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COVID-19: GLOBAL ISSUES AND LOCAL SERBIAN RESPONSES

Abstract:

The global COVID-19 outbreak has exposed the complex global interdependencies, as well as local responses to the hereby addressed global issues and challenges. Bearing in mind that the COVID-19 pandemic has inevitably affected the existing socio-political structures and practice, through the holistic approach, we will analyze various topics in this paper, such as: the relationship between coronavirus and Europe's new political fissures; the repositioning of the US in relation to rising China's and Russia's superpower; the importance of health sovereignty; the impact of COVID-19 on global inequality, on digital transformation revolution and on fracture of society. Additionally, particular focus will be given on the relationship between COVID-19 and political leadership as well as local responses from Serbia.

Key words: COVID-19, the world's new fissures, geopolitical repositioning (US-China-Russia), Serbian response health sovereignty.

INTRODUCTION

Throughout the time, different virus epidemics have taken place. Severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS), swine influenza A H1N1 virus (H1N1), and Zaire ebolavirus (Ebola) caused many severe infections and thousands of deaths (Dawood et al. 2012; Aylward et al. 2014). Similarly, the global COVID-19 disease outbreak caused by a cluster of cases of viral pneumonia of unknown etiology (VPUE), now known as novel coronavirus-infected pneumonia (NCIP), occurred in Wuhan, Hubei Province, and was reported to the health authorities on December 29, 2019 (Li 2020, 79).

The COVID-19 virus (2019-nCoV) turned to be worrisome, firstly for its high rate of spread, but also for its relatively high death rate (from 0.75% to 3%) (Wang et al. 2020, 2).¹⁾ Short afterwards, the COVID-19 virus has reached the range of a pandemic range in 2020 and has thrown a harsh spotlight on the state of global governance.

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¹⁾ As opposed to other European countries, Austria did not observe an increased overall mortality rate during the epidemic. Obviously, the death rate varies in regions and countries with different climates and temperatures, and the fatality rate of the COVID-19 is not found to be so high. However, it is certain that the older patients or those with preexisting conditions like cancer, diabetes, high blood pressure or heart disease are likely at higher risk than the average person or younger people without significant prior health conditions.

In this paper, we will try to point out the global issues caused by the ongoing coronavirus crisis originated by the arrival of the COVID-19 virus, in order to show that existing socio-political structures and practices will not be the same as they were prior to the COVID-19. Thus, we will address the following topics: 1) the fact that the COVID-19 crisis has highlighted existing fissures in global politics as well as the shift in influence from EU institutions to national governments; 2) the narrative of a rising China and a resurgent Russia as the main culprits in the destabilization of the global order; 3) the necessity of efforts to protect health sovereignty within *today's* extremely competitive geopolitical context; 4) the impact of COVID-19 on global inequality; 5) the impact of COVID-19 on the rise of digital markets; 6) pandemic psychology and the fracture of society; 6) the impact of COVID-19 on political leadership; 7) local responses of Serbia to COVID-19 crisis.

This paper presents the advantages of an analytical and *holistic view* of the COVID-19 crisis, because it aims to identify its most relevant issues and turning points in order to take an overall approach and achieve a deeper understanding of the coronavirus crisis as the global reset that can only preserve the basic principles and practices of multilateral cooperation through serious *reform of global institutions* and its evolution.

In the first part of the research, by means of a systematic data analysis and through the combination of the *methods of inductive and deductive* logic, we have tried to develop a holistic quality multilevel and multipurpose evaluation approach. In the second part of the paper, as contribution, we have linked the discussion on the impact of the COVID-19 on political leadership with local responses from Serbia and its strategies for mitigating the *COVID-19* pandemic progresses.

The coronavirus crisis has transformed the narrative of international society and global order and, all over the world, governments and societies have come to grips with public health, economic, security, strategic, and psychological challenges. At the same time, against the backdrop of Western policymaking based on openly combative US-China relations, and the amplifying European pushback against China by offering aid and medical supplies and resources for various European countries, China's foreign policy has managed to win the hearts and minds of one-half of a divided Europe, while politically putting the other half out of action.

