway or Denmark), it appears that the majority of people who died came either from immigrant communities or from nursing homes. In the meantime, Swedish economy continued to operate with the majority of people continuing their lives as usual.

On other hand, the Government of the Czech Republic has combined a number of the characteristics belonging to resilience paradigm. The Czech government, together with other major stakeholders have budgeted prevention, impact and recovery costs. In particular, Czech government officials have been in touch with Taiwan's government early on and had a relatively realistic picture of what was coming. In January 2020, when most of Europe was thinking about the Winter Olympic Games and had heard about the virus in China from social media in passing, the Czech Republic cancelled all flights from China and began to prepare for the pandemic. The Czech media, for its part, began to provide reliable information about the nature of the challenge

and the necessary measures. Communities and public intellectuals actively discussed the response options and were, for the large part, prepared. The government also ensured that masks were plenty and available, and hospital beds were adequate. It also involved private companies to ensure large scale testing to be done and relied on software application that tracked new cases and mapped them onto its central website. Businesses began to engage in cleaning and disinfecting the premises while sending their staff on vacation or leave. Communities found ways to transform public gatherings into digital spaces. Local shops began to introduce digital doors, soap dispensers, re-stacked and re-arranged places in line with the new requirements. All of these activities took place voluntarily, because people had reliable information, and trusted the government. When wide range of stakeholders was involved in the process, people did not try to sabotage government measures, but took pride in changing their lifestyles to meet the new challenge. These activities put the Czech Republic together with other Visegrad countries in leading positions in Europe. The number of deaths and the 'flattening' of the curve to fit the existing healthcare capacity is commendable.

While the extent to which each of these paradigms will prove viable during the second wave of the novel coronavirus remains to be seen, facilitating recovery and adaptation will remain a key priority across Europe and beyond. In the meantime, further inquiry into the philosophies and methodologies to draw upon can empower all stakeholders to deal with the pandemic and its aftermath.

COVID-19 AND THE FUTURE OF THE CONVENTIONAL SECURITY PARADIGM

The COVID-19 (coronavirus) pandemic, which started as an epidemic in China, has had far reaching implications for public health, economy, but also governance and security. In terms of academic research, priority has been given to studies in the field of public health, and countries have focused their scientific efforts toward developing effective treatment methods and vaccine testing in the fight against the pandemic. Though crucial, clinical efforts are not sufficient when the wider effects of the pandemic are considered, and the need for vigorous academic work on its impact on the economy, society, but also security is more pertinent than ever. National but also international security, and the unintended consequences of the pandemic in other security-related areas have grown in salience as the world governments react to the growing prospects of prolonged uncertainty.

The notion of security pertains to the activities of states, societies, groups and individuals to protect and maintain their existence, and the perceptions, tools, practices and policies for eliminating the elements that threaten them. As Barry Buzan has put it more succinctly: “Security is taken to be about



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the pursuit of freedom from threat and the ability of states and societies to maintain their independent identity and their functional integrity against forces of change, which they see as hostile. The bottom line of security is survival, but it also reasonably includes a substantial range of concerns about the conditions of existence.”¹

Conceptualized in this way, as being open to change, security is also contingent and context-dependent, reshaped every time according to the changing and developing dynamics. In this vein, a lynchpin of security is the concept of threat, in order to talk about security, there must be a threat



which undermines the future viability of the “referent”. Threats can be multiple in addition to being internal or external. Regardless of whether a threat is real, perceptions about the existence of the threat are also sufficient. This idea is based on the concept of securitization that was formulated by Ole Waever, a close colleague of Buzan’s, where an issue is “securitized” when it gets constructed into a threat. According to Waever, “something is a security problem when the elites declare it to be so”,² and something becomes securitized when it has been declared a security problem and this problem is accepted by the audience.

In this regard, the COVID-19 crisis lends itself to both material and perceived security dynamics — as a national and international threat against both physical safety and the existential way of life of citizens.

The spread of the virus has already ushered in a new set of security measures including lockdowns, quarantine zones and curfews, which often rely on the monitoring and implementation of the security forces. In this sense, the coronavirus pandemic poses a significant challenge to domestic security, when curfews are defied giving way to looting (US), antisocial behavior (UK), or leads to widespread unrest as hunger and despair mount (South Africa).

