

GEOSTRATEGIC PULSE

Motto: "Opinions are free, but not mandatory" I.L. Caragiale

Valentin Lazea, Chief Economist at the National Bank of Romania: "The Biggest Mistake Would Be to Consider that this Pandemic is a Singular Happening"

Geneva Centre for Security Policy:
"Extremist Groups' Response to the Current COVID-19 Crisis"

Cătălin Gombos, journalist for Radio Romania News: "There Has Been a Change of Mentalities in the Middle East, at Least for a Part of the Population"

Professor Dan Pavel on the US Presidential Elections:
"The Supporters of Each Candidate See the Opponent as too old and Mentally Weak"

After the Pandemic. Perspectives and Challenges
Regarding the Reversal of the Social and Political Values

EDITORIAL

3 We are preoccupied with the state and future of NATO. How about the state and future of the EU?!



Constantin IACOBIȚĂ

INTERNATIONAL SITUATION

4 Interview with **Valentin Lazea**, Chief Economist at the National Bank of Romania: “The Biggest Mistake Would Be to Consider that this Pandemic is a Singular Happening”



6 Interview with Radu Magdin, political analyst: “Transposed into sustainable and fair solutions, the European cooperation and solidarity are the main mechanisms that can get Europe out of the crisis.”



10 Interview with Professor Dan Pavel on the US Presidential Elections: “The Supporters of Each Candidate See the Opponent as too old and Mentally Weak”

12 After the Pandemics. Perspectives and Challenges Regarding the Reversal of the Social and Political Values



Vladimir-Adrian COSTEA

TERRORISM

19 Interview with Geneva Centre for Security Policy: “Extremist Groups’ Response to the Current COVID-19 Crisis”



THE BLACK SEA

22 The impact of the Pandemic on the prospects of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict settlement



Volodymyr HAVRYLOV

24 Bulgaria Takes Issue with Ukraine over Minority in Odesa Province



Vladimir SOCOR

26 Bessarabia’s ‘Ethnographic Harlequin’ in a Regional Perspective

28 Ukraine and Hungary Move to Settle Differences over National Minority Legislation

Vladimir SOCOR

THE MIDDLE EAST

31 The Epidemics of the Great Middle East



Dumitru CHICAN

33 Interview with Cătălin Gomboș, journalist for Radio Romania News: „There has been a change of mentalities in the Middle East, at least for a part of the population”



38 Israel: “Bibi” Netanyahu’s Trial Has Started. How Will It End?

Dumitru CHICAN

39 Between Moscow and Damascus: Zero Problems. For Now

Dinu COSTESCU

42 Syria, Once a Player on the Stage of the Middle East, Now a Stage for Strollers

Dumitru CHICAN

44 About the authors

Motto: "Opinions are free, but not mandatory" - I.L.Caragiale

EDITORIAL



We are preoccupied with the state and future of NATO. How about the state and future of the EU?!

Constantin IACOBIȚĂ

Beyond the way of putting it, the recently reiterated warning of the president of France reflects long-lasting dissensions and discontent within the military alliance that was established with the aim of defending the Euro-Atlantic area against armed aggression. It also reveals that some of the member states use or try to use, through their leaders, NATO for their own interests – usually domestic, since that is where threats deemed to be important (for the respective leaders' objective to stay in power) exist and persist.

This warning regarding NATO is neither the first nor the last. We should not forget that the Alliance was recently labelled „irrelevant”, and consecutive American governments have been increasingly vocal in asking the Europeans to do more for their own security (and defence).

The post-Cold War years have shown us, though, that the main threats to EU citizens' existence, security and prosperity are no longer of a military nature.

For this reason and given the specifics of an international environment dominated – as most of us acknowledge - by the competition between great powers, I believe the time has come for us to focus on building a European Union that is united, self-confident, coherent and, most of all, strong – a union empowered and able to ensure the security and prosperity of its own citizens just like the nowadays great powers do for theirs – according to their own concepts, approaches and standards.

This is where I propose, to those who wish and believe they can contribute to the debate included, a number of objectives and topics aimed at building such a European Union:

- Identifying, as well as effectively and fairly prioritizing a common answer to threats to the common security and prosperity;
- Finalizing the separation of Great Britain through an agreement between two partners with equal rights, that respect each other and remain dedicated to the major principles and objectives that made possible the birth of EU itself and the current levels of development of each of the parties. Moreover, the EU should not forget that Great Britain has been one of its “engines”, that one of the reasons for separation was the lack and the acute need to reform the Union, and that the continent's security and prosperity can only be provided together;
- Finding, or reinventing the EU's unity and solidarity when facing the challenge posed by the COVID-19 pandemic, mainly by agreeing on, approving and implementing as soon as possible the Union's economic recovery package. This will be an essential test for the EU's ability to mobilize itself against a range of other challenges and priorities;
- Properly financing the common defence through a long-term budget of the EU that will prove to be stretched more than initially thought, given the effects of the crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. This necessity becomes even more urgent given Washington's stated intention to reduce the size of American troops stationed in Germany;

Last but not least, the tough trade and investment competition with US and China – here is where the EU is significantly disadvantaged, given the lack of unity within the bloc (the lack of unity regarding the vision, approach and policies on energetic security has been exploited by Russia and – recently – penalised by the US, as is the case of Nord Stream 2), as well as the American and Chinese subsidising policies towards national companies operating on the EU market (to which, so far Union does not have an effective response).

INTERNATIONAL SITUATION

Valentin Lazea, Chief Economist at the National Bank of Romania: "The Biggest Mistake Would Be to Consider that this Pandemic is a Singular Happening"

The COVID-19 pandemic has brought new challenges, which call for a new reflection on the healthy development of various economic sectors. After the pandemic, the prospects for an economic and social crisis compel the countries affected by it to take actions with a powerful impact on society.

In the interview he gave to Vladimir Adrian Costea for the *Geostrategic Pulse* Magazine, Valentin Lazea, Chief economist at the National Bank of Romania, analysed the prospects and challenges regarding the recovery of the economy after the pandemic is over.



Vladimir-Adrian Costea: We are in the middle of a reflection process regarding the post-pandemic perspectives; how do you see the future of the Romanian economy? What are the scenarios for the emergence of an economic and social crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic?

Valentin Lazea: It would have been better if the pandemic had started a reflection process, however, unfortunately this did not happen – neither in Romania, nor anywhere else in the world. Everybody is convinced that things were well the way they were, and the sooner they return to the status quo before the pandemic, the better. Nonetheless, a reflection process would (at least) have led to the following conclusions:

- The growth model before 2020 was profoundly unsustainable, both ecologically (it consumed more resources than the Earth provided), as well as with regard to the increase of private and government debts. Both features entail the unnecessary burdening of future generations (so we can live beyond our means) in the hope that technological progress will solve these problems on its own and on a long term.

- The current global economic model posits that between a healthy life (for ourselves, for our children and grandchildren) and a life of plenty, most people would choose a life of plenty. This pandemic at least should have changed this conviction, but it seems that it has not. Specifically, the current economic model, which produces goods both unnecessary (made to look “useful” by publicity, marketing and the finance and banking industry) and with a short life span (in order to enable mass production) is valued more than the model addressing the basic needs and the production of durable goods. In addition, the media promotes opulence and status as the ultimate success in life.

- Sound principles that proved their validity for centuries were discarded by economists (not to mention politicians and the public). Among these: 1) resources are limited and have an opportunity cost (if I buy a bicycle I cannot buy a TV; if I excessively increase salaries, I don’t have money to invest etc.); 2) there is no such thing as a free lunch (whatever I consume and do not pay for, someone else – the taxpayers, the bank, my descendants – will have to); 3) whatever powerful/disciplined/rich countries (with currency making international reserves) are allowed to do, weak/undisciplined/poor countries (which do not have international reserves) are not allowed to; 4) in a market economy, the state is bound to save the life of every citizen, but it is not obliged to save every private enterprise.

Besides these issues, yet unsolved on a global level, Romania has some extra particular issues:

- The society is yet to decide whether it wants a welfare state (with public services just like in the

EU, which would entail budget expenses of about 45% of the GDP), or a minimal state, with taxes as low as possible (just like in the USA, which entails budget revenues of under 30% of the GDP). Since it wants both – and political parties of every orientation promote the illusion that such a thing is possible – we have the result of high budget deficits, which we do not have the political will to balance without foreign intervention.

- The lack of separation between the finances of the business and the finances of the individual owner of the business made it possible, over the past 30 years, for businesses to register capital loss equal to over 30 million Euro (money that the shareholders took home, instead of meeting the minimum capitalization requirements stipulated by Law 31/1990); however, in the current crisis situation, the same shareholders refuse to recapitalize the businesses by bringing money from home, and expect to receive help from the state budget (from us all). In other words, the privatisation of gains and the socialisation of losses.

Unless these subjects (and others, equally important) are debated openly, we will only have repeated upsurges and downfalls, but under more and more restrictive material and financial conditions. The biggest mistake would be to consider that this pandemic is a singular happening that will not recur in this century, so that we could use all the ammunition we have in the fight against it. It is more likely that, for the next decades we will witness recurrent hybrid warfare episodes (cyber, viral, climate) making humanity in general (and Romania in particular) redefine its relationship with the environment and the economy.

What should Romania do in order to mitigate the effects of the economic and social crisis? What are the main measures of economic recovery that you see reliable in the current context?

The crisis caused by the pandemic incidentally favours the sectors that are more ecologically sustainable and where Romania is better equipped than other EU countries: organic agriculture, renewable energy sources, IT. Similarly, the crisis puts at a disadvantage sectors that are not ecologically sustainable: mass tourism, travels by plane, shopping, restaurants etc. It is as if God is making us see what we have been refusing to see for so long.

Beyond this, any strategy of economic

development should address the sectors that contribute to the increase of the potential GDP: capital, workforce, productivity.

Specifically, the development of the “capital” factor should take into account a better absorption of EU funds, increased attraction of remittances from the Romanians working abroad, a predictable fiscal and legal framework, the development of the Stock Exchange. The development of the “workforce” factor implies reforming the educational and health systems, extending the active age, attracting qualified immigrants, attracting nationals working abroad. The development of the “productivity” factor takes into account the road and railway infrastructures, increasing the energy efficiency, developing the irrigation system, stimulating research and innovation etc. However, all these require funds and, as such, a precondition for their achievement is the budget revenues NOT TO BE depleted through measures that have nothing to do with labour productivity, faster increases of pensions than of wages (financed through Social Security Contributions), continuous tax cuts and countless write-offs and exemptions. The reality shows that in Romania elections are won by those who promise high pay raises (not the increase of energy efficiency), larger pensions (not stimulating research and innovation) and tax cuts. The society as a whole is responsible for choosing a wrong economic model (out of ignorance, poverty or dishonesty), and the political parties encourage this state of affairs that suits them electorally.

To what extent do austerity policies represent a solution for Romania currently?

If we are to take into account the principles 1), 2) and 3) from the answer to the first question, we should also acknowledge the fact that the Romanian society has lived well beyond its means, between 2015 and 2019. This did not seem to be a problem as long as the global economy was good, the cash flow was abundant and a country such as Romania was financed (at a quite hefty price). Under the circumstances of the pandemic, none of these premises applies anymore and significant budgetary adjustments will be needed. If it is not done by us, willingly (and we will not do it), the international organisations (the IMF, the WB and the EU) will force it on us. If they will not do it in their turn, the markets will – with brutality. Then, what does “austerity” mean? Bringing back the salaries of the

state employees to the level of productivity? Bringing back the pensions increase below that of salaries? Ceasing to drill holes in the Fiscal Code by countless write-offs and exemptions? All these can be labelled as “normality”, even though not many are comfortable with it.

On a European level, what are the prospects for the economic development gap between Western economies and emerging economies?

The prospects for the continuing convergence between the Eastern and the Western blocs of the EU remain as valid as ever, especially for the financially disciplined countries (such as Bulgaria and the Czech Republic). The reason for this is the fact that the rich countries in the West (with GDP per capita of over 40,000 Euro at Purchasing Power Parity) find it more difficult to increase their GDP with more than 2% a year, even in the best of times, as they are closer to the Production Possibilities Frontier (big earnings have already been obtained).

For countries in the East, with GDP per capita

below 30,000 Euro at Purchasing Power Parity, an increase of 3-4% is possible, if they stick to the investment sectors mentioned in the second answer and if the budgetary funds are not wasted on electoral and populist actions (a big IF, admittedly).

An insufficiently underscored aspect is that states, which instead of financial and structural reforms prefer the expediency of cheap financing by having central banks purchase government bonds (just like the Central European Bank does) become more fragile on a long and medium term: they cannot survive without the “drug” administered by the central bank. It is a danger lurking over many countries, especially over the countries in Southeast Europe, whose fragility will be exposed every time a new crisis occurs. Even more reason for Romania to resist the convenient temptation to have the public debt monetized by the National Bank of Romania, even if we have the tendency to mimic all the bad things from the experience of others.

N.B. The above opinions are personal and do not in any way involve the National Bank of Romania.

Radu Magdin, Political Analyst: "Transposed into Sustainable and Fair Solutions, the European Cooperation and Solidarity Are the Main Mechanisms that Can Get Europe out of the Crisis"

The COVID-19 pandemic puts the EU member states and institutions in a position where they must rethink the way resources have been managed, in order to reduce, as much as possible, the economic, social and political crisis that occurred while prevention measures were taken. At the same time, the reaction of the EU and its member states actually highlights the values and principles constituting the foundation of the European concept.

Radu Magdin, political analyst and former advisor to prime ministers in Romania and the Republic of Moldova, identified and analysed the perspectives and challenges to the cohesion of EU in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, in an interview offered to Vladimir-Adrian Costea for the *Geostrategic Pulse Magazine*.

Vladimir-Adrian Costea: For several months now, the Coronavirus pandemic has taken over

the global headlines, leaving in the background the concerns of the international community.

The EU member states continue to be affected by this virus. Under these circumstances, will the EU still be the same after the tsunami caused by the COVID-19 pandemic?

Radu Magdin: Every crisis over the past decades has put the European Union face to face with some fundamental choices, which have marked its identity and course of action. The crisis of the COVID-19 pandemic has multiple dimensions, and we are just beginning to comprehend their complexities. In simple terms, we can anticipate from the start that the EU, seriously affected by the pandemic, will undergo major changes. Given its shortcomings, of which even its leaders are aware, the EU finds itself especially in the position to self-assess its ability to act and its short, medium and long-term priorities.