1. Global order in the shadow of the COVID-19 virus

Although the coronavirus affected the EU member states in different ways and to different extents, almost all found that their public health relied mostly on goods or services from third countries, especially China. Due to its incapacity to coordinate efforts in providing and creating common strategic stocks, The EU

bodies followed the so-called policy of piracy,²⁾ causing feelings of abandonment among the worst-hit countries, as it was, for example, *Italy*. In another words, the coronavirus has perfectly highlighted the fragility of EU solidarity and, at the same time, exposed an overall need for health sovereignty, which is undoubtedly conditioned by the political context.³⁾

From the moment of the outbreak of coronavirus, liberalism has faced its greatest crisis, and a dominant European model has clearly shown that globalism in its current form has collapsed. The evident impossibility of the state of global governance to prevent the coronavirus from becoming a lethal worldwide pandemic is its first and foremost a resounding sign of failure that has pointed out how, in times of crisis, nations always regress into narrow self-interest, or better said, into their *own backyards*.

In that sense, the crisis has also highlighted that, while China and the US are fighting over dominance, no one is really in charge and, actually, from a European perspective, neither the American nor the Chinese model look satisfactory because, due to their confrontation, the multilateral institutions, from the G20 to the World Health Organization (WHO), are almost falling apart.

The COVID-19 outbreak has taken the world aback, leading in short time to a near-total standstill in international trade, travel, and global political interactions. Since early March, the epicenter of the outbreak has rapidly and strikingly shifted from China to Europe and America. A majority of countries in the top 10 (in number of cases) were in Europe, as opposed to East Asia, which impressive ability to stem the spread of COVID-19 has been notable already in July⁴⁾.

In concordance with this, dealing with the COVID-19 pandemic, China's General Secretary Xijing Ping precipitated the wave of anti-Chinese pervasive sentiments throughout the United States, due to the extremely high death rate and the standstill of the United States' global economy (Levine 2020, 1).⁵⁾ From the above mentioned, it is clear that the ongoing competition between China and USA to secure their positions and interests at global level will surely continue, which

²⁾ When he realized that 200,000 protective masks intended for Berlin's police force had disappeared, German interior minister, Andreas Geisel, stated in April 2020 that the mentioned situation could literally be interpreted as an *act of modern piracy*.

³⁾ In July 2020 during a four-day summit, there has been bitter debate over debt-sharing and the size and terms of the economic package for the worst affected member states (Boffey & Rankin 2020).

⁴⁾ For example, in comparison with Belgium which confirmed 46 deaths per million, Vietnam reported zero deaths from COVID-19 (Mahbubani 2020).

⁵⁾ Because of the trade deficit of \$378.6 billion in 2018 with China, the United States has vowed to hold China accountable for unfair trade practices that have severely damaged the American economy and businesses. (United States Trade Representative 2018). On the other hand, in June 2019, Beijing released a white paper placing the blame for trade tensions on the United States, while a vice foreign minister accused the United States of targeting China with a campaign of "naked economic terrorism" (State Council Information Office 2019; Guardian May 30, 2019).

will normally affect the global order and individual countries as well. Furthermore, it will put pressure on countries to take a side. Especially the developing and least developed countries, like Serbia, will be under more pressure to agree to the conditions of a prevailing policy.

Therefore, the key questions related to the COVID-19 crisis are whether the global order of the post-COVID-19 narrative should be a partially liberal, partially global, US-led order based on multilateral collective action problem solving, or whether it should be increasingly nationalist, combative geopolitical system of states turned inwards in search of national sovereignty that will, in times of crises like the current COVID-19 crisis, secure them the health sovereignty as well. However, the situation presented also involves a new scenario of bipolarity between the world's two major powers, the US and China.

Being caught in the coronavirus crisis, each country has realized that its health system is an element of security as much important as the one of defense industry or telecommunication infrastructure. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the absence of health security in almost all prosperous European countries has jeopardized their societies as well as economies and nations to compete in geopolitical competition. Like many other areas of international life, health emergencies can also disintegrate the concepts of democracy and human rights, perhaps permanently.

As we live in a world of interconnections, health security, or better said health sovereignty, underlines the importance of the concept of *microbial borders* as relevant to global health. As well as people, goods or information flow across borders, infectious microbes flow as well, creating in that way real borders that are not dependent on human making, which, in turn, require that each state should develop both cooperative and competitive health structures. Although the concept of interconnectedness creates enormous benefits, the concept of microbial borders is relevant to global health and security efforts in general, and, as the pandemic demonstrates, it also represents a societal vulnerability and exposes us all to risk. In order to defend themselves, states can limit these flows ad close borders to some extent, but only at enormous cost to their economies, and their people (Hackenbroich, Shapiro & Varma 2020).