The longer COVID lasts, we may also see a surge in political instability around the world. Populations around the globe are already angry — and will become angrier — with the performance of their

governments with regard to both their response to the public health crisis and to the economic crisis. With it being clear that the crisis will inevitably add to the burden of the poorest and already fragile countries and push millions into poverty, it is not difficult to suggest that some of these populations will demand change. And, some of that anger could well turn into political violence with potential spill-over effects.

Meanwhile, violent extremists across the ideological spectrum are set to take advantage of the global pandemic as an opportunity for expansion. In many regions, coordinated security operations between international and local forces and security assistance, including capacity building of local security forces, are critical to effectively counter terrorist groups, such as ISIL/Da’esh. The current health crisis is endangering those efforts as international actors withdraw military troops and trainers. The spread of the virus amongst Iraqi forces — and the subsequent withdrawal of international security assistance on fears of virus’ spread — which has reduced their strength to fight ISIS is a case in point. ISIL/Da’esh has also openly communicated that they expected the international community to be reluctant in deploying troops abroad as the pandemic was ongoing, and has urged followers and affiliated groups to take advantage of the situation by intensifying their activities and escalating quantity and quality of attacks.

COVID-19 may also further exacerbate ethnic conflicts or raise tensions in those contexts that are

¹ Barry Buzan, “New Patterns of Global Security in the Twenty-first Century”, *International Affairs*, 67.3 (1991), pp. 432-433.

² Waever, O. (1995) ‘Securitization and Desecuritization’ in R. Lipschutz (ed) *On Security*, New York: Columbia University Press, 46-86, p.55.

at risk of transforming into a conflict. So far, competing sides in many ongoing conflicts have cynically looked to gain strategic advantage from the health crisis. Ceasefires have repeatedly failed and even in areas where violent conflict has abated, armed forces have looked to expand territorial control or provide health assistance purely as a way to build their local reputation. In conflict contexts, such as Syria, Libya, and Yemen, it is thus possible to say that the virus is not limited to the health crisis, and that it is set to have a huge negative impact on the conflict processes in these countries. In the same vein, the refugee movements experienced as a result of the crises in these countries may force the relevant state actors to rethink their policies and prepare for a more robust response.

Last but not least, there is also evidence that malicious actors are exploiting the crisis which has shifted the global economy and society to become more reliant on the Internet, apps and the digital economy as it enabled millions of people to work remotely. In other words, our increased reliance on digital platforms during COVID-19 crisis has also meant that such concepts of “cyber-attack” and “cyber warfare” have become more pronounced.

Cyber-attacks are carried out by a range of actors — from individuals to large-scale organizations, terrorist groups, and states. Cyber warfare involves the actions by a nation-state or international organization to attack and attempt to damage another nation's computers or information networks through, for example, computer viruses or denial-of-service attacks. And while not new, both are on the rise. In May, the US authorities directly

accused the People’s Republic of China of targeting COVID-19 research organizations. The Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) and Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency (CISA) issued a joint statement accusing investigating the targeting and compromise of the US organizations conducting COVID-19-related research by “China affiliated cyber actors and non-traditional collectors”.^{3f} The potential theft of this information jeopardizes the delivery of secure, effective, and efficient treatment options, US authorities argue.

Taking all of this mentioned above, COVID-19 has already had a tremendous impact on the security environment. It has tested the readiness of not only traditional health systems but also the existing security framework in such a way that raises important questions about the very concept of security by introducing different physical and online realities. Given these circumstances, a robust and a holistic understanding of security will remain critical when navigating through the consequences of the COVID-19 on security, helping states but also societies and individuals to enhance their readiness and resilience on the face of the security-related challenges of the pandemic.



³ BBC (2020), “Coronavirus: US accuses China of hacking coronavirus research”, 14 May. Available online at: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-52656656> [Last accessed 12 September 2020].

DEMOCRATIC BACKSLIDING IN TIMES OF COVID-19

The outbreak of the COVID-19 (or coronavirus for short), is the most serious global public health crisis in recent history. Widely understood to have originated from the Chinese city of Wuhan at the end of 2019, the virus was declared by the World Health Organization (WHO) a “public health emergency of international concern” on 30 January and subsequently a “pandemic” on 11 March 2020. Despite the ongoing “war of words” between the US and China regarding the source of virus — with one Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson claiming the “US army brought the epidemic to Wuhan” — the source of the virus remains unknown. What is certain however, is that the pandemic itself is likely to have wider repercussions on key aspects of society and government, including the fundamental principles of democracy in the form of what analysts have called “democratic backsliding”.