The overall priorities of the EU as a whole, as

well as of its member states, will be best emphasised in the context of negotiations over the Union's multiannual financial framework, which caused strong reactions among its members ever since the first drafts circulated before the COVID-19 pandemic spread. In the meantime, the European Commission resorted to compromise, especially regarding the allocations for agricultural and cohesion policies, which are crucial for the countries in Central and Eastern Europe. The differences in the level of development of individual member states have always caused major disagreements over matters of vision and priorities, and the post-crisis efforts of social and economic recovery must take into account the need to deal with these disagreements.

As far as the capacity to take action is concerned, the crisis caused by COVID-19 has tested the European Union, which initially had a slow response, but somehow recovered in the process. In other words, the EU's bureaucratic apparatus had a difficult jumpstart, just as expected at a time when the EU member states had already implemented severe measures on a national level, including closing the borders and ceasing exports of medicines and essential medical equipment, decisions unacceptable under different circumstances. Besides, the European Union doesn't have enough leverage on healthcare, and the absence of extensive challenges to the public health of the entire bloc it did not sought to assume extend powers, over time. There are no clear intentions to change this approach, but a broader discussion on the European Union resilience to major challenges should take into consideration the matter of healthcare systems as well.

Another subject to think of when the crisis is over, is the EU's role in the world and its ability to stay relevant in the competition between great powers, a competition intensified by the COVID-19 crisis; to what extent will we be able to talk about a *Global Europe*, and how do we define this concept in unforeseeable circumstances. The strength the European Union has globally cannot consist only in its ability to respond to crisis (otherwise slow), but also in its ability to predict dangers in time and create long-lasting alliances with likeminded countries, alongside which the EU can succeed within multilateral formats.

To what extent do the solidarity, cohesion and cooperation between the member states and the EU institutions still remain principles that have helped the Union remain united in front of these

challenges?

Firstly, I would like to highlight the essential differences between the three dimensions of the relations between the EU member states on one hand, and the relations between the member states and the European institutions on the other. Speaking of cohesion, it is crucial to see the fact that it was a problematic matter for the European Union even before the outbreak of the pandemic, given the well-known major differences between the member states as far as their development is concerned. These differences have grown during the Coronavirus pandemic, as the social and economic systems, the resources, services, as well as the physical and digital infrastructures of each country have been strongly tested by the effects of the pandemic. It is true that the Coronavirus pandemic reached the less developed countries of the EU later, which is explicable, and its effects continue to be smaller. However, the cohesion, and most of all the mature discussions on the budgetary allocations for the cohesion policy in the upcoming financial cycle, should remain on top of the European agenda; and the crisis we are going through should remain a lesson on the importance of consensus within the EU.

As regards the cooperation and solidarity between the EU member states, on one hand, and between the member states and the EU institutions, on the other, I believe these are key principles for the elaboration and implementation of joint measures to alleviate the sanitary crisis and to facilitate the economic and social recovery. In the beginning, the EU member states have focused, naturally, on their internal efforts to counter the crisis. Then, the intervention of the European Union focused on restoring and building the confidence of the European citizens in coordinated and solidary actions, hence the initiation of the rescEU, the coordinated repatriations of the EU citizens, the launch of the largest economic package in the world and the adaptation of future financing tools to the demands in time of crisis. I believe that the European cooperation and solidarity, transposed in sustainable and viable solutions, are the main mechanisms that can get Europe out of the crisis and can restore the trust in the European values, including at a time when the future of the EU is under debate.

What are the cleavages that have resurfaced in the EU during this time? To what extent did the reaction of the EU contribute to enhancing/

reducing tensions and grievances?

The cleavages that can be analysed in the context of the Coronavirus crisis are not different from the ones that have always existed within the EU, and first of all, I am referring to the weak cohesion between the member states and the major differences between the health services at European level, which could have proven catastrophic, should there have been a higher number of infected in countries situated in the centre and east of the European Union. We have all seen how European countries with advanced health systems were overwhelmed by the number of cases and we have imagined what could happen in our area under similar circumstances.

In the context of the Coronavirus crisis, the most important cleavages are those that are just beginning to be visible. For example, economic cleavages will make the European countries recover from the crisis differently, at a different pace and with some social and political costs that are yet difficult to assess. The economic support packages at the level of every country are still extremely important, not only financially speaking but also as perspective and ability to generate trust. This is why we take a look at Germany, which has launched both financial support packages and clear policies of economic recovery.

At the same time, the cleavages in education and respect for rules will make the elimination of restrictions in the European countries have very different effects and we shouldn't rule out a second wave of infections, which will be closely followed this time by a second wave of mistrust on a national level. Under crisis, trust in leadership is the most important tool, which must be managed very carefully. Should there be no trust in the leaders, the action taken will always create tensions within society and will generate a breeding ground for populism. Last but not least, I wish to emphasise that the existence of educational cleavages makes us more vulnerable to disinformation and fake news originating from within or from outside the country, and serving the same purpose – to weaken the trust in a system and, in time, make room for destructive leaders.

What were the main steps undertaken by the EU to support the countries affected by the COVID-19 pandemic? What kind of support do the EU institutions provide, especially with regard to education and health?

The European Union has mobilised support resources as it went along, including by adjusting policies already existent, and that have proven restrictive in the context generated by the Coronavirus pandemic. The immediate measures included the repatriation of European citizens, especially by organizing flights from third countries, emergency financial support (for the first time in history, the European Commission activated the “escape clause” to allow exceptional financial support), establishing a EU supply of medical equipment – the so called *rescEU*, issuing recommendations regarding the measures to limit the spread of the Coronavirus and testing strategies, and ensuring the movement of goods and people under the circumstances created by the crisis.

The longer-term measures are those which aim at rendering the regulations regarding state aid more flexible, at allocating resources for the research and development of specific treatments and, especially, at the economic recovery plan. The European Commission proposed a 2.4 trillion Euro economic recovery plan, that was declined by the Next Generation EU instrument – based on finances collected from financial markets, as well as by the financing instruments designed as part of the consolidating process of the EU's long-term financial framework, which is being negotiated on at a European level. I would also like to mention the SURE instrument, a temporary support instrument to reduce unemployment risks in an emergency situation. The instrument, which provides the member states financing up to almost 100 billion Euros for the costs related to the development, or extension of national technical unemployment programmes until December 31st 2022, with the possibility of a new extension, will be available once all the member states provide their collaterals for the loans.

In terms of the health strategy, between January and now the European Commission mobilised almost 550 million Euros to develop vaccines, new treatments, tests and medical systems that could help stop the spread of the Coronavirus. It is a very high amount, and it is only natural that most of the EU's medical efforts should focus on research, taking into account, as I was saying, the limited of the Union in this area. However, the European Commission allocated 3 billion Euros to finance the instrument dedicated to emergency support and the joint *rescEU* equipment reserve, Romania and Germany being the first countries to store it.

As far as education in a broader sense is

concerned, the efforts at the level of the European institutions focus, for now, more or less successfully on countering disinformation, by means of the tools they already have at the European level. Besides, in this field, the Commission and the European External Action Service cooperate with other EU institutions and member states, including by means of the rapid alert system established in March 2019, as well as with international partners from G7 and NATO. Hereinafter, we expect the measures announced on the 10th of June in this respect, namely strengthening the strategic communication and public diplomacy in the EU's immediate neighbourhood and everywhere else in the world, as well as the support given to the media and to independent journalists, to be implemented. As far as classical education is concerned, I am convinced that the efforts to strengthen this system on a European level will contribute to the economic recovery on medium and long-term, especially by supporting the requalification mechanisms and so on.

How do you see the response of the EU and its member states to the latest challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic?

The Coronavirus pandemic is unprecedented. No other pandemic in European history has expanded under the current connectivity and interdependency conditions. Faced with such a threat, the EU countries reacted before the European institutions, as they should have, to protect their citizens. From my point of view, the toughest challenge was closing the borders, based on decisions taken at a national level and then at a European level – in a sequence we would have never thought possible. Once the borders were closed, the issues related to the transportation of goods and people – an issue nobody thought we would be facing nowadays – intensified both the first effects of the crisis and the public discourse. Subsequently, the answer of the EU, although somehow late, was as coherent as it could be under the circumstances and taking into account the EU's legal framework.

The crisis is ongoing, so the only useful evaluations at this moment are sequence evaluations, in order to figure out the next steps. Under the circumstances of the pandemic, each European country will take the decisions it finds logical from an epidemiologic and economic point of view. On a European level, however, I believe that the approach should still be coordinated and

active so that it allows us to return to a relatively normal state and to some of the key European debates, presently suspended or limited due to the crisis.

What are the perspectives after the pandemic, in the context of an imminent social and economic crisis? Do you believe in the possible emergence of a new political crisis in the European Union?

According to the main financial institutions, an economic crisis at the level of the European Union is imminent. All predictions show a loss in the GDP and economic trade, factors that inevitably lead to an economic crisis. An economic crisis is always accompanied by a social crisis as the prospects of stability for the people fade, and because of certain phenomena, such as unemployment, decrease of the purchasing power, fluctuations of the exchange rate – which are already visible in Europe.

At the same time, it is important to remember the fact that the possibility of a political crisis at the level of the European Union has never been neglected. Under the current circumstances, just as we have learned from the economic crisis in 2008, there will be a proper environment for populist leaders, who will gain ground “helped” by disinformation, among other. On the other hand, I still hope that the populist discourse, built on the logic of finger-pointing to problems without finding a solution, will not meet the expectations of the European citizens, who will emerge off this crisis marked by serious losses and in search for real solutions.

Who are the players who find an economic and political opportunity in the fight for resources and influence in the EU?

Closely related to what I have said before, the players who will find political opportunities in times of crisis are, first of all, the populist politicians, as well as state and non-state actors engaged in a hybrid war for the destabilisation of the European Union. As far as the economic opportunity is concerned, it is an open issue to all European countries able to adjust and find ways to use the European toolbox for the benefit of their own economies. The “winners” of this crisis will be those who manifest a reasonable form of economic patriotism, who will focus on consolidating European capabilities, but without sacrificing the European solidarity, cooperation and integration.

Professor Dan Pavel on the US Presidential Elections: "The Supporters of Each Candidate See the Opponent as too old and Mentally Weak"

The US presidential elections are of high interest all over the world, due to their economic, political and social implications. The prospect of Donald Trump's re-election in a world changed by the Coronavirus pandemic raises several questions.

In the interview he gave to Vladimir Adrian Costea for the *Geostrategic Pulse* Magazine, professor Dan Pavel analyzed the perspectives and challenges represented by the confrontation between Donald Trump and Joe Biden.



Dan Pavel (© Polirom)

Vladimir-Adrian Costea: Professor Dan Pavel, four years after Donald Trump's election as president, one of the strongest democracies in the world could go through another electoral shock. What are Donald Trump's chances to get a second mandate as president?

Dan Pavel: I was with some of my friends and we were watching CNN, on June 2015, when Donald Trump first announced his candidature; he was only one of the 17 republican candidates, nobody knew whether he would be his party's choice, and I cried out – "Oh my God, this guy will win the elections!" Everybody contradicted me except for my youngest son, who laid a wager with his elder sister which he won a year later. There were several explanations for my intuition at that time, however, what I want to say is that today his chances of being re-elected are not that clear any more. The chances were better before the

Coronavirus crisis, so it would not have been a shock. There will be a shock, though, if the sitting president loses. In the meantime, the way he acted in 2020 made him considerably vulnerable. Trump has largely kept his base, but it is eroding according to the polls. The situation in some states, which were on the verge in 2016, *the swing states*, is uncertain once more. In Michigan, he outvoted Hillary Clinton by only 0.23%. Now, however, the president is in conflict with the democrat Gretchen Whitmer, the governor of the state of Michigan, elected in 2018. There are 11 *swing states* where he won last time, but where he may lose now.

To what extent did the institutional continuities and the rationality of the politics protect the democratic system and the American military superpower during Trump's mandate in the White House? What are the perspectives should this carnival continue for the next four years?

During my course on US foreign policy, I always give examples on how powerful a president can be, but also on the limits of his power. For example, neither Trump, nor Obama before him, nor anyone else has the power at least to close a US military base abroad. The US democratic system has been constantly undermined by the sitting president, and yet it still endures. In the meantime, the democrats obtained the majority in the *House of Representatives*, the lower parliamentary chamber, and the Supreme Court of Justice was rebalanced (there are four liberal and four conservative justices, and the balance is tilted one way or the other by John Roberts, the Chief Justice). The military superpower was not weakened; on the contrary, its budgets have increased. The U.S. states are very powerful and, in many respects, are not affected by federal policies. For example, California, the most populous and economically developed state (based on an informal comparison, it is the fifth economic power in the world, on top of France), disregards Trump's withdrawal from the Paris Agreement on Climate Change. But the US democratic system was in a crisis before Trump became president; in fact, his election was a confirmation of the crisis of democracy, which will

nevertheless endure. There will be a post-Trump period, after one or two mandates. Powerful democracies have autoimmune systems that will protect them even against an eventual third wave of de-democratization (a low tide). I am worried about weak democracies, particularly about illiberal democracies, not the American one.



Donald Trump (© White House)

How do the American voters perceive President Trump? To what extent have their perceptions changed after his electoral triumph in 2016?

Surveys I consulted show that perceptions are relatively the same among the democrat and republican voters; preconceptions and partisanship are strong. What differs are the answers to extremely specific questions on what steps are being taken when it comes to gun control, since the number of attacks committed by mentally unbalanced people or people with a radical agenda have increased, or when it comes to his handling of the Coronavirus epidemic. His rush to restart the economy is not well perceived, considering the fact that the pandemic produces many victims in certain states.

How do the voters perceive Joe Biden? Do you see a remake of the confrontation between Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton?