It is an undeniable fact that the pandemic has produced a health and economic crisis unfamiliar in scope and magnitude until now. Enforced lockdowns and the closing of national borders have paralyzed international economic activities, which resulted in laying off millions of workers worldwide, so the possibility of a prolonged economic recession accompanied by the rising poverty and inequality are real threats and problems to be faced (United Nations 2020, 1). Therefore, the COVID-19 will considerably increase the socioeconomic inequality by leading to further economic decline, as well as to faster distinction between the most and the least privileged people in life-preserving medical treatment. Hence, the most vulnerable members of society as the elderly, disabled people, the poor, and especially women and children,

will be extremely hard hit. Additionally, the COVID-19 will mostly jeopardize the societies of the world's most unequal continent, where many depend on informal work for their livelihood, like Africa and Latin America.

The lockdown due to the pandemic has also replaced the physical market with the digital one, leaving it as the only possibility of consumption. In that way, even the most reluctant consumers have had to familiarize with digital platforms. Policies and health prescriptions aimed at limiting the contagion forced producers and consumer's interaction into new modes very quickly, so the COVID-19 served as a strong incentive for firms to carry out the fixed investments necessary to venture into the digital market.⁶⁾ In the context of an emergency situation, the individuals as well as the organizations *have had to adapt* at a dizzying pace to the habit of using digital technology to a much wider extent, like adopting smart working, online education, video-conferencing, e-commerce, online banking etc. However, even when COVID-19 retreats, the non-digital consumers' participation in the digital market has remained, so it is pretty evident that, even though the coronavirus crisis caused temporary shock, it produced as well a long-lasting effect in boosting the digital market (Giordani & Rullani 2020, 1-2, 4.). At the same time, the proliferation of online and home-based leisure activities and the extensive use of virtual and digital communication during the COVID-19 pandemic might have helped easing the burden of lockdown itself and reduce the stress level and anxiety (Fancourt, Steptoe & Bu 2020).

We must be aware that the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) has taken a toll on the mental health of millions of people around the world. Stay-at-home and quarantine orders issued by governments led to the largest enforced isolation period in human history. Furthermore, due to physical distancing, many individuals globally faced high levels of adversities, from being diagnosed with generalized anxiety disorder or facing the challenges that impact fulfilling their *basic needs* (accessing food, water, and safe accommodation) to financial problems (including job losses, income cuts, or inability to pay bills). Being female or younger, with lower education lower income, or with pre-existing mental health conditions, and living alone or with children, are all risk factors for higher levels of anxiety and depressive symptoms due to the lockdown and toxic public discourse that suggests that we must be responsible and save lives by staying at home. However, locking down alone does not save lives in the end, it only slows down the spread of the virus because life must go on, and while many people have reported only symptoms of anxiety disorder or depressive disorder, or symptoms of a trauma- and stressor-related disorder due to the pandemic, some people have reported having started or increased substance use to cope with stress or emotions related to COVID-19 lockdowns, or much worse, that they have specific symptoms (such as thoughts of death) and are seriously contemplating suicide.

⁶⁾ For example, the video conferencing software sector was in sudden need for changing the user bases of different products, with the final growth of Zoom over other tools (CNBC 2020a).

The analysis of how did the world end up in a space of thinking, feeling and acting that has normalized extremes and is based on the assumption that biological life is an absolute value separate from politics is essential if we are to understand the real consequences of what is happening today (Caduff 2020, 1). Today's fear of ordinary man is based on neoliberal health policies, toxic media reporting, mathematical disease modeling and frequently contradictory *data obtained from official sources, which generally leads to feeling of apathy and despair or even bitterness.*

2. The pandemic implications on diplomatic jockeying: political leadership and Serbian responses to the coronavirus crisis

The new COVID-19 coronavirus, which has developed into a global pandemic, is bound to have a profound and complex impact on the world order. Nowadays, we are in a time of a crisis, and the COVID-19 has changed the relationship between states, turning the international system into an era of nationalist political trends reasserting the sovereignty of the state because the nationalism has become the country's first strategy. Additionally, this situation has given birth to the so-called strongman version of political leaders.

In the current crisis, prolonged and specific as this one, with such serious consequences, effective leadership is absolutely necessary for any state and safety of its people. As the COVID-19 crisis continues, political leaders must be aware of evolving problems and the necessity of its own physical, psychological and emotional fortitude. Successful leadership in this kind of situations specifically relies on a possibility of political figures to organize people and be adaptive to transcending adversity, with all its attendant stresses. In fact, the leader's ability to transcend adversity implies his ability to *emerge stronger than before*. Only that kind of response can be considered as *resilient*, which requires political possibility to respond and adjust to fluid circumstances across the globe and be responsible and stable in a climate that changes day by day and hour by hour. Besides, with a prolonged adjustment to the *new normality*, successful political leaders must prepare for a significant shift in operational priorities, because their old leadership styles, which had served them before the crisis, needs to be adapted to the novel and unprecedented crisis.