The starting point of such concerns is that with the pandemic displaying no signs of waning, the handling of an extraordinary crisis will have important ramifications for fundamental human rights across the world. Indeed, as Ishaan Tharoor



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has underlined in his Washington Post op-ed, “Coronavirus kills its first democracy”¹, over 100 countries have already authorized emergency laws and declared states of emergency in response to the spread of coronavirus. In many of these cases, governments also moved towards suspending civil rights and fundamental freedoms, including limiting the role of the legislatures, increasing civic surveillance, but also by-passing democratic oversight through executive measures under the pretext of fighting the pandemic. In this regard, what has become apparent since the outbreak of the coronavirus is the rather peculiar convergence of the ways how democracies fight the pandemic with those of authoritarian regimes.

While ‘authoritarian upgrading’ and ‘democracy backsliding’ are themselves not new and we have been witnessing such tendencies around the world since the 2008 financial crisis and in the aftermath of the 2011 Arab Uprisings, the outbreak of coronavirus carries the potential to have further

¹ Tharoor, I (2020), “Coronavirus kills its first democracy”, *Washington Post*, 31 March. Available online at: <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2020/03/31/coronavirus-kills-its-first-democracy/> [Last accessed: 18 September 2020].

detrimental effects on democratic norms and values. Indeed, further into the future, an unabated pandemic may not only lead the free market economy to vanish following an “enhanced role of the state” in taking pre-emptive financial and austerity measures (a form of economic nationalism, some say), it may also hit vulnerable groups harder and render the socio-economic inequalities more drastic.

One of the clearest manifestations of the undesirable effects of coronavirus on democratic practices has been the rescheduling (and in some cases, revocation) of elections in at least 67 countries. In the case of Bulgaria for instance, this comes at a time when pressure is mounting on the government regarding the protection of personal data and the discriminatory treatment of Roma communities following the introduction of strict measures in fighting the virus.²

Another spill-over effect of the virus is the immediate and widespread ban on public gatherings, which are crucial in those cases where societies need to voice their dissent and demand their democratic rights. Just before the pandemic, in the case of Lebanon, large-scale popular protests were being held against the administration and the sectarian model of power-sharing in the country, which it represents.



But the Lebanese are now deprived of the far-reaching public demonstrations because of the government response to the ongoing pandemic. As one Lebanese protestor described the dramatic situation in the country: “we stopped the revolution because of corona ... bankruptcy is coming. Hunger is coming [...] everyone has to leave their comfort zone”.³ In the People’s Republic of China, another country considered “not free” by the Freedom House, a new health code system was authorized, which gave colors (red, yellow and green) to citizens based on their risk of carrying corona virus. More worryingly perhaps, with the help of popular mobile phone apps, such as Tencent, WeChat, Alipay or Alibaba, the digital code system easily allows the government to introduce an effective surveillance system that could detect individuals’ locations with great accuracy.⁴

In Hungary, one of the emerging ‘illiberal democracies’ of the European Union (EU), prime

² *Emerging Europe (2020), “Monitoring Covid-19’s impact on democracy and human rights”, 8 July. Available online at: <https://emerging-europe.com/news/monitoring-covid-19s-impact-on-democracy-and-human-rights/> [Last accessed: 18 September 2020].*

³ *US Global Leadership Coalition (2020), “COVID-19 Brief: Impact on Democracy Around the World”, 7 July. Available online at: <https://www.usglc.org/coronavirus/democracy/> [Last accessed: 18 September 2020].*

⁴ *Harvard International Review (2020), “Authoritarianism in the Time of COVID”, 7 May. Available online at: <https://hir.harvard.edu/covid-authoritarianism/> [Last accessed: 18 September 2020].*