Joe Biden has a rich biography, fully known especially by people closer to his own age. The progressive democratic voters did not like him very much initially; however, following Bernie Sanders' withdrawal the confidence in him is strong. Sanders, the former US president Obama, all the democrats support him and the perception is positive. They all believe Biden would beat Trump. Many Americans believe that Biden would have done a better job than Trump, during the pandemic; at the same time,

many Americans believe that Trump is doing a better job than the former First Lady would have done, had she become president. The confrontation between the two will be different. I have posted a while ago the disturbing fact that the supporters of each candidate see the opponent as too old and mentally weak. The democrats are working hard to identify a strong woman as a running mate for Biden, so that there is a suitable successor in the event of his death. There are several proposals, including Michelle Obama, the former First Lady, but we shall soon see who his choice is.



Joe Biden (© Biden for President)

There will be a different world order, especially since China's prestige is strongly affected by the way the communist leadership lied to the entire planet about the pandemic, did not reveal in time the extent of the danger, which increased the number of deaths and infections (according to specialists, their number would have been between 67% and 85% smaller, had they admitted to the truth from the start and had they taken swift actions, just like Taiwan, which was the best informed state, but ignored when it warned the World Health Organisation). Russia emerged defeated from the short oil war against Saudi Arabia in 2020. Therefore, one of the unintentional effects of the 2020 crisis - medical, humanitarian and a serious recession - can be the re-emergence of America on the global stage, and the recovery of the ground it lost during Trump's presidency. In the context of diminishing the American presence in the Middle East, the main piece of news, in the beginning of January 2020, was Trump ordering a drone attack that killed the Iranian general Qasem Soleimani, the commander of the Quds Force, the division of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps and a sort of leader of the Iranian foreign policy and military apparatus. The USA have the power to

act against their enemies even while diminishing the American presence in an area. However, a reversal of fortune can occur, especially if the period following the pandemic is poorly managed.

Immigration and terrorism were the main topics which have taken Trump to the White House. To what extent can the Coronavirus pandemic influence the result of the presidential elections?

Trump has attacked the policies of his predecessor and the latter's predecessors, especially when it came to China, immigration from Mexico, bilateral

trade agreements or major projects (Trans Pacific Partnership), and his championed foreign policy was one of non-interventionism (no human loss in useless wars), even if it recommended a firm hand when it came to ISIS/The Caliphate, or agreements on climate change. His topics remain the same, but new dimensions were added. The outcome of the pandemic (the USA have the highest number of infections and deaths in the world), Trump's major hesitations, delays, second thoughts, the economic recession, will all take place in the election year 2020 (unless the elections are postponed by several months).

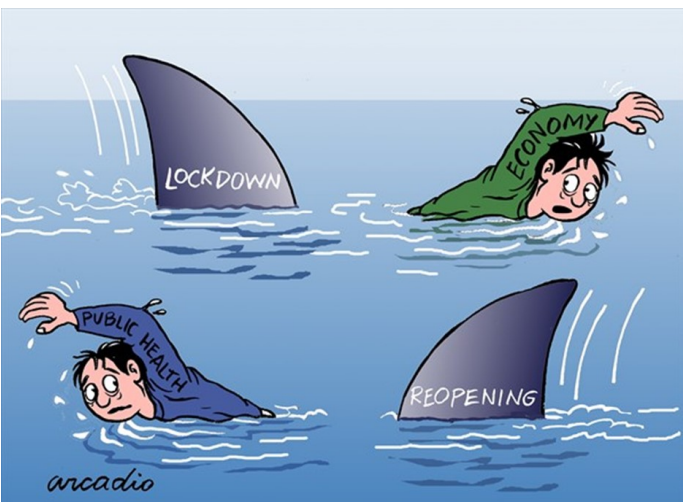
After the Pandemic. Perspectives and Challenges Regarding the Reversal of the Social and Political Values

Vladimir - Adrian COSTEA **Foreword**

Summary

In this article, we tackle the prospects and challenges that could be predicted in a situation witnessing a gradual overcoming of the COVID-19 pandemic. In order to understand the process of reversal of social and political values, we refer, at the same time, to the human nature and to the mechanisms specific to the actions taken by state actors on the international stage. Our analysis aims to identify the prospects of redefining the relationship between domestic and collective security.

Key words: human nature, resilience, domestic security, collective security, COVID-19



Lockdown and reopening by Arcadio Esquivel, Costa Rica,
06.05.2020 (© CagleCartoons.com)

These days, we feel tempted to imagine a world that will try, after the pandemic, to redefine itself in order to find a new balance. In the process, we tend to stop relating to the world that we know and in which we used to live. Before the COVID-19 pandemic, globalization and development had made the world in which we used to operate extremely dynamic, by virtue of our social interactions. Individuals and states were equally trying to maximize their resources and harness their potential. Essentially, we were familiarized with rules that were clear, but, at the same time, we accepted that there was continuous change, brought about by the dynamics of power and influence. When faced with new threats, the world we lived in provided us with the apparent guarantee of an appropriate level of resilience.^[1] The fall of the Twin Towers, terrorist attacks followed by the arms race and the taunting that could even lead to a new world war, failed to shake the foundations of the world.

Our ability to adjust to new threats and act on the go has been obvious including during the COVID-19 pandemic. With the help of technology or with a better practising of *physical distancing*,^[2] the stress of (self)-isolation at home (gradually) diminished. Surely this experience affected us to different degrees, depending on one's capacity to understand the need and scope of the preventive measures. The experience has not changed us fundamentally, even if our points of reference have changed. Basically, we are abandoning the zero-sum game without automatically wanting what is best for others. The

isolation of the “lepers”[3] requires the way medical and financial resources are distributed to be reconsidered. The access to education and quality medical care is a privilege only for certain social groups, and this only widens the existing rifts and gaps nationally and internationally. The national medical resources become, in the current context, the main diplomatic negotiation tool.

Overall, the Coronavirus pandemic reverses, at least for a certain period, the fields of strategic investment, and makes obvious the exponential increase in the legitimate demand to secure access to medical, digital and educational services meant to meet the needs of the people belonging to vulnerable groups. Yet, there is no focus on investments in the security of the IT systems, even though the level of exposure and use of these systems has registered a significant increase since countries affected by the pandemic started imposing restrictions. Adaptation to the digitalisation process poses a challenge, yet it is crucial in diminishing the gaps seen in training and managing human resources.

After the pandemic, in all likelihood we will assess the damages and try to recover, economically and psychologically. We will thus give additional value to human and material resources, and, at the same time we will (re)define (tacitly) the social contract.[4]



After the lockdown by Gatis Sluka, Latvijas Avize, Latvia, 15.05.2020 (© CagleCartoons.com)

From the Shock of Isolation to the Shock of Liberation

On a psychological level, (self)isolation, the sudden surrender of a familiar lifestyle caused an (inherent) shock[5] of which we are all more or less aware. We have adopted a different lifestyle and we

have been (and still are) going through a process of adaptation to the preventive measures. This situation is (in some cases) comparable (yet not similar or identical) to that of a detainee, even though we are not serving a sentence (like house arrest) We are free, but responsible at the same time. (However paradoxical it may seem.) After the lifting of restrictions, even if partially, there will most probably be another psychological shock – that of having to adapt to a new lifestyle, at least for a while.[6]

Social[7] and dynamic[8], an individual has the ability to adapt to extreme situations, an ability prevalent among state and non-state actors. Change is, therefore, not structural but limited to a timeframe. Fear of the unknown, lack of energy, the pressure felt because of the imminent economic and social crisis, are bound to influence in the short and medium term the actions of the players. Here we should distinguish between those who accept these measures even if burdensome, and those who do not accept them and take risks. A swift reaction in this case can represent an important advantage.[9] Promoting the country brand[10] is a priority if the country wishes to reposition itself globally, thus contributing to the establishment of a new global agenda as well.

The shock induced by the gradual lifting of restrictions engages new energies that aim, in a competitive environment, to capitalize on the needs and behaviours brought out by the scope and evolution of the (self)isolation measures. More explicitly, one can identify two sectors that generate considerable financial resources and that swiftly need a new approach: 1) tourism and 2) sports competitions, because physical distancing considerably reduces revenues. The main problem is posed by the discrepancies, among the population, as far as the level of education is concerned, clearly seen throughout the period of restrictions imposed during the state of emergency.

The interference of the state in the private lives of the individuals will gradually diminish, and the focus will turn to individual responsibility, rather than to social responsibility. Recovering from the economic crisis will be the main legitimate concern of state actors, as will be recovering from the social crisis. The perception and fear of the risk of being infected with the coronavirus will have to be minimized if we want to be able to return to the “normalcy” we were used to. Ensuring a reserve of medical resources in the near future will be a priority if the population is to feel reassured.

The main focus should be on research, a vital element in a competitive environment (*par excellence*). At the same time, politically and economically speaking, it will make a “huge difference” whether the vaccine against the coronavirus will be produced in the US, China or the United Kingdom. According to the *New York Times*, sources from the FBI and the US Homeland Security are preparing a report accusing the authorities in Beijing of espionage and attempt to steal data from researches done by the US.^[11] The competition between these great state actors over the discovery of the cure for the Coronavirus is, on a medium term, similar to the race of nuclear arms, meant to strengthen their position on the international stage. Fundamentally, finding and approving a treatment will have social and political implications with a direct impact including on diplomacy, and become (in the first place) a national asset. Supporting this assumption is the reaction of Agnes Pannier-Runacher, secretary of state at the French Ministry of Economy, who criticised the decision taken by the multinational French company Santofi following its CEO's announcement that the US would have priority in receiving the vaccine as a result of its financial contributions.^[12]



Hope of the World by David Fitzsimmons, The Arizona Star, Tucson, AZ, 08.04.2020 (© CagleCartoons.com)

Lessons (not) Learned. From Globalization to Narrow-Minded Nationalism?

Politically speaking, the rhetoric of national triumph, in a world where the threat is global, is indicative of the rise of political nationalist movements, which are more clearly against globalization. To the followers of “liberating” nationalism, globalization is not a solution, but

rather a “threat”. Managing the crisis was initially seen as a national issue; even taking the physical distancing measure was, in certain cases, justified by the consensus regarding some national values pertaining to the imperative of ensuring the health of all members of society. Since international support and cooperation were rather scarce, encouraging a rhetoric based on the idea of nation should not surprise one. Such narrative existed and will continue to exist independent from the nature and size of threats, therefore, in certain cases there are attempts to ignore the significance and support that globalization can provide to coordinate efforts and distribute resources, commensurate with the size and intensity with which the virus spreads.

Gradually, narrow nationalism started to gain currency vis-à-vis the visibly more evident polarization on the Beijing-Washington axis, as a result to the repeated accusations directed at the Chinese communist regime. In a competitive environment,^[13] the criticism directed at the authorities in Beijing on to the way they have informed their foreign partners regarding the evolution of the spread of the virus, questioned their honesty.

By contrast, one should mention the actions taken by the EU to provide financial support and the necessary medical equipment, to launch common public acquisitions, increase the production of individual protection equipment and stimulate research in order to find treatments and vaccines.^[14] Concretely, the EU allotted 140 million euro to develop vaccines and new treatments, as well as diagnostic tests.^[15] More precisely, through its research programme Horizon 2020, the EU gave 48.5 million euro to finance 18 projects and 140 research teams. The Enhanced European Innovation Council Accelerator raised 164 million euro to support start-ups and SME that find innovative solutions to combat the COVID-19 epidemic.^[16] Moreover, the European vaccine innovative developer CureVac received 80 million euro in grants to launch, by June 2020, the clinical trial of a vaccine. The support lent to the member states to facilitate the return to a sustainable economic growth represents a “safety net” for EU employees, enterprises and countries; its value amounts to 540 billion euro.^[17] Making access to structural funds flexible was another action meant to offer immediately needed support to “diminish the social and economic prejudices caused by the pandemic”.^[18]

The EU’s institutional efforts were doubled, even

if partially, by the solidarity among the member states; we are mentioning here the support given to Italy: (1) France donated 1 million masks; (2) Germany sent 7 million tons worth of medical equipment (ventilators and anaesthetic masks); (3) the Czech Republic offered 10,000 personal protective suits and artificial respiration devices (made through 3D printing); (4) Austria, Germany and Luxemburg took over patients; and (5) Poland, Romania and Germany sent teams of doctors.[19]

The EU and its member states initiatives have been useful not only to managing the COVID-19 pandemic, but also to diminishing the populist rhetoric, which accuses the EU member states of being incapable of a quick and efficient reaction in times of crisis. The risk of upending the European citizens' values is reduced by the alleviation of the social and economic effects due to the adoption of restrictions and preventive measures, as well as to physical distancing.

The involvement of the EU and its member states is an exception compared to the changes at global level, more and more visible in the political sector. Despite the EU's concrete actions, populist rhetoric and Euroscepticism are still on display in the European area, including blaming the EU's (relatively) delayed reactions. At the same time, there are discussions regarding seasonal workers, which highlights the questionable attitude of the national authorities towards citizens of other member states.

A New Horizon of Expectation. Domestic Security Versus Collective Security

When facing an "unseen enemy", the (self) isolation experience determines, at individual level and depending on the level of education, the (re) definition of the horizon of expectation. The reversal of the hierarchy of values and needs determines, in the medium and short term, a (partial) change in lifestyle. Whether we like it or not, the individual adapts to the situation if he becomes aware of the size of the danger and penalties. Other than that, the COVID-19 pandemic does not have a significant impact on individual decisions. In such circumstances, the reluctance to change and to adopt preventive measures may bring about certain behaviours that aim at defying the restrictions imposed by the authorities. For example, the spread of the virus did not discourage the protesters who contested the restriction of their personal freedom in the name of preserving the common good.[20]



The protesters by Bruce Plante, Tulsa World, 22.04.2020 (© CagleCartoons.com)

On a larger scale, the restrictions were applied rather through measures taken at national level, and the cooperation among countries was obvious particularly when they established transit corridors. Borders became visible (once again), which changed the functions and principles of collective security.[21] The principle of equality and equal security,[22] the right of each country to ensure domestic security to justify the limitation of the freedom of movement and border control[23] prevailed. At European Union level, one of the first measures witnessed was the closure of its external borders.[24] which highlights the emphasis on internal security.