Moreover, the integrity in research and public discourse is essential for maintaining the trust in public institutions because the trust is the foundation upon which the legitimacy of public institutions is built and it is crucial for maintaining social cohesion. Also, public trust is inevitable for the success of a wide range of public policies that depend on behavioral responses from the public, because public trust leads to greater compliance with state regulations in accordance with public health.

In accordance with the analysis presented above, in 2019, Beijing political leadership took new steps to advance the aggressive approach to foreign and security policy in the Indo-Pacific region and around the globe. Using its growing economic

and political influence, Beijing's political actions reinforced ideological and nationalistic messaging strategy towards China's intent to reorganize the international system and ultimately dedicate itself to reform and improve the global governance system.⁷⁾ Under the guidance of the Xi Jinping and his thought on diplomacy, there has been a further rise in China's international influence, given its ability to inspire and shape events. Therefore, China has made continuous efforts to safeguard the world peace, promote global development and maintain the stability of the international order (Jiechi 2019, 26).

The COVID-19 pandemic as a global shock has not spared the Western Balkans. As in other countries, in Serbia as well the COVID-19 crisis has put to the test the efficiency of the health system in all its dimensions: prevention, screening, the research and manufacture of treatments, its financing, etc. In the midst of the COVID-19 turmoil, the Serbian government continued to declare European integration as its strategic goal, but several statements made by high-ranking officials were not in line with this strategic commitment.

Nevertheless, while the US-China relations had significant coverage, less attention has been directed to China's efforts to assist countries that were facing lower numbers of confirmed coronavirus cases, but had less crisis capacity, as Serbia, for example. Chinese aid to Serbia has emphasized not only how Beijing is capitalizing on the pandemic to rewrite its image as a responsible international actor, but also how it has dedicated itself to showing a sign of a comprehensive strategic partner. Between 2005 and 2016, bilateral trade has tripled, and in 2018, China ranked third among the top sources of Serbian imported goods, behind Germany and Italy.⁸⁾

To ease the crisis situation, the Serbian government provided two financial packages in the total worth of 5.7 billion EUR to support the economy. Packages contained budget funds for direct cash subsidies to the private sector, for a programme of favorable loans and for state guaranteed loans. Additional financial aid was announced for particularly affected sectors, such as tourism and transport. Furthermore, the government paid a minimum salary for employees of small and medium enterprises for three months and delayed the payment of taxes and social security contributions. The latter two measures were prolonged in July 2020 for another month and were complemented by the establishment of a new programme granting state support for each newly created job for the period of nine months, and all citizens over 18 were given a

⁷⁾ At Central Foreign Affairs Work Conference held in June 2018, Xi urged China to "lead the reform of the global governance system." (See Xi 2019, 550).

⁸⁾ In 2009, China and Serbia signed an agreement establishing a strategic partnership. The partnership was upgraded in 2016 to a comprehensive strategic partnership and a year later, China and Serbia lifted visa restrictions for travelers to the two countries. Since then, Serbia and China have signed a series of major projects that extend China's Belt and Road Initiative to the western Balkans, including a Belgrade-Budapest railway and a new metro system for the Serbian capital. Separately, the growth of Chinese influence in Serbia is also felt both through cultural and political channels, as well as via the installation of Huawei Safe City technology (Eleanor March 27, 2020).

100 EUR cash transfer. Serbia pledged 2 million EUR at the EU's international conference in May 2020 to help development and ensure equitable access to COVID-19 vaccines, tests and treatments (European Commission 2020, 3-4).

The President, Prime Minister and Speaker of Parliament declared a state of emergency on March 15 to stem the spread of the virus, announcing a night curfew and deployment of the military to protect hospitals and Serbian borders, among other measures.⁹⁾ Chen Bo, the Chinese ambassador to Serbia, joined many of China's other diplomats in opening a Twitter account and has focused on disseminating information about China's solidarity with Serbia and medical help. Following the arrival of the Chinese doctors, the Serbian political elite revised Serbia's response to follow what could be described as a *Chinese model* based on mass testing program and immediate isolation of positive cases, while separating the mild ones in makeshift clinics, serious cases in hospitals, and severe cases treated in intensive care units¹⁰⁾ The President of Serbia welcomed the arrival of China's medical team and publicly stated: "Dear Chinese friends, sisters and brothers, welcome to Serbia! Thank you very much to my brother, President Xi Jinping, the Communist Party of China and the Chinese people. Long live our steel friendship! Long live China! Long live Serbia!" At the same time, Chinese state media have made the most of the Serbian administration's appreciation for Chinese aid and frustration with the lack of European solidarity (Eleanor March 27, 2020).