⁵ *Tharoor, op.cit.*

⁶ *Zakaria, F. (1997), “The rise of illiberal democracy”, *Foreign Affairs*, 76 (22): 22-43; Diamond, L. (2002), “Elections Without Democracy: Thinking About Hybrid Regimes”, *Journal of Democracy*, 13(2): 21-35.*

minister Viktor Orbán has also been criticized for targeting democracy instead of tackling the deficiencies of the health care system in the country.⁵ The Hungarian emergency law, which stipulates imprisonment for those found to be spreading ‘false’ information and disobeying mandated quarantines, constitutes one of the most explicit illustrations of undemocratic practices in the context of the pandemic, significantly overlapping with the practices of illiberal or hybrid regime types, as has been previously articulated by Fareed Zakaria and Larry Diamond respectively.⁶

Since the emergence of the Covid-19 pandemic, we have been witnessing a striking convergence of democratic and authoritarian political systems in the way their authorities have responded to the virus. In many democracies, where elections are regularly held, the citizens have been deprived from acquiring accurate knowledge and taking part in the decision-making processes, which have been dominated by the executive branch — with ample indication across the table of a growing appetite for further expansion of executive power.

Yet, we must also tread carefully since sweeping generalizations of regime types may indeed misguide evaluation of policy responses vis-à-vis the pandemic. And for that reason, identification of the best practices remains a crucial need, which may then lead the way for policy learning and indeed benchmarking for democratic governance in times of the pandemic. In this regard, the case of New Zealand and its government under Jacinda Ardern deserves a special mention for showing that prioritizing healthcare system and routine



communication (in the form of daily press briefings and conferences from the prime minister’s office⁷) have been extremely vital in ensuring transparency and accountability — which, in return, brought trust and helped the government in stemming the spread of the virus. Trust in political institutions and toward decision-makers in the Arab world had already begun to wane prior to the pandemic (34% in 2018 according to the Arab Barometer), but the measures that have been put into place by Jordan and Morocco, similar to those in New Zealand, may also increase the trust in institutions and the decision-makers in these countries.

The drastic impact of the ongoing pandemic around the world and the future policy direction that will be undertaken by the governments, together with their ability to secure trust and legitimacy, will inevitably show different colors. But the growing convergence of democratic and authoritarian forms of governance still represents a challenge to democracy and will require the seizing of the opportunity in the post-pandemic period to rebuild new social contracts by fostering trust between citizens and the incumbents. The precise ways in which this can be done, once the dust settles, will merit our close attention.

⁷ Deutsche Welle (2020), “Coronavirus: 5 things New Zealand got right”, 8 June. Available online at:

<https://www.dw.com/en/jacinda-ardern-leadership-in-coronavirus-response/a-53733397> [Last accessed: 18 September 2020].

THE CORONA PANDEMIC AND INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS: JUST ANOTHER CRISIS OR A GAME-CHANGER?

Every global crisis affects the international system, its structures, norms and institutions. No need to go back to the world wars and the founding of the League of Nations and the United Nations. In our own century, the attacks of 11 September 2001 changed international law and state practice towards non-state actors, while the financial crisis of 2008 saw the G20 transform from a club of finance ministers into a body capable of a soft steering role in some of the less controversial areas of international politics.

Even half a year after the global outbreak of the pandemic, definitive statements about its mid-



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to long-term effects on international relations are premature. There is still too much we do not know about the nature of the virus, second and third waves, or the effectiveness of potential vaccines, and of international cooperation in developing and distributing vaccines and medication.

Regarding the effects of the pandemic on world order and international relations, I generally share the assessment that it will mostly act as an accelerator or multiplier of the existing dynamics and trends, as well as strongly-held beliefs. It will also continue to expose weaknesses and deficiencies – as well as relative strengths – of states and international organisations. COVID-19 has already been instrumentalized by both China and the USA to

¹ This is an updated version of an earlier article, which appeared under the title “The Corona Crisis and International Relations: Open Questions, Tentative Assumptions”, *SWP Point of View*, 31 March 2020.



partly “decouple” their economies, and it has promoted tendencies towards sectoral de-globalization. In certain areas, however, a new “globality” as well as more regional cooperation could also emerge. The broader geopolitical impact – on international order, inter-state rivalries, conflict and cooperation – is unlikely to produce a uniform overall picture. The shape of the world after the pandemic remains subject to political will, leadership, and the ability of international actors to cooperate.