In the current context, the desire to create "a world without borders"[25], which has been promoted for the last thirty years by supporters of globalization was significantly refuted by the complex and uneven practices to regulate and militarize the borders.[26] "Sovereign security sites",[27] the borders serve as territorial limits where norms that include or eliminate multiple forms of mobility apply and are prioritised according to the level of the threat.[28] Minca and Rijke noticed that paying increased attention to borders actually strengthens the rhetoric supporting walls building.[29] tendency explained by Wendy Brown[30] as "a sign that the state is losing its power rather than a show of strength".[31] The shape of borders changed, especially under the influence of globalization and of the emergence of new digital and communication technologies.[32] Borders (visibly) define the dimension of internal security, and the measures taken by the countries affected (mainly) depend on the rate at which the COVID-19 infection spreads.

The emphasis put on internal security influences

the way migration flows are perceived, especially when it comes to migrants who come from highly affected areas. The level of tolerance towards the integration of these people is down and will, most likely, go even further down. A clear example is provided by the violent reaction of some ultras towards a young Asian man who was forced off a public transportation vehicle, an incident that took place before the pandemic in Bucharest.^[33]

After the pandemic, the prospect of reducing the risk of infection will be seconded by the dire need to have (limited) resources redistributed to the more vulnerable categories, who are many and have diverse needs, and this is an important dimension. Loss of jobs, inability to pay loans and bills, the extra costs for the acquisition of protection equipment and disinfectants, to which one should add personal traumas, are the main factors that heighten the egotistical dimension of expectations at individual level. Moreover, it can be said that in certain cases, security is strictly all about the individual, especially about those people who react violently towards those with whom they share the same spaces. Overall, socially, stereotypes and the limited resources dictate a different logic, one which demands isolating certain people and groups perceived as presenting a high risk of infection. In some instances, when there are registered cases of infection with COVID-19, in the name of internal security, physical distancing leads to the expulsion of certain communities/social groups from the vicinity.

Coordinating efforts at global level to answer to the crises and challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic is poor as far as planning, programming and managing its consequences, and, at the same time, made difficult and delayed by the dire need to manage the situation (first) at national level. The most overlooked element is the promotion of the exchange of good practices, and this actually highlights the individual approach to identifying and implementing certain measures to prevent the risk of becoming infected with coronavirus.

Diplomacy becomes valuable (once again) through the will and interests of some of the best trained players who have abundant medical resources or significant ability to negotiate and purchase. At the same time, diplomacy gains a strong component through volunteerism or the mutual exchange of resources. The focus is on solidarity (and on gaining trust), by the respect shown to the vulnerable situation in which the countries most affected by the consequences of the

COVID-19 pandemic find themselves.

Overall, just like the unconventional threats that highlighted the dire need to strengthen collective security, the COVID-19 pandemic brings (again) to the table the need to generate synergies between the different levels of domestic security of each country. Clearly, the threat posed by the COVID-19 pandemic brings into focus the need to have a mechanism that is integrated in the security framework and that allows the swift identification of effective measures to evaluate and manage the new threats. In order for us to be able to adopt swift and comprehensive measures that aim at preserving the resilience of the security systems, it is necessary to transfer sovereignty by merging and integrating each security system in a comprehensive framework regulated by a transnational legal instrument. At global level, the COVID-19 pandemic clearly alters the public agenda, health becoming the main concern – as it requires more effort and resources allotted concomitant with the reduction of discrepancies in order to decrease, as much as possible, the level of vulnerability of every security system.



Corona Sisyphos by Martin Sutovec, Slovakia, 16.04.2020 (© CagleCartoons.com)

NB: Vladimir-Adrian Costea is a graduate student at the Faculty of Political Science, University of Bucharest, under the supervision of Prof. Georgeta Ghebrea PHD. (E-mail: costea.vladimir-adrian@fspub.unibuc.ro). He has published articles on clemency and the state of occupancy of Romanian prisons in magazines such as *Studia*, *Romanian Political Science Review*, *Revista de Drept Constituțional* (Constitutional Law Magazine), *Revista Română de Sociologie* (The Romanian Sociology Magazine) and *Revista Polis* (Polis Magazine).

Publishing the current paper was financed through

„Entrepreneurial Education and Professional Counseling for Social and Human Sciences PhD and Postdoctoral Researchers to ensure knowledge transfer from the field of Social Sciences and Humanities to the Labor Market” Project, co-financed from European Social Fund through Human Capital Programme (ATRiUM, POCU/380/6/13/123343).

Bibliography

ANSOFF, Igor and Patrick SULLIVAN, *Optimizing Profitability in Turbulent Environments: A Formula for Strategic Success, Long Range Planning*, Vol. 26, No. 5, Printed in Great Britain, 1993, pp. 11-23.

ARISTOTLE, *Politics*, bilingual edition, translation, comments and index by, foreword study by Vasile Muscă, Bucharest, IRI Publishing, 2001.

BROWN, Wendy, *Walled States, Waning Sovereignty*, New York, Zone, 2010.

BURNELL, Peter J. and Peter CALVERT, *The resilience of democracy: persistent practice, durable idea*, London, Frank Cass, 1999.

DORUL, Olga, “Conceptul de securitate colectivă în dreptul internațional contemporan” (*Collective Security in Contemporary International Law*), *Revista moldovenească de drept internațional și relații internaționale (The Moldovan International Law and International Relations Magazine)*, 2008, pp. 68-73.

FOUCAULT, Michel, *Abnormalities, Courses at Collège de France 1974-1975*, translation Dan Radu Stănescu, afterword Bogdan Ghiu, Bucharest, Univers Publishing, 1999.

FRIEDMAN, Thomas L., *The World Is Flat: The Globalized World in the Twenty-First Century*, London, Penguin, 2006.

GILMARTIN, Mary and Patricia Burke WOOD, Cian O’CALLAGHAN, *Borders, Mobility and Belonging in the Era of Brexit and Trump*, Bristol, Policy Press, 2018.

HANWAY, Jonas, *The Defects of Police. The cause of immorality and the continual robberies committed, particularly in and about the metropolis*, London, J. Dodsley, 1775.

JONES, Reece and Corey JOHNSON, *Border Militarisation and the Re-articulation of Sovereignty, Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, 41(2), 2016, pp. 187-200.

JONES, Reece, *Violent Borders: Refugees and the Right to Move*, London, Verso Books, 2016.

JOSEPH, Jonathan, *Varieties of Resilience*,

Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2018.

MÜLLER, Andreas, *Governing Mobility Beyond the State. Centre, Periphery and the EU’s External Borders*, Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2014.

ROUSSEAU, Jean-Jeaques, *Despre contractul social sau principiile dreptului politic*, translation and foreword study by N. Dașcovici, published, afterword and notes by A. Bârna, Bucharest, Mondero Publishing, 2007.

SAVATER, Fernando, *Politica pentru fiul meu*, translation by Corneliu Rădulescu, Bucharest, Humanitas Publishing, 1999 [1992].

TILL, Karen E. and Juanita SUNDBERG, Wendy PULLAN, Charis PSALTIS, Chara MAKRIYIANNI, Rana Zincir CELAL, Meltem Onurkan SAMANI, Lorraine DOWLER, *Interventions in the Political Geographies of Walls, Political Geography*, 33 (1), 2013, pp. 52-62.

VAN HAM, Peter, *The Rise of the Brand State, the Postmodern Politics of Image and Reputation, Foreign Affairs*, September/October 2001, pp. 1-5.

WALTERS, William, *Border/Control, European Journal of Social Theory*, 9(2), 2006, pp. 187-203.

WALTERS, William, *Rethinking Borders Beyond the State, Comparative European Politics*, 4, 2006, pp. 141-159.

Footnotes

[1] Peter J. Burnell and Peter Calvert, *The Resilience of Democracy: Persistent Practice, Durable Idea*, London, Frank Cass, 1999; Jonathan Joseph, *Varieties of Resilience*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2018.

[2] World Health Organization, *WHO expert mission to Belarus recommends physical distancing measures as COVID-19 virus transmits in the community*, 21.04.2020, <https://www.who.int/news-room/feature-stories/detail/who-expert-mission-to-belarus-recommends-physical-distancing-measures-as-covid-19-virus-transmits-in-the-community>.

[3] Michel Foucault, *Abnormalities, Courses at Collège de France 1974-1975*, translation Dan Radu Stănescu, afterword Bogdan Ghiu, Bucharest, Univers Publishing, 1999, p. 94.

[4] Jean-Jeaques Rousseau, *Despre contractul social sau principiile dreptului politic*, translation and foreword study by N. Dașcovici, published, afterword and notes by A. Bârna, Bucharest, Mondero Publishing, 2007.

[5] Jonas Hanway, *The Defects of Police. The Cause of Immorality and the Continual Robberies*

Committed, Particularly in and about the Metropolis, London, J. Dodsley, 1775.

[6]Ibid.

[7]ARISTOTLE, *Politics*, bilingual edition, translation, comments and index by, foreword study by Vasile Muscă, Bucharest, IRI Publishing, 2001, §3.

[8]Fernando Savater, *Politica pentru fiul meu* translation by Corneliu Rădulescu, Bucharest, Humanitas Publishing, 1999 [1992], p. 29.

[9]Igor Ansoff and Patrick Sullivan, *Optimizing Profitability in Turbulent Environments: A Formula for Strategic Success, Long Range Planning*, Vol. 26, No. 5, Printed in Great Britain, 1993, pp. 11-23.

[10]Peter van Ham, *The Rise of The Brand State, The Postmodern Politics of Image and Reputation, Foreign Affairs*, September/October 2001, pp. 1-5.

[11]David E. Sanger and Nicole Perlroth, *U.S. to Accuse China of Trying to Hack Vaccine Data, as Virus Redirects Cyberattacks, The New York Times*, 10.05.2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/05/10/us/politics/coronavirus-china-cyber-hacking.html>.

[12]“Va fi bătaie mare pe vaccinurile anti-coronavirus/Franța se contrecează cu SUA pentru vaccinul dezvoltat de Sanofi”, EuroPunkt, 14.05.2020, <https://europunkt.ro/2020/05/14/va-fi-bataie-mare-pe-vaccinurile-anti-coronavirus-franta-se-contreceaza-cu-sua-pentru-vaccinul-dezvoltat-de-sanofi/>.

[13]Igor Ansoff, Patrick Sullivan, *Optimizing Profitability in Turbulent Environments: A Formula for Strategic Success, Long Range Planning*, Vol. 26, No. 5, Printed in Great Britain, 1993, pp. 11-23.

[14]UE împotriva COVID-19, https://europa.eu/european-union/coronavirus-response_ro.

[15]Ibid.

[16]Ibid.

[17]Ibid.

[18]Ibid.

[19]Ibid.

[20]Coronavirus Lockdown Protest: What's Behind the US Demonstrations?, BBC, 21.04.2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-52359100>.

[21]Olga Dorul, *Conceptul de securitate colectivă în dreptul internațional contemporan, Revistă amoldovenească de drept internațional și relații internaționale*, 2008, pp. 68-73.

[22]Ibid.

[23]Ibid.

[24]European Commission, *Travel and*

Transportation during the Coronavirus Pandemic, https://ec.europa.eu/info/live-work-travel-eu/health/coronavirus-response/travel-and-transportation-during-coronavirus-pandemic_ro.

[25]Thomas L. Friedman, *The World is Flat: The Globalized World in the Twenty-First Century*, London, Penguin, 2006.

[26]Reece Jones, *Violent Borders: Refugees and the Right to Move*, London, Verso Books, 2016; Reece Jones și Corey Johnson, *Border militarisation and the re-articulation of sovereignty, Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, 41(2), 2016, pp. 187-200; Mary Gilmartin, Patricia Burke Wood și Cian O'Callaghan, *Borders, Mobility and Belonging in the Era of Brexit and Trump*, Bristol, Policy Press, 2018, p. 10.

[27]Karen E. Till, Juanita Sundberg, Wendy Pullan, Charis Psaltis, Chara Makriyianni, Rana Zincir Celal, Meltem Onurkan Samani, Lorraine Dowler, *Interventions in the Political Geographies of Walls*, *Political Geography*, 33 (1), 2013, pp. 52-62.

[28]Gilmartin, Burke Wood and O'Callaghan, *Borders, Mobility and Belonging in the Era of Brexit and Trump*, p. 12.

[29]Claudio Minca and Alexandra Rijke, *Walls! Walls! Society and Space*, 2017, available at: <http://societyandspace.org/2017/04/18/walls-walls-walls/>.

[30]Wendy Brown, *Walled States, Waning Sovereignty*, New York, Zone, 2010.

[31]Gilmartin, Burke Wood and O'Callaghan, *Borders, Mobility and Belonging in the Era of Brexit and Trump*, p. 12.

[32]William Walters, *Border/Control, European Journal of Social Theory*, 9(2), 2006, pp. 187-203; William Walters, *Rethinking borders beyond the state, Comparative European politics*, 4, 2006, pp. 141-159, apud. Andreas Müller, *Governing Mobility Beyond the State. Centre, Periphery and the EU's External Borders*, Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2014, p. 23.

[33]Revoltător. Un tânăr asiatic a fost bătut și dat afară din metrou de suporteri rapidiști, isterizați de teama coronavirusului, Digi24, 26.02.2020, <https://www.digi24.ro/stiri/actualitate/evenimente/revoltator-un-tanar-asiatic-a-fost-batut-si-dat-afara-din-metrou-de-suporteri-rapidiști-isterizați-de-teama-coronavirusului-1266411>.

TERRORISM

Interview with Geneva Centre for Security Policy: “Extremist Groups’ Response to the Current COVID-19 Crisis”

Dr. Andreea Stoian Karadeli – independent researcher based in Turkey, Associate Fellow at the Geneva Centre for Security Policy - GCSP (Global Fellowship Initiative), Jean-Paul Rouiller – head of the Terrorism-Joint Analysis Group (T-JAG) at the GCSP and Jean-Pierre Keller – senior analyst and deputy at T-JAG / GCSP, in the light of their common CT-related projects, analyzed the extremist groups’ responses to the current COVID-19 crisis and the ways in which they exploited the pandemic, in an interview to the *Geostrategic Pulse* Magazine.

What are the general responses of extremist groups to the current COVID-19 crisis?

The response of extremist groups has been diverse although all of them (by “them” we refer to the “Trinity of Terrorism”, meaning Jihadists, Far Right and Far Left extremists) have been quick to use it in their respective narrative lines, their infographics, memes and documents. As a matter of fact, all major propaganda channels of the “Trinity” were very quick in their appropriation of the COVID-19 crisis.