Simultaneously, Serbia aligned their actions to deal with the pandemic with World Health Organization (WHO) recommendations and imposed wide-ranging temporary measures, including strict curfew hours, closure of schools and universities, bans on public gatherings, freezing of most air traffic and closing of borders, etc.

After the state of emergency was lifted on April 29, the country held elections on June 21 and several precautionary measures were lifted. Amid a rising number of coronavirus cases in early July, the President of Serbia announced the reintroduction of a stricter curfew. This led to protests in Belgrade and several other cities, during which protestors expressed dissatisfaction with the government's handling of the pandemic and wider concerns over the state of democracy in Serbia.

Overall, the final extent in terms of loss of human lives and damage to the economies is still difficult to assess, but early estimates foresee a drop of between 4-6% of gross domestic product (GDP) in the region. Thousands of citizens are at risk of losing their jobs, and temporary government support measures have an especially important fiscal impact (European Commission 2020, 3-4).

⁹⁾ According to the Johns Hopkins University & Medicine Coronavirus Resource Center, as of March 26, Serbia had nearly 400 confirmed cases of the virus, and the President made appeals for international assistance which China responded to by sending much-needed testing kits and a medical team including epidemiologists with COVID-19 experience.

¹⁰⁾ Other countries and organizations have also provided aid to Serbia. Norway sent 5 million euros in economic assistance. UNICEF donated dozens of ventilators, protective gear, and sanitizing supplies. On March 25, the European Union announced a 93-million-euro package for Serbia, including 15 million euros for the purchase and transport of medical supplies and equipment and an additional 78 million euros for economic recovery.

CONCLUSION

As we have emphasized at the beginning, *infectious diseases* have wreaked havoc on *human* communities since *ancient* times and the emerging and re-emerging pathogens still pose great challenges to public health (Gao 2018). If we think more critically and, by means of a systematic literature review, as research method, analyze the global issues related to COVID-19 through holistic approach, the pandemic outburst of coronavirus truly can be seen as the first universal event since the end of the Second World War and the dawn of the atomic age.

This paper has tried to examine the most evident global issues related to the COVID-19 and local responses of Serbian government during the crisis. Moreover, bearing in mind that each pandemic or crisis situation is a test of a country's governance, we have reflected critically on leadership role and the skills needed to navigate emergency situations successfully. By analyzing how the COVID-19 crisis drew China and Serbia closer, we have tried to point out the necessity of fully awareness of the fact that in a post-COVID-19 narrative of the reformed world order, isolated national responses will certainly not be able to solve global problems. Instead, a collective social commitment and political will be required if we intend to obtain global solutions.

Although it is too early to predict with certainty the features of the post-COVID-19 narrative, which can oscillate between the usual neoliberal and be solved after some time, basically similar to the one before COVID-19, to the absolutely apocalyptic and chronic breakdown scenario, we can assume that the real solution would include a more inclusive and flexible order driven by a common imperative in meeting universal challenges, such as climate change, pandemic disease, and global poverty. Therefore, if we want to build a future that benefits the whole of humanity, we must be aware that today, the mankind has become a close-knit community of common destiny, which interests are highly interconnected and co-dependent. In that sense, we must outline that the COVID-19 has brought forward a series of issues that have both short- and long-term implications for international development and global order.

Meanwhile, the pandemic is still unbeaten by any vaccine or therapy, the source of the COVID-19 virus has not yet been determined, and further investigation and large-scale nucleic acid testing are still being conducted. In other words, it is unlikely that the coronavirus will naturally die down by itself. Bearing in mind that fact, as well as the ongoing COVID-19 vaccine war, it is understandable that COVID-19 vaccines have become both a public and political obsession. Therefore, at present, questions like, "What is to be done if a pandemic outburst is to happen again?" or "Can we assume that the COVID-19 crisis could serve us to build a narrative for extra-national communities?" remain open. Among these questions, surely, there are many others, but we consider that one of the most important is related with the concept of health sovereignty.

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