Will the pandemic, as some commentators imply, reduce multilateral cooperation and further weaken the rules-based international order? Most states have initially reacted

unilaterally to the crisis but the pandemic has also underscored the need for effective global cooperation, so inconsistent and contradictory developments in differently, affected regions and states remain the most likely outcome. With the notable exception of the US President Trump, even nationalist leaders accept the relevance of the WHO and the importance of cooperation on information exchange and vaccine research. The UN and regional organizations will certainly pay greater attention to health systems and public health. This may eventually be accompanied by a strengthening of the WHO, more binding rules and more resources. After all, weak health systems in some countries clearly pose a threat to others.

We should not expect any significant initiatives to strengthen multilateral cooperation from the G7 or G20 under their current presidencies. But it has become easier to place public health on the agenda of the UN Security Council, even without linking it to classic security issues. Germany, holding the UN Security Council Presidency in July, has successfully coined health crises and COVID-19 as a threat to global security. There should no longer be any doubt that global health is directly related to international peace and security. On the normative level, it is interesting that the notions of vaccines as a “global public good” is gaining traction. The EU has adopted this understanding; China at least pays lip service to it. A new US administration could follow a similar course.

Will the COVID-19 crisis affect great power conflicts, especially the paradigmatic rivalry between the US and China? It will certainly not mitigate them. Cooperation and open conflict – in particular between the United States and China – are likely to coexist. We can assume

that the ideological dispute between China and Western states will sharpen. At its core, this is about the competition between different systems of government and the relationship between state and society. After initially concealing the epidemic, China began to present its authoritarian system as superior to democratic models in dealing with such a crisis. The People’s Republic attempted to increase its “soft power” through well-staged aid deliveries to different countries in the world, including an EU country like Italy that felt left alone by its co-Europeans during the first weeks of the crisis. The United States, in contrast, did not even try to coordinate an international response – further downgrading its image as a benign superpower. Rather, President Trump presented his country as a nationalistic loner. This included an attempt to buy a German pharmaceuticals firm or exclusive deals with other companies in order to secure a vaccine “only for the USA”, as well as the refusal to ease sanctions on Iran, a country that was hit particularly hard by the pandemic.



Will the virus help to contain wars? Probably not. Countries with ongoing armed conflicts and large vulnerable populations will also be affected severely by the pandemic. At worst, internal conflict lines in highly fragmented states will be drawn even more sharply. Positive responses to the UN Secretary-General’s appeal to “put armed conflict on lockdown” and focus on fighting COVID-19 remained limited. It has gone unheeded in Libya, Yemen and northern Syria,

as well as by ISIS and Boko Haram - and North Korea continued to test missiles.