As far as we could see, Jihadist groups (Islamic State, al-Qa’eda and their affiliates, proxies...) developed very structured responses to the COVID-19 crisis. First came the “religious” interpretation (using ideas like “COVID-19 is God’s punishment”) of the crisis, then came the editorials and essays explaining why and how the crisis could be turned to their advantage. Both the “religious interpretation” and “operationalization” were delivered by official and core communication channels and medias of both the Islamic State and al-Qa’eda. Supporters and sympathizers’ channels were then responsible for the development of the “mass propaganda campaigns” that followed.

Far Right and Far Left Extremists groups simply jumped stage one (interpretation and incitement) and immediately went for the mass propaganda campaigns. They did it in a pretty fluid and easy manner as they simply considered COVID-19 as one more piece of evidence supporting their well-established worldview and narratives. Far Right Extremists clearly considered COVID-19 as

evidence of the apocalypse to come whereas Far Left Extremists repeatedly asked their audience not to be confused and not to lose track of the real enemy: capitalism, the governments and police forces implementing measures of quarantine/confinement.

To make a long story short, each segment of the Trinity of Terror tried to take advantage of the COVID-19 crisis. Each of them did it by integrating the crisis into pre-existing propaganda campaigns and narrative lines.

What are the main trends in the Salafi-jihadi propaganda strategy for COVID-19?

One strategic narrative lined developed by Salafi-jihadi groups, and a strategy so far supported by the figures of the contamination and losses of European and North American countries, has been to describe the virus as a God-sent punishment hitting (in priority but not exclusively, both the Islamic State and al-Qa’eda were very clear on that) first the unbelievers and only second, the Muslims.

Interestingly, al-Qa’eda and associated groups tried to take advantage of that conclusion as a mean to demonstrate the crisis management capacities of their surrogate groups in Syria and in other parts of the world.

The Islamic State on the other hand, developed a not so surprising narrative line, turning the crisis into an opportunity to command and inspire attacks on all countries that had fought against the Caliphate.

The Islamic State propaganda machine has instrumentalized the COVID-19 crisis, infusing it heavily (although not exclusively) into two narrative lines it had developed over the last 18 months.

First, associating COVID-19 and the fall of the Caliphate. Here the pandemic is present as God’s Punishment for the crimes committed by the SDF and the coalition in Baghûz, Syria. The last redoubt of the Islamic State was a small village on the Euphrates river, Baghûz. Officially the last redoubt of IS fell on March the 23rd, 2019. Chronologically, the COVID-19 crisis literally became a problem for

the whole world in March 2020.

In phase with its internal timeline, and surfing on the emotional weight attached to the first anniversary of the “Fall of Baghûz”, the Islamic State propaganda machine didn’t resist the chronological collision and therefore interpreted the virus as the punishment of God, unleashed onto the Unbelievers for what they had done to the Men, Women and Children of the Caliphate in Baghûz.

Second, the Islamic State exploited the COVID-19 in line with the narrative it has thoroughly been developing (and feeding) over two years and focusing on the fate of the IS men, women, and children detained in prisons and camps in Iraq and in Syria. Here the COVID-19 virus becomes one more piece of evidence of the unspoken, dark and irrevocable will of the enemies of the Islamic State, as both the SDF and the States behind the coalition don’t do anything against the virus and let its “people” die miserably in camps and prisons. IS therefore calls its soldiers and supporters to “break through walls” of the prisons and camps, to free the jailed mujahideen, the detained muhajirat and the walled cubs of the Caliphate.

What are the main trends in the extremist right wing and left-wing propaganda strategy for COVID-19?

Both Far Right and Far Left Extremist organizations/ groups and their propaganda channels have used the COVID-19 crisis in their propaganda.

Like their jihadist brothers in hate, both the Far Right and Far Left extremists have infused a COVID-19 dimension in already existing narrative lines.

Unlike their jihadist opponents, Far Right and Far Left extremists skipped the “immanent” dimension of COVID-19. No abstruse exegetics of the how and why of the virus posited by the ideologues of hate. No lengthy holistic demonstration of the intrinsically capitalistic nature of the pandemic! The Alpha and the Omega of extremism acted in harmony, developing an incredible variety of infographics, memes and slogans associating COVID-19 with their favorite rants and themes!

Propagandist on extreme right associated COVID-19 with immigration, they saw it as one more step in the direction of the end of the current and corrupted world order.

The left side propagandists used COVID-19 as a reminder of who the real enemy is: the police, the

state and capitalism.

Last but not least, when jihadist organizations suggested immediate action to their fighters and sympathizers, both far right and far left groups and channels adopted a different position. Both sides told their soldiers, adherents and sympathizers to wait for the actual world order to crumble. Then, and only then, would the time be right to take the arms and finally conquer the world.

Weaponizing COVID-19?

A great topic for journalists and tv-shows. The truth is way less spectacular as there has been no clue of a serious attempt to weaponize COVID-19... A handful of sympathizers on jihadist forums fantasizing about the sacrifice of a contaminated brother infecting a whole city of unbelievers... An “skull and bones” iconized member of a far-right telegram channel suggesting the discrete introduction of contaminated materials stolen from a hospital into a refugee shelter in an unspecified European country... Just two samples of the fantasies expressed online by the tenants of the trinity of terror.

Provocative as it is, the above summarizes what we have been able to gather on the possible weaponization of the COVID-19. In a very few words: we didn’t find traces of any serious discussions / plans to weaponize the virus. This conclusion is the one derived from our early warning monitoring of the propaganda channels of the “trinity of terror”. It cannot be generalized as we know that the Islamic State, al-Qa’eda and Far Right groups have tried to acquire / produce biological and chemical weapons.

What is the situation in the camps in Syria?

Following the “October the 9th 2019” aftermath, almost all medical facilities were suspended, therefore having a direct impact on the living conditions of the 65000 IS related families kept in al Hol. The transfer of the so-called third country national (TCN) to al Roj camp tried to decongest the al Hol annex, where 10000 TCN currently live (women, children, orphans). Recent information provided by Kurdish sources alluded to the future creation of a new camp in the Hasakah Governorate.

Due to concerns about the pandemic, few people may visit the camps, where the medical treatments and basic health are poor; as WHO stated, “any areas with large groups of people such as camps &

cities hosting mass gatherings are of greater concern". The prisons share the same common denominator: a vulnerability to non-existing health standards, therefore a fertile ground for spreading the virus. As diseases developed easily within a contained space, prisoners are easy targets. Two riots have already started in the Hasakah prison within the last two months, where more than 5000 ISIS fighters are detained. These uprisings coincided with mounting fears across the region that the COVID-19 will arrive in this war-ravaged area but apparently it was due to some of the detainees having Tuberculosis which is common in bad prison conditions. Former ISIS fighters are in constant tension and analysis projects an explosion of the situation especially as the virus will amplify the strains.

Overall, the situation for these detainees remains desperate and hopeless as a wave of panic may spark and the virus will start to spread within camps / prisons. As it is already hard to wash their hands on a normal time, it is even worse now. In conclusion, the necessary attention of home countries is even less present, as they are all focused on the pandemic, therefore delaying the repatriation, trial and, above all, the lessening of the burden on the SDF shoulders.

What kind of CT response should be developed in the post COVID-19 reality?

Since the beginning of the pandemic, ISIS has encouraged its members and supporters to exploit the weaknesses of the so-called superpowers, of the coalition members and of the European states. As the troops and security forces of those states are now deployed and stretched to the limits of their capacities (if not reduced), they could become easy targets as they are preoccupied with protecting their own population, if not themselves.

The virus handicapped domestic security efforts. It also nearly halted the international operations to counter ISIS all over the world. Major coalition partners pulled back from the field, halted training activities for both their middle eastern and / or african partners.

The post COVID world will most certainly be more fragmented, more dangerous and hence less predictable.

Far right and far left extremists will most certainly follow the roadmaps their propaganda channels have suggested: monitor, prepare and plan... The COVID crisis has given both extreme sides reasons to intensify their preparations and if given an

opportunity, they will most certainly act upon it.

As for jihadists, the latest news coming from the field show that the fight continues: in Africas, the Islamic State and al-Qa'eda are at each other throats. It could be good news, but both sides do not forget to attack locals and members of the foreign troops deployed in the area. In Iraq, in Syria, in Central and South-East Asia, Islamic State affiliated groups are on the offensive.

CT practitioners, analysts and operators will not be short of work. This, depending on who you are, might be good news. The bad one is that if more will be expected from our armed forces and our security / intelligence services, they will have to perform their current and new tasks with less money, and most certainly, with less political and public support. The trinity of terror will not dissolve itself into the abyss. But the world has experienced an unexpected foe. One that doesn't claim its victories but will most certainly occupy the minds of our fellow citizens for the years to come.

CT practitioners, analysts and operators will therefore learn to achieve a lot more with less. The times of unlimited resources and funds are gone. To face the challenges ahead, both the intelligence and law-enforcement communities will have to optimize their processes. Willing or not, CT analysts will have to embrace new tools, new methods. They will have to share their tasks with different sorts of AI. And there will be very little time to learn and to understand the implications of what is coming.



Pictures collected by the T-JAG team through the social media channels used by salafi-jihadi, far-right and left-wing extremist groups.

THE BLACK SEA

The impact of the Pandemic on the prospects of the Russian - Ukrainian conflict settlement

Volodymyr HAVRYLOV

The coronavirus pandemic, falling oil prices and the approaching global economic crisis may affect the course of negotiations to resolve the Russian-Ukrainian conflict in eastern Ukraine.

It is the sixth year since the beginning of Russia's hybrid aggression against Ukraine that resulted in the annexation of Crimea and the occupation of some territories in eastern Ukraine.

Following an active phase of hostilities in May-September 2014, the so-called "Minsk Arrangements" were signed in the capital of Belarus with the mediation of the OSCE, Germany and France, with the aim to end the conflict and pave the way for Ukraine to regain control over its territory. The last document of these Arrangements was the Comprehensive Measures for Implementation of the Minsk Agreements, approved by UN Security Council Resolution 2202 of 17 February 2015.



All these measures can be summarized as follows:

1. Ceasefire, disengagement of opposing forces, amnesty of fighters and withdrawal of foreign armed formations (in fact Russian troops) from the territory of Ukraine.
2. Granting of special status to the individual areas of Donetsk and Luhansk regions and securing it by amending the Constitution of Ukraine.
3. Holding local elections under Ukrainian law.
4. Transfer of the border with Russia under the control of Ukrainian law enforcement agencies.

The sequence of implementing these measures was not clearly spelled out in the Minsk Arrangements and therefore each side interpreted them in their favor.

When signing the Minsk Arrangements, Ukraine was primarily interested in regaining control of its border, understanding that afterwards Moscow would completely lose its ability to influence the situation in the region.

On the other hand, Putin's team realized that the tactic of hybrid coercive compulsion of Ukraine to surrender under the Crimean scenario ("we are not there") does not work, and the open invasion by the Russian regular troops into Ukraine entails unpredictable consequences.

Therefore, since 2015 Moscow has focused on the strategy of collapsing Ukraine from within while maintaining the low-intensity military conflict in eastern part of Ukraine. In addition, Putin had personal disdain of Poroshenko, which added to the delay in political settlement. In these circumstances, the negotiations in Minsk were used by Moscow primarily to discredit Kyiv in the eyes of Ukraine's Western partners.

This strategy could have had some prospects if Russia were not under international sanctions and had sufficient strategic resources. But since 2015 the economic situation in Russia has started to deteriorate due to falling oil prices and sanctions. In addition, Ukraine succeeded to overcome its energy dependency on Moscow, suppressed Russia's "fifth column", launched internal reforms and received significant support from the European Union and the United States. Thus, Moscow started to lose its traditional leverages of economic, political and

social influence on the processes in Ukraine. So given the growing challenges inside Russia and the strengthening of international sanctions, it became economically unsustainable and politically dangerous for Kremlin to “freeze” the conflict in Ukraine for a long time (as it did in Abkhazia, South Ossetia and Transnistria).



The best option for Moscow was to push Kyiv towards direct negotiations with the Donetsk and Luhansk, thus presenting the conflict in eastern Ukraine as a purely domestic political problem of Ukraine. This would provide Putin with the justification to demand that the Europeans and the Americans remove “unjustified” sanctions against Russia, allowing at the same time to control and delay the proxy talks in Donetsk and Luhansk for as long as it would be necessary.

In 2019, following the presidential transition in Ukraine the Kremlin has focused its efforts on implementing this scenario by utilizing one of the provisions of the Minsk Arrangements that envisaged the involvement of representatives of “particular areas of Donetsk and Luhansk regions” in consultations and approvals within the Tripartite Contact Group.

The new President of Ukraine, Volodymyr Zelensky, has identified ending the war in the east of the country and returning the temporarily occupied territories under Ukraine’s control as his main goal. To achieve this, he initiated direct dialogue with Putin, agreed with him on the disengagement of opposing forces on some sections of the frontline, the exchange of prisoners and the intensification of negotiations in Minsk.

The parties replaced their authorized representatives in the negotiations. The new Russian delegation was led by Deputy Chairman of the Russian Presidential Administration Dmitry Kozak, known for his plan to settle the conflict over

Transnistria in 2003.

The Ukrainian team in Minsk was headed by the Head of the Office of the President of Ukraine, Andriy Yermak.

During their first meeting in Minsk on March 11, 2020, Kozak presented the initiative to create a “consultative council” to “... carry out dialogue, consultations and make proposals on draft political and legal solutions to the conflict settlement, including elections in some areas of Donetsk and Luhansk regions of Ukraine”. This “consultative council” was to include ten representatives from Ukraine and ten representatives from “separate areas of Donetsk and Luhansk regions” with voting rights, as well as one representative from each Russia, France and Germany with “advisory rights”. The OSCE was to moderate the meetings of the “council”, and its decisions had to be advisory.

Russia thus would effectively change the status from being the aggressor state to being the observer and advisor, like France and Germany. This would have been the first step towards lifting the sanctions.

According to plan, the protocol on the establishment of such a “council” had to be signed on March 24-26, 2020. However, this signing did not take place. Again, both the Kremlin and the Office of the President of Ukraine did not take into account the reaction of civil society in Ukraine (especially war veterans), which strongly opposed any direct negotiations or consultations with representatives of Donetsk and Luhansk, who are justly regarded as mere sock puppets and mercenaries of Moscow.