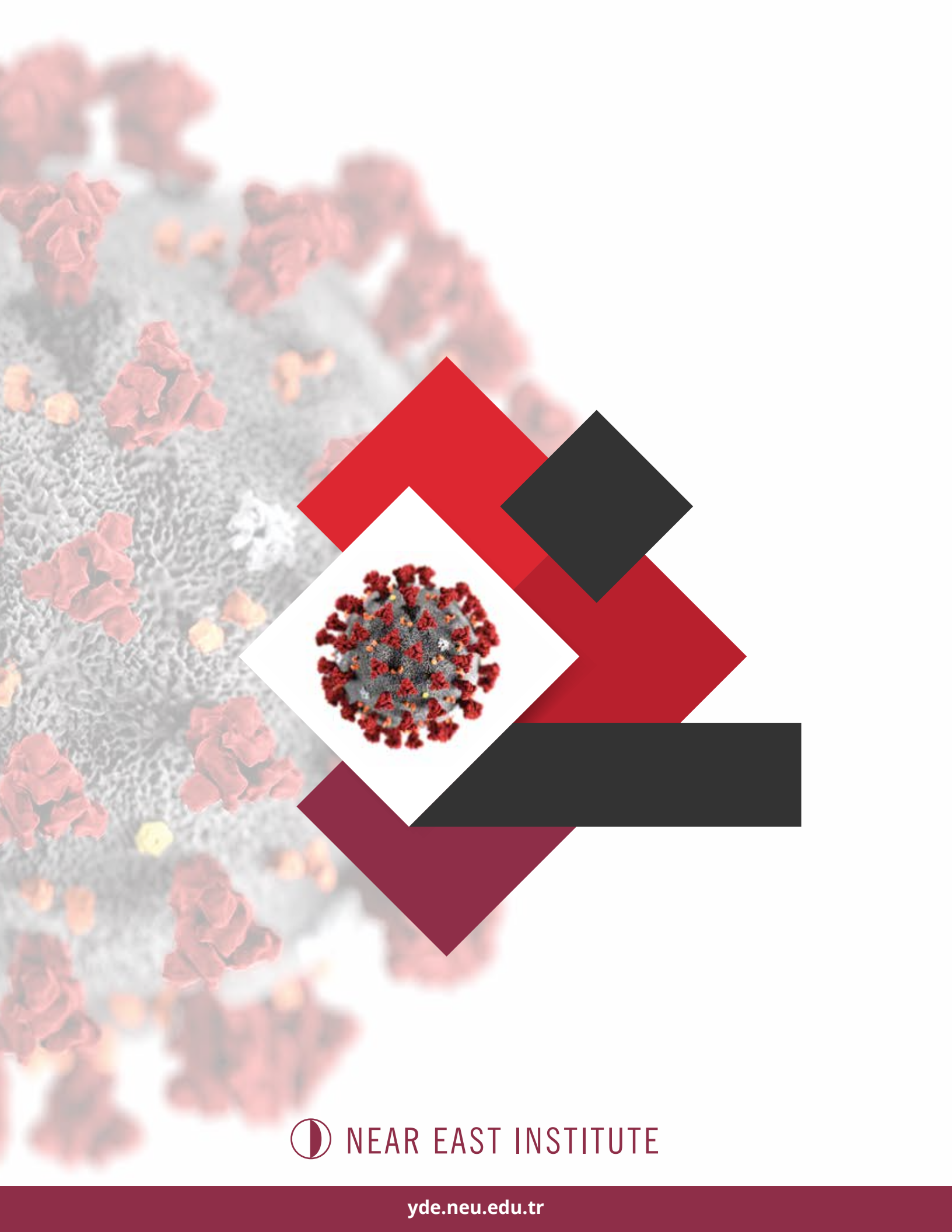
The impact of the pandemic on regional power conflicts is likely to remain negligible. Governments can, however, use the situation for confidence-building measures, as was seen with the UAE and Kuwait sending aid to Iran at an early stage. This was not a one-off, a high-ranking Emirati official explained to me: “We have helped Iran before in emergencies, and Iran would certainly do the same for us. But we have not managed to translate such actions into political reconciliation.” The international community as a whole is likely to devote less energy to crisis diplomacy and conflict resolution. Even the existing UN peace-keeping missions are affected – by the pandemic itself, additional limitations on the mobility of peacekeepers, or increasing difficulties to rotate troops. There is definitely a high risk for new or renewed local and regional conflicts, including civil strife, forced displacements and irregular movements of people where governments are unable to cope with the economic effects of the pandemic. Already poor and weak states that largely rely on migrant income, tourism, raw materials exports, or aid, have already slipped or are likely to slip into economic crises without even having contained the health issues. In principle at least, the G20 and G7 have agreed to grant debt relief to poorer states, but details remain unclear. For the next two, three years, we will probably see less willingness to mobilise aid for humanitarian emergencies, to support the UNHCR, or to fund and staff UN missions.

And Europe? Neither Washington nor Beijing

will devote much energy to finding common solutions to global problems. Here, it is for the EU and like-minded multilateralists such as Canada, South Korea, Indonesia and Mexico to take the initiative. It was good that the EU hosted the “Coronavirus Global Response Pledging Conference” in May 2020, together with international private and public actors. The United States were not part of the conference and may remain unavailable for multilateral endeavours under the current government. China and Russia may cooperate as partners for certain international proposals – on global health, for example – but are unlikely to lead inclusive multilateral efforts.

It is possible, but not certain, that the crisis will eventually strengthen cohesion within the EU. After some delay, the EU has rather swiftly moved to support its own severely affected member states. The agreement of the European Council, in July, on a huge recovery fund could be a historic juncture for EU integration particularly because it is partly based on common borrowing. For its international posture, the EU will have to re-learn the language of power, as Josep Borrell, the EU’s High Representative, has put it. This remains true. One should add that Europe’s power – and attractiveness – also rest on the practice of solidarity. Particularly in times like these.

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