As a result, as of the end of April, there have been no major changes in the Minsk negotiations. This creates a dilemma for the President of Ukraine, who hoped to hold local elections in the temporarily occupied territories in the fall of 2020. At the same time, Ukraine's leadership is now forced to focus more on fighting the coronavirus pandemic and preparing for the encroaching economic crisis. Due to the support of its partners in Europe and the United States and the limited reliance on its economy on world oil prices, Kyiv has every opportunity to overcome the effects of the pandemic and the economic crisis.

At the same time the coronavirus pandemic and the sharp fall in the price of oil have significantly worsened the economic situation in Russia. Moscow is rapidly spending its strategic reserves to compensate for the losses of the state budget, half of which is dependent on oil and gas exports, and is

preparing for the worst-case scenarios of intensifying sociopolitical instability. Lifting international sanctions and reducing the costs of supporting occupied territories in Ukraine (including Crimea, which is a topic for a separate story) in these circumstances becomes critical for the Russian leadership, as such a crisis has not yet occurred in the modern Russian history.

Therefore, paradoxically, in the near future Moscow may be potentially more interested in

they arise from Central and Eastern European countries of the Euro-Atlantic community with vital accelerating the Minsk negotiations than Kyiv itself.

However, in these circumstances Ukraine must strengthen its army, carry out deep economic reforms, decisively fight corruption, improve the efficiency of state institutions and thus demonstrate the irreversibility of its pro-European transformation.

Bulgaria Takes Issue with Ukraine over Minority in Odesa Province

Vladimir SOCOR



Source: bulgariaanalytica.org

The parliament of Bulgaria has adopted a declaration criticizing Ukraine's policy toward the Bulgarian minority in Odesa province (see EDM, May 26). This move might seem to indicate that Bulgaria is about to emulate Hungary or Romania, each of which, in its own way (Hungary more persistently and harshly), has in recent years criticized Ukraine's policies toward the Hungarian and Romanian minorities, respectively.

Those complaints developed in response to Ukraine's reforms in the education system and the local administration system, where Soviet-legacy models are finally being replaced with European ones. And notably, those complaints come—if not in intention then in effect - as addenda to Russia's own propaganda alleging discriminatory treatment of Ukraine's "Russian-speaking population." The addenda from Budapest, Bucharest or, now, Sofia are minor in volume and tenor, compared with Moscow's propaganda. Nor are they coordinated with Moscow or instigated by it (suspicions to this effect remain largely unsubstantiated). Yet, unfounded reproaches to Ukraine over ethnic minority issues in its borderlands are disconcerting when

Putin is doomed to leave Ukraine in order to save Russia from disaster.

stakes of their own in Ukraine's stability and cohesion.

The Bulgarian National Assembly's (parliament) May 20 declaration "On Ukraine's administrative-territorial reform and the protection of the Bulgarian community's rights and integrity" expresses "categorical disagreement with the planned administrative changes" affecting the Bulgarian minority in the Odesa province's Bolhrad district. The parliament "obligates Bulgaria's government to take all possible actions" for preserving the Bolhrad district's existing administrative boundaries. The parliament "insists that this is a priority issue" and calls on the government "urgently to arrange a Bulgarian-Ukrainian inter-governmental meeting" on this matter. Additionally, the Bulgarian parliament references the inter-ministerial protocols (see below) on support for Bulgarian-language schools in Ukraine (Parliament.bg, May 20).

Two members of parliament from the nationalist-conservative United Patriots, one from the right-wing populist Volya party, and one from the center-right governing party Citizens for Bulgaria's European Development (GERB) initiated this declaration. It passed by 109 votes in favor, none against, 19 abstentions, and 102 not voting in the 240-seat chamber (Parliament.bg, May 20; Dumskaya.net, May 20).

The declaration responds to Ukraine's administrative-territorial reform in this part of the Odesa region along the same lines as in all Ukraine. The Soviet-style, centrally-supervised districts ("raions") are to be replaced throughout the country by smaller, self-governing communities ("hromadas") in the framework of Ukraine's administrative decentralization. This reform, for

years in preparation, is to go into effect ahead of the local elections scheduled to be held country-wide in October.



Bolhrad raion (in red), Odesa oblast, in southwestern Ukraine
(Source: Wikimedia Commons)

Ukraine's Bulgarian minority is concentrated in several existing *raions* of the Odesa province - including the Bolhrad *raion*, where it forms a local majority of 61 percent. The town of Bolhrad functions as the Bulgarian minority's informal capital. Under the imminent reform, this *raion*-level territorial unit would be replaced by five *hromada* - (community) - level units, each amalgamating several villages into a self-governing unit. Nothing would change for the Bulgarian minority in terms of voting for local Bulgarian mayors and other community leaders or running its own cultural institutions. The Bulgarian parliament's declaration seems to misunderstand the local situation, assuming that the reform threatens the minority's identity somehow. The parliament's declaration seems, furthermore, to equate the Bolhrad *raion* with the whole Bulgarian minority in this part of the Odesa province. Bulgarians, however, also reside more or less compactly (although not as majorities) in three nearby *raions*: Artsiz, Tarutino and Izmail (and in smaller numbers in other *raions*),

all of which are to be replaced by *hromadas* of amalgamated villages (see article at page 26).

The Bulgarian parliament's May 20 declaration departs from the non-polemical, cooperative tenor that had characterized the Bulgarian-Ukrainian inter-governmental dialogue on the Ukrainian school reform's impact on Bulgarian minority schools in Ukraine. The declaration is a far cry from the friendly spirit of Bulgarian Prime Minister Boyko Borissov's discussions with Ukraine's then-president Petro Poroshenko in 2018, when Borissov twice visited Ukraine, including the Bulgarian settlement area in the Odesa province. Borissov brought up the school issue in the wider context of bilateral cooperation projects and of both countries' relations with the European Union (BTA, Novinite, May 26 - 28, 2018 and October 4 - 5, 2018).

Differences over the minority schools issue have been resolved after that by means of cooperation protocols between the two countries' education ministries for the school years 2020-2024 (Ukrinform, May 20, 2020). Borissov has invited Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy to visit Bulgaria (Novinite, January 31, 2020). By contrast, Romania's President Klaus Iohannis never visited neighboring Ukraine, and he canceled a visit by then-president Poroshenko to Romania as a protest against Ukraine's school reform affecting Romanian schools in the Chernovtsy province.

Anton Kisse, the deputy to the Ukrainian parliament from the single-mandate electoral district centered on Bolhrad and Tarutino (see above), is plausibly believed to have helped inspire the Bulgarian parliament's declaration. Apparently, he is interested in preserving the boundaries not only of the *raions* but also of his electoral district.

Kisse has been a perennial and imperishable leader of this ethnic community for the last three decades. He presides over the Association of Bulgarians of Ukraine and is a veteran deputy to the Verkhovna Rada (2004 - 2006 and 2012 to date). Kisse has been aligned all along with the parties in power in Kyiv, making deals with them - or with groups close to them- as they rotate in and out of the presidency and the central government. He distanced himself from Russia's attempts to subvert the Odesa province in the heyday of the Novorossiia project and notably disavowed the Moscow-instigated "Bessarabian People's Council" and "Bessarabian Republic" projects in the Odesa province in 2015 (see EDM, April 9, 13, 2015). A member of the Party of Regions, Kisse moved in 2015 to co-chair one of that party's offshoots, the

Nash Krai (Our Land) party, based on an informal deal with the Poroshenko administration. In 2019, Kisse joined the Za Maibutne (For the Future) parliamentary group, which is close to Ihor Kolomoysky - a move by which Kisse drew close to President Zelensky's camp. Kisse is a cautious, conservative representative of the old *nomenklatura*, a *status quo* - oriented politician, interested in retaining his position as key power broker in the Bulgarian community as well as between it and the central authorities.

The Ukrainian parliament's committee on state administration, local self-government and regional development held talks on May 22 in Kyiv with local mayors and community leaders from the Odesa province, including those from Bolhrad and

other Bulgarian-populated localities there. Ukraine's Ministry of Foreign Affairs has rebuffed the Bulgarian parliament's declaration as "unacceptable interference into Ukraine's internal affairs," while allowing, however, that the "Bolhrad district's status would ultimately be resolved by taking the local citizens' views into account." The ministry has initiated discussions with the Bulgarian embassy in Kyiv on this matter, preparatory to an inter-ministerial dialogue with Sofia (Ukrinform, May 20, 22; see accompanying article).

NB. The article was first published in Eurasia Daily Monitor Volume: 17 Issue: 75 on 28 May 2020.

Bessarabia's 'Ethnographic Harlequin' in a Regional Perspective

Vladimir SOCOR

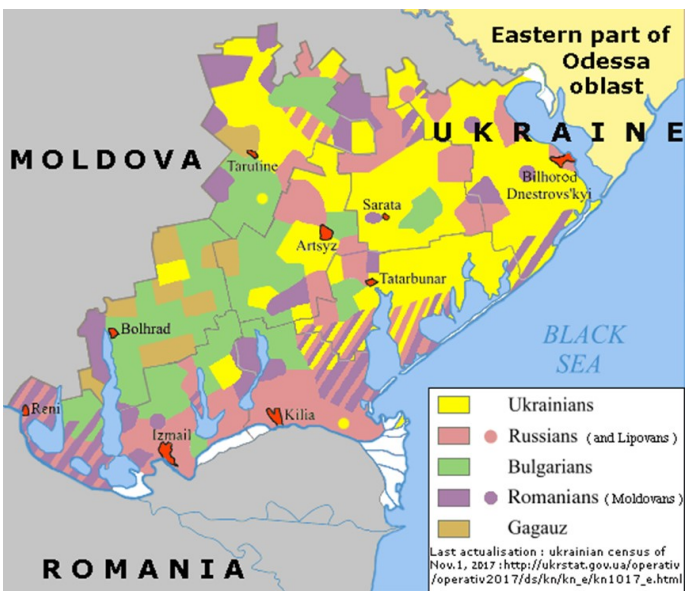


Taraulia District, Moldova (Source: Wikimedia Commons)

Ukraine's ethnic-Bulgarian minority is concentrated in the southwestern part of Ukraine's Odesa province, an area often if somewhat inaccurately referenced as "Bessarabia." It forms a triangle between the Dnister/Nistru River, the Danube Estuary and the Black Sea, adjacent to the Russian-controlled Transnistria, and bordering on Moldova and Romania. This triangular area holds pivotal strategic significance in the region.

The Odesa province, including its Bessarabian part as well as Transnistria, had been a focus of discussions about "Novorossiia" in Russian nationalist circles, before the Kremlin took charge of this project in 2014 at the latest. The city of Odesa almost fell to *Novorossiia* supporters in May 2014. At about that time, Moscow switched the project's focus to Donetsk and Luhansk, although (ironically) these were not considered parts of historic Novorossiia.

The "Bessarabian" part of the Odesa province has been described as an "ethnographic Harlequin [crazy quilt]," comprised of juxtaposed and interspersed nationalities. All of them are numerical minorities; and while ethnic-Russians are one minority among the others, Russian is the *lingua franca de facto* in this region as a legacy of Russian imperial and Soviet policies.



Ethnic breakdown in Ukrainian "Bessarabia" (Source: Wikimedia Commons)

Adding to this area's potential vulnerabilities, it suffers from insufficient and decrepit rail and road connections with the rest of Ukraine. The impact of Ukrainian mass media, and of Ukrainian cultural life generally, remains low.

According to Ukraine's latest census, 621,000 people resided in the Bessarabian part of the Odesa province as of 2001. The census reported 40 percent Ukrainians, 21 percent Bulgarians, 20 percent Russians, 13 percent Moldovans, 4 percent Gagauz, and some smaller groups in that population. The ethnic breakdown, however, does not coincide with the language breakdown in the population, owing to the historic legacy of linguistic Russification of the non-Russians. Fully one half of the ethnic Ukrainians and about the same proportion of ethnic Bulgarians declare Russian as their native language and/or their language of first use. Russian remains the dominant language in local media and all spheres of public life (State Statistics Committee of Ukraine, 2001 census, accessed May 27, 2020).

Ethnic Bulgarians number 140,000 in the Bessarabian part of the Odesa province under the same census. Bulgarians form the majority in the Bolhrad district ("raion"), at 61 percent (followed by the Gagauz, at 19 percent). Bulgarians form pluralities in the Artsiz district, at 39 percent (followed by Ukrainians at 27 percent), and in the Tarutino district, at 37.5 percent (followed by Ukrainians at 24.5 percent). Smaller Bulgarian communities reside also in nearby districts (Soviet-style *raions*). None of these hold any kind of special status; and they are scheduled to be replaced by smaller, self-governing "*hromadas*" (communities) of amalgamated villages (see accompanying article).

Following the Novorossiia undertaking's failure, Moscow came up with two projects in 2015, closely tailored to this part of the Odesa province: the "Bessarabian People's Rada [Council]" and the "Bessarabian People's Republic." These envisaged a "national-cultural" special status as well as a political special status for this territory, with the intent of detaching it from Ukraine. These projects met with some support from openly Russophile political groups in Bulgaria and Moldova, such as Volen Sidorov's Ataka Party in Sofia and the ethnic-Bulgarian former prime minister of Moldova, Vasile Tarlev, the head of the "Russia's Friends in Moldova" association. Those two projects failed for a number of reasons, not the least of which being the implicit challenge to local ethnic community leaders, *status quo*-oriented power brokers intent on preserving their positions (see EDM, April 9, 13, 2015).

The Ukrainian-Moldovan border bisects southern Bessarabia and, with that, divides Ukraine's

Bulgarian community from Moldova's. Along that border, Moldova has a special-status unit in the Gagauz autonomy and a potential aspirant to special status in the Bulgarian-majority Taraclia district (*raion*). A proposal to institute a "national-cultural special status" for Taraclia is currently pending in the Moldovan parliament, submitted by two deputies from President Igor Dodon's Socialist Party (Deschide.md, March 5, 2020).

This proposal seems designed at least in part to lock in Taraclia's ethnic-Bulgarian votes for the Socialists in the upcoming presidential and parliamentary elections. It does, however, have an antecedent from 2015, when the Communist Party and then-ruler Vladimir Plahotniuc's Democratic Party proposed a special national-cultural status for Taraclia and had it adopted by the parliament in the first reading (see EDM, April 13, 14, July 2, 2015).

Any forward movement with the currently pending parliamentary bill would serve pro-Russia circles and Moscow. It would enable them to cite a Moldovan precedent in support of new calls for special status in Moldova and across the border in Ukraine's Odesa province.

NB. The article was first published in Eurasia Daily Monitor Volume: 17 Issue: 75 on 28 May 2020.

Ukraine and Hungary Move to Settle Differences over National Minority Legislation

Vladimir SOCOR November 7, 2019).

Part One



(Source: 112.international)

Kyiv and Budapest have initiated an effort to resolve their differences over the impact of Ukrainian language and education laws on the Hungarian national minority in Ukraine's Carpathian province (see EDM, June 3).

Budapest's position is based on a *sui generis* conception of Hungarian national community entitlements in Carpathian Ukraine. Versions of that conception also apply to Hungary's kin communities in other neighboring countries. Budapest, however, has exacerbated its controversy with Ukraine by injecting this problem into the North Atlantic Treaty Organization's (NATO) high-level deliberations. Since late 2017, Hungary has been blocking NATO-Ukraine meetings at the presidential, ministerial and flag-officer levels, jeopardizing NATO-Ukraine cooperation programs amidst the Russia-Ukraine war. That said, there are no indications of coordination between Budapest and Moscow and no grounds for suspicion in this regard.

To generate pressure on Ukraine to fall into line with that conception, Budapest seeks, in effect, to misuse NATO and divert it from its purposes (not overly ambitious in the first place) regarding Ukraine. Hungary's political leaders seem oblivious to the risk that their tactics may set a precedent whereby other NATO member countries would inject parochial issues into the Alliance unrelated to its mandate and missions. For its part, the North Atlantic Alliance collectively takes the position that this dispute is only for Hungary and Ukraine to settle bilaterally. Yet, NATO's consensus-based decision-making has left the Alliance with no choice but to accept Budapest's veto against senior-level meetings with Ukraine (see EDM, July 30, 2018 and

The controversy over Carpathian Hungarian minority entitlements can also complicate Ukraine's position in the context of the European Union. As an EU-aspirant country, Ukraine must in its own interest accept Brussels' assessments of Ukrainian domestic legislation and policies. EU institutions, among them the European Parliament's advisory Venice Commission on Democracy Through Law, would be loath to side with one EU member country against another member country, but might deem unproblematic politically to go along with an EU country's perspective against that of a non-member. Furthermore, current notions of multiculturalism in Western Europe may complicate the understanding of Ukraine's nation- and state-building tasks. As a latecomer to statehood, Ukraine must of necessity focus on the national language and education, as was the case everywhere in Europe earlier, during the state-building phase.

While Ukraine is keen to overcome the two-and-a-half-year-old stalemate at NATO, Hungary cannot be comfortable with that stalemate either, as initial Hungarian objectives remain unfulfilled. Meanwhile, Budapest interprets the political changes in Ukraine as having brought to power a "less nationalistic" president and parliamentary majority. Consequently, Budapest sees an opportunity to secure certain entitlements for the Hungarian national community on school education, language use and, possibly, the legalization of dual citizenship in Ukraine. The Hungarian government proposes to attain these objectives by agreement between Kyiv on one side and the Carpathian Hungarian representatives and Budapest on the other side.

Both Kyiv and Budapest now seem to envisage possibilities for normalizing relations on two tracks: Ukrainian accommodation of some Hungarian national minority grievances, in correlation with Budapest's support for economic and infrastructure programs in Ukraine's Hungarian-inhabited Carpathian districts (see EDM, June 3). The linkage is implicit but fairly apparent on both sides.

Hungary's complaints have centered on three Ukrainian legislative acts:

- Ukraine's Law on Education, a framework law adopted in September 2017, and seized upon by Budapest to raise the ante at the diplomatic level and at NATO.

- Ukraine's Law on Ensuring the Functioning of the Ukrainian Language as the State Language, adopted

in April 2019 and promulgated the following month. It enshrines Ukrainian as the *lingua franca* in the legal and the practical sense for the first time in the nation's history. At the same time, it guarantees the free public use of the languages of Ukraine's national minorities, as well as the official languages of the European Union. The Hungarian language qualifies on both of these counts, alongside the Romanian, Bulgarian and Polish national minority languages in Ukraine (see EDM, May 16, 2019).

- Ukraine's Law on Secondary-Level Education, adopted in January 2020, pursuant to the framework law on education (see above). Both of these laws ensure that the state language functions (as it does in any European state) as the main language of instruction, of graduation examinations and of admission tests, in secondary-level and vocational schools. However, here as well, scope is provided for elastic implementation, transitional periods, some exceptions, and possibilities for teaching one or several disciplines in one or more languages of European Union countries (including Hungarian - see above). This law is not about restricting the teaching of national minorities' languages and culture as subjects in the curriculum. It is about ensuring that the other subjects are taught in Ukrainian as the language of instruction. Minority languages remain the languages of instruction in primary-level schools for national minorities (Ukrinform, January 16, 2020).

The Ukrainian government has changed three ministers of education in close succession in the last ten months. The current government will be taking the Venice Commission's recommendations under serious consideration.

Part Two

For almost three years, the Hungarian government has sought to instrumentalize the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and some European Union institutions to pressure Ukraine into legislating certain entitlements for the Hungarian national community in Carpathian Ukraine. While still using these external pressure tools, Budapest currently seeks to achieve its objective through bilateral negotiations with Ukraine; and Kyiv is showing itself receptive to Budapest's overtures (see EDM, [June 3](#), [4](#)).

Budapest proceeds from a *sui generis* conception of Hungarian national communities' entitlements in all neighboring countries where these kin communities compactly reside. This conception includes fair access to native-language education, use of the native language in the local administration, the right



Ukrainian Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba (left) and Hungarian Foreign Minister Peter Szijjarto in Kyiv, May 29

to fly the Hungarian flag and other national symbols, an open door for Hungarian economic aid and investments targeted to the kin communities, due representation of these communities in local and central bodies of power, as well as Hungarian passportization of members of those kin communities (dual citizenship).

Most of these elements exist to a full or partial extent, *de jure* or *de facto*, in all of Hungary's neighboring countries, including Ukraine. Seeking fuller implementation *de jure*, Budapest has singled out Ukraine, partly because a non-member of NATO and the EU is a more convenient target, and partly because Ukraine (unlike Hungary's other neighbors) has inherited a complete system of primary and secondary schools with Hungarian language of instruction throughout, which Budapest wants to see preserved as an acquired right of its kin community in Carpathian Ukraine.

Budapest deems Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy's government and the parliamentary majority as "less nationalistic" compared with the (previous) Petro Poroshenko presidency and, therefore, more amenable to negotiating bilateral solutions on that whole range of issues. Kyiv is also keen to overcome the stalemate and stop the spillover effect into Ukraine's relations with NATO and the EU.

On January 9, Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán declared that a personal meeting between himself and Zelenskyy would benefit state-to-state relations and the Carpathian Hungarian national community. On February 7, Hungarian Foreign Affairs and Trade Minister Peter Szijjarto conferred in Kyiv with senior government officials on the contentious issues. They agreed to handle these matters in bilateral negotiation channels. In parallel with this, the two sides decided to reconvene the Hungarian - Ukrainian inter - governmental commission on economic cooperation after a seven-

year hiatus, and they agreed to prepare an Orbán-Zelenskyy meeting within the next few months.

On March 26, Szijjarto declared that Orbán would visit Ukraine after the coronavirus emergency is over, and as soon as the two ministers of foreign affairs complete the draft agreements for signing by the two leaders (MTI, Ukrinform, January 9, February 7, March 26). Those actions were, however, delayed by frequent changes in the Ukrainian government and the prolonged coronavirus pandemic crisis.

Ukrainian Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba chose to visit Budapest as his first destination in this capacity, on May 29, "to open a new page in bilateral relations." Kuleba and Szijjarto agreed to convene two specialized joint commissions: on national minority rights and on Hungarian-language education in Carpathian Ukraine, respectively, in addition to the inter-governmental economic commission (see above). The three commissions are supposed to meet during June to discuss the existing differences, work out commonly agreed proposals, and draft possible agreements for consideration by the top leaders.

Budapest's desiderata are fairly ambitious: for the two sides to draft a joint declaration that sets out the path for the future, including provisions for the Hungarian language, schools and other entitlements in Carpathian Ukraine; and for the Ukrainian parliament to adopt the law on national minorities (which is also foreseen by Ukraine's 2019 law on the state language) (Evropeiska Pravda, May 29; MTI, Hirado.hu, Ukrinform, May 27–30).

Hungarian and Ukrainian positions, as expressed through each side's talking points, show not only differences but also certain convergencies, with enough overlap to identify some common ground.

Budapest's positions, voiced during these meetings, include:

- Hungary seeks no territorial changes or other revisionist goals;

- For Budapest, the Hungarian national community in Carpathian Ukraine is more important than Ukraine's relations with NATO;

- The complete school system with the Hungarian language of instruction in Carpathian Ukraine is a time-honored "acquired right" that may not be taken away through Ukraine's education law;

- Budapest would accept any solutions that are acceptable to the Carpathian Hungarian community leaders as well as to Kyiv (this seems to devolve blocking powers to intransigent community leaders);

- Hungary expects Ukraine to draft the overdue law on national minorities in consultation with the

Council of Europe's advisory Venice Commission on Democracy through Law ahead of the draft law's consideration by the Ukrainian parliament, not after the parliament had already adopted it;

- Pending solutions satisfactory to the Carpathian Hungarians and to Budapest as well as to Kyiv on these issues, Budapest will continue raising them in the EU and vetoing NATO-Ukraine senior-level meetings. The aim, however, is not to maintain the veto, but to achieve agreements;

- Hungary offers a €50 million (\$56.5 million) tied loan for infrastructure projects, to be implemented jointly with Ukraine in Carpathian Hungarian-inhabited districts.

Kyiv's positions, voiced during these meetings, include:

- Ukraine does not seek to assimilate (Ukrainize) the Hungarian national minority. It aims to enable young Hungarians to learn Ukrainian to the level necessary for college education and employment in Ukraine's economy. The existing language barrier practically isolates the Carpathian Hungarians from Ukrainian society. Hungarian-language schools' students (along with those of Romanian-language schools in the Chernovtsy province) show the highest failure rate at state tests and college admission exams in all of Ukraine;

- Kyiv notes that Budapest no longer demands point-blank that Ukraine should change the laws on education and language. Rather, Budapest seems to hint that it would be content with elastic implementation rules and regulations that would have to be negotiated with Kyiv.

Overlapping positions of the two sides include:

- Both sides profess the aim of turning Carpathian Ukraine's Hungarian-inhabited districts into a "success story" of Ukraine-Hungary state to state relations;

- The goals of consolidating the Hungarian national identity in Carpathian Ukraine and better integrating that national minority into Ukraine's socio-economic life are mutually reconcilable goals.

This overlap allows identifying common ground. Kuleba has handed over in Budapest an official invitation for Viktor Orbán to visit Ukraine in July.

NB. The article was first published in Eurasia Daily Monitor Volume: 17 Issue: 80, on 4 June 2020 (Part One) and Volume: 17 Issue: 81, on 8 June 2020 (Part Two).

THE MIDDLE EAST

The Epidemics of the Great Middle East

Ambassador Professor Dumitru CHICAN Afghanistan: From Soleimani to the New Franchise War?

Since the beginning of this year, and even earlier, the world was taken over - with its values, frustrations, concerns and, most of all, with the frightening count of those defeated - by the poisoning stench of the killer COVID-19. The tale of this ailing world filled numerous bookshelves, and the obsessive leitmotif was whether “the world after” will ever be the same. Epidemics, which humanity had experienced throughout its long journey to civilization and survival have not been forgotten, nor have the nostalgic ludic moments with their beaches, the joy of exotic places and the customary normality threatened with extinction. During the isolation and the “social distancing” imposed by official decrees, or while avidly waiting for the return to the simple “normality” of every day existence, however, how many of us had the time to realize, at least as a late lesson of our own history, that in the shadow of this pandemic “ennobled” Corona another disease persists – while decision makers keep silent, the media shows no interest and the players themselves treat it cynically since they see the political map of the world as a mere chessboard.

This disease is called war and, unlike other diseases, its taxonomy is as complicated as it is harmful. Listing types and tangles would take too long and prove useless, as they are too well known and for too many times experienced. Today, we are no longer referring (yet) to the global extent of the phenomenon. Easier to pronounce and more effective to wage, we can talk about atypical wars, civil, religious, proxy wars or a “franchised” wars, and we could go on confusing even Saint Augustine, he himself an advocate of the “just war” theory – *jus bellum justum*.

During all this time of apparent lull, the “New” and “Great” Middle East – one of the hottest regions in global geopolitics – is still as hot as ever. Despite what we have seen through the curtain of the pandemic, the realities in this area unfold at a faster pace and tend to transform a frail peace into the preamble of belligerent prospects. So, what is going on in this “New” and “Great” Middle East stretching from the Indian subcontinent to the Mediterranean Sea?

By executive order signed by president Donald Trump, on January 3, 2020, US drones manned in the vicinity of Baghdad International Airport struck and burned to the ground the convoy transporting the Iranian general Qasem Soleimani and a number of leaders and sympathizers of the Shiite Iraqi militias *Al-Hashd Al-Shaabi* (Popular Mobilization Forces). The famous Muslim vendetta was expected, and the international nervousness suggested a new ravaging war between the Yankees and the Mullahs. However, none of this occurred, except for a few Iranian missile strikes on some US military bases in Iraq. Then all went quiet. Nevertheless, it did not last long, since Iranian Navy speedboats carried out several raids to harass US Navy warships in the Persian Gulf.



The Iranian General Soleimani among Afghani militia and pro-Iranian Azerbaijani (www.mei.edu)

On the 9th of February, the Qatari capital (Doha) witnessed the signing of a “historical” peace agreement - after a long period of negotiations - between the Western coalition and the Taliban Islamic rebels from Afghanistan. The agreement, to which the government in Kabul was not a signatory, stipulated the withdrawal of the Western coalition troops over the following 14 months and a prisoner exchange between the Taliban and the government of President Ashraf Ghani. The implementation of the agreement, though, is hindered not only by the mutual mistrust of the belligerents, but also by the reactivation of the Iranian militancy that, after the Doha signing, returned to its tactics of waging war through intermediaries – having as main target the Western

troops getting ready to go back home. This is why Iran, led by the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, took steps to redeploy militias from Syria to the (Iranian) border with Afghanistan. The redeployed troops are part of the so-called Fatimid Brigades (*Liwa Al-Fatimiyyun*, named after Fatimah, the youngest daughter of the Prophet Muhammad), a militia consisting of Afghans and Shiite Azeri from Afghanistan that was established in 2014 with view to fight alongside Bashar Al-Assad's loyalist army. At the same time, Hezbollah's militias in Afghanistan have been placed on high alert.



The Flag and Seal of the Fatimid Division

After Iranian Navy speedboats got provocatively close to a US Navy warship in the Persian Gulf, on the 15th of April, President Donald Trump warned on Twitter that he had instructed the US Navy "to shoot down and destroy any and all Iranian gunboats if they harass our ships at sea."

Aside from the symptoms of the COVID-19 pandemic, that has been causing devastation in the USA and Iran as well, the symptoms of the war seem to be immune to the therapy called "peace". This is all the more so since on the shores of the Atlantic, as well as on the coasts of the Persian Gulf, the famous dictum *si vis pacem, para bellum* remains timeless.

Libya and the New Caliph

In Arabic, the word *khalifa* means "caliph", a lexeme used – based on its archaic meaning – to designate the successor of Prophet Muhammad to the political, social, military and leadership of the Muslim nation. After World War I, in 1942, Mustafa Kemal ended the institution of the caliph and the caliphate, by defeating Ottoman Turkey. The attempts to revive and rebuild the caliphate led to the birth to the Muslim Brotherhood – founders and theorists of what would later turn into fundamentalism and its Jihadist incarnations from which a new caliph, in the person of the Iraqi imam Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi and a small caliphate called

the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant would emerge in the 20th century,

Al-Baghdadi was dispatched after his mentors, Abu Mussab Al-Zarqawi and Osama Bin Laden, and the world could breathe again as if it awakened from the nightmare.

Only by lexical coincidence, based, even if to a small extent – at least according to some Western European and US politicians – on deeds that could entail the accusation of "war crimes", a new caliph arose in another part of the "Great" and "New" Middle East.

The birthplace is the former Great Socialist People's Libyan Arab Jamahiriya of colonel Gaddafi, and the new *khalifa* is the field marshal Khalifa Haftar - a former general under Gaddafi's command and the latter's opponent once the Arab Spring and the first Libyan civil war started. Nowadays he is commanding the National Libyan Army in the second civil war in the former Jamahiriya – a war that has been ongoing for three years. In the first part of May 2020, Khalifa Haftar declared himself some sort of caliph, and renamed himself governor over the eastern part of the country.



Khalifa Haftar (www.cursdeguvernare.ro)

Under his command, on the 19th of May 2019 the National Libyan Army (NLA) engaged against the Government of National Accord (GNA) in Tripoli - internationally recognised and consisting of several Libyan Islamic militias, including members of the Muslim Brotherhood and former combatants, converted to democracy, of the former Islamic State/ISIS/Daesh. None of the UN's actions and of the international community in general did not manage to put an end to the civil war and bring the two belligerent parties to the negotiating table.

While general Khalifa Haftar has been benefitting from Russia's strong support (including mercenaries from the famous "Wagner" Group), on the 4th of January 2020, the Turkish Parliament

passed a motion authorizing president Recep Tayyip Erdogan to send troops and weapons to Libya, in support of the GNA led by Fayeze Al-Sarraj. The intervention had at least two immediate consequences. On one hand, the balance of forces between Khalifa Haftar's army and the government led by Fayeze Al-Sarraj swiftly changed in favour of the latter. On the other hand, we witnessed a considerable activation of the Muslim Brotherhood, which was perceived as encouragement to violent activism by its affiliates, especially those in Egypt.

The interference of the religious factor in Turkey's reason for the intervention contributed to the intensification of the civil war, with no prospects for returning to dialogue... Not even for

fear of the threats posed by the Corona pandemic!

*

Looking at the current map of the conflicts and interferences that kept on eroding and inflaming the heaven and earth of the Great Middle East since the beginning of this year, we will find military active hotbeds in five countries in the area, while the number of directly involved countries – be they small or large, regional or extra-regional – in these wars exceeds 15. And these interferences evolve between the mercantile interests, powerlessness and lack of political will of the players on the front line, on one hand, and of the international community on the other.

Cătălin Gomboș, Journalist for Radio Romania News: "There Has Been a Change of Mentalities in the Middle East, at Least for a Part of the Population"

The Arab Spring that broke out ten years ago in Tunisia caused significant changes and keeps on affecting one of the hottest areas of the global political geography – the Middle East. On the other hand, this series of protests and traditional unrest in the region has been overshadowed, at least as far as the West is concerned, as a consequence of the current Coronavirus pandemic.

Cătălin Gomboș, journalist for Radio Romania News with a vast experience in matters related to the Middle East, provided us with a detailed analysis on the current stakes characterising the tense situation in the Middle East, in the interview he offered to the *Geostrategic Pulse* Magazine.



The Coronavirus pandemic has taken over, for a few months now, the headlines of the global media, leaving in the background the preoccupation of the international community. The prophecy of the US president George Bush Jr. following the September 11 attacks – “from now on the world will never be the same” – is frantically recurring. Today, after the COVID-19 tidal wave, we come across the same prophecy, but in a different causal context. However, nobody, intellectual elites in the Middle East included, asked themselves the question “will the New Middle East ever be the same?” I propose we try and find an answer in this interview. Will this Middle East be the same? How will it be? Or, where will it return?

Cătălin Gomboș: For years before the pandemic the Middle East was a fluid region, going through various changes, so with or without the pandemic it couldn't have been the same. Not even some of the foreseeable outcomes could have been final. In Syria, for instance, Bashar Al-Assad was heading towards winning the civil war; however, with all the problems facing the country – millions of refugees, entire cities destroyed, a failing economy, the Kurds bent on keeping at least some degree of autonomy, Turkey determined to maintain a presence in Idlib etc. – it's hard to believe that it would ever return to the sort of situation – a mainly stable dictatorship – that we've seen there before the conflict. On the contrary, even

the Assad clan seems to be facing internal divisions now – the president’s cousin, Rami Makhluf, a tycoon involved in many shady undertakings who once seemed untouchable, publicly complained that he was stopped from leaving the country; and these fractures could spread to the Alawi community, which has been the main base of support for the regime. So, the internal dynamics of the region suggest that the Middle East cannot be the same anymore. Obviously, the pandemic is also leaving its mark on the region. Just like everywhere else in the world, the credibility of the governments is at stake, and if they don’t manage the crisis properly, they risk antagonizing their populations. This seems to be already happening in Iran, where there’s a deepening of the fractures seen during the past ten years between a hard-core of ayatollahs and the Revolutionary Guards, on one hand, and an increasingly larger part of the population – the pro-reform middle classes and those hit by the economic crisis – on the other hand. Let’s not forget that besides the US sanctions, the country has been hit hard this year by the collapse of the oil price and the largest invasion of locusts in decades, which had a serious impact on the agriculture. On top of all that comes the economic costs of the pandemic and the way it has been dealt with by the authorities, who initially refused to consider any travel bans to and from China, Iran’s main trading partner, and also sought to cover up the impact of the pandemic, and they did that even by concealing the real number of dead.

Beyond the internal dynamics of the countries, we also have to take into account foreign powers, both regional and global. Iran’s influence is increasingly challenged in the region, even in places like Iraq, where it has wielded an enormous influence for years. It’s reasonable to assume that Tehran will find it difficult to maintain its sphere of influence – the so called Iranian Crescent that stretches from Mesopotamia, through the Levant, all the way to the Mediterranean Sea, but also in Yemen – since it requires funds, which are running low, human resources, who may be needed elsewhere, and not in the least the willingness of local elements to accept Iran’s guardianship. The other two major regional actors are not doing so good either – the Saudis are experiencing the effects of the pandemic and the fall of the oil prices to the fullest, and their turbulent *de facto* leader, Muhammad Bin Salman, might not be able to keep the promises that made him popular among the young. Turkey, on the other hand, is more and more isolated because of the decisions taken over the past years, and this

isolation is very bad in the context of the economic and social crisis caused by the pandemic; moreover, we should not forget the troubles/conflicts that Erdogan has gotten himself into in Syria and in south-eastern Turkey, where the war with the PKK continues. As far as the global players are concerned, the crisis generated by the pandemic might discourage Russia, which following its success in Syria sought to get involved in the civil war in Libya. It’s true that one of Putin’s strategies in times of domestic tensions is to draw the attention outside the country and mobilise the people’s minds on an external conflict; however, it’s not clear whether he will be able to do this during an economic crisis. Let’s not forget that the crisis in Russia is worsened by sanctions and the fall in revenues from oil and gas exports. It’s also unclear what will happen with the US presence in the Middle East; it may be scaled back, considering that bringing home some troops may be seen as a much needed popularity booster, considering this year’s presidential elections and the fact that president Trump can no longer flaunt the booming economy, or the administration’s response to the pandemic and the civil unrest brought on by the George Floyd killing. However, scaling down doesn’t mean leaving the Middle East, and it’s highly unlikely that in a foreseeable future we will see the Americans withdrawing from more than – let’s say – the positions held in 2003, when they invaded Iraq.

There is also a third power which might seek to take advantage of the USA’s and Russia’s loss of interest and/or ability to get involved: China. It already has a strong presence in Iran, it’s significantly engaged in the construction of the port in Duqm (in Oman) that will allow bypassing the Strait of Hormuz, where the tensions between the Americans and the Iranians could lead at any time to the strangulation of the crude oil flow. Duqm – just like the entire southern contour of the Middle East – is part of the Chinese “Belt and Road” initiative. China seems to be less affected by the pandemic than the other two powers (at least that is what Beijing wants us to believe), so it may have some financial resources that would make it more attractive. What Beijing lacks is the military capability to support the Belt. So far, the US remains the only actor capable to project power outside its own territory and to maintain a truly global military presence, using naval and air forces that are by far the most powerful in the world.

This year marks a decade since the “Arab Spring”. However, looking back we notice that this spring

turned into a barren autumn, or it sometimes continued its domino effect in the **Maghreb via Algeria and Tunisia, in Sudan, Libya, Syria, Lebanon, Iraq, Yemen. How would you describe, in short, the “status” of this “New and Great Middle East” forever under “crosswinds”?**

I don't believe the Arab Spring is truly over. The Middle East is a region where several vectors, both foreign and domestic, are constantly and simultaneously at work. Some seek to obtain economic and/or strategic benefits, others are interested in power, while a third category aim to change their respective societies according to a certain model. Some believe that model lies with Islam and they look back at the idealised society and age of Prophet Muhammad; others look at the Western societies. Basically, there is nothing new in this search for change that has been manifesting itself ever since the age of national revivals and the end of colonialism, and it has been brewing a lot earlier than that. The difference is that 60-70 years ago the models were Islam and socialism. The Arab Spring marked the beginning of a new stage of this search, after the failure of the former generations of reformists, who, after an initial momentum ended up establishing a series of decrepit dictatorships. If we are to look only at the results, yes, the Spring was more of a failure that left behind civil wars in Libya, Syria and Yemen, an even harsher dictatorship in Egypt – where in the end we only witnessed a change of guards within the military establishment that has been in power ever since the “free officers” led by Nasser mounted the coup d'état in 1952. In the rest of the countries the changes were less significant than the protesters would have wanted, with the notable exception of the very country where the Arab Spring started – Tunisia.

However, I do not believe that the Arab Spring ended in 2011-2012. 2019 was marked by revolutionary movements that had a certain amount of success in Sudan, where Omar Al-Bashir was overthrown, and in Algeria, where Abdelaziz Bouteflika was forced to give up his run for a fifth term as president. In Lebanon and Iraq, countries that have been somewhat democratic for years, we have witnessed large anti-system movements reprimanding the entire political establishment. The protests in Iran had an anti-system dimension as well, and even broke some taboos: the great ayatollah Ali Khamenei was compared to the Shah, whose overthrow led to the birth of the Islamic republic, and in addition to that, the 40 years old

narrative of the foreign enemy was publicly rejected, and I'm thinking here about the footage of protesters who refused to walk over USA and Israel flags, which seem downright implausible for all those who followed Iranian affairs. And finally, even in the most conservative country in the Middle East, Saudi Arabia, we are able to see a reform effort, which, true enough, is doubled by a campaign to consolidate the power of the crown prince, Muhammad Bin Salman, but is also a response to demographic changes (most of the population is made of young people) and grass-root level reform initiatives.

All these developments show that a change in mentalities has taken place the Middle East, at least for some of the population. Information is hard to control in a world as interconnected as our own, so ideas do reach the Middle East, people do learn about living in democratic societies, and whenever activists descend on the streets for their beliefs, even in other countries from the region, people do find out and this encourages them to seek the same rights.

How realistic is the assertion that the “big winner”, at least for now, in the competition for control over the region is Vladimir Putin's Russia, as opposed to Donald Trump's “America First”?

It seems to me a little far-fetched. Russia has managed a PR coup, it acted like a great power would, but if we take an in depth look, we'll notice that its achievements are not that remarkable. First of all, Syria has been under Moscow's influence for decades; it is what's left after all the other regional partnerships have failed, during a long process that started once Egypt decided to turn to the West in the 1970s and continued, one way or the other, until Gaddafi was overthrown with the help of NATO. The Russians stepped in the Syrian conflict to save their last traditional stronghold in the Middle East – and it should be noted that this stronghold is not an entire country because Bashar al-Assad only controls a part of Syria, and that part is mostly damaged and politically unstable. The East is controlled by the Kurds and its de facto autonomy is guaranteed by the US military presence – a first made possible by the civil war – in the North there are the Turkish troops, and Israel is periodically raiding the country from over its border in order to prevent the Iranians to take a foothold. Russia's intervention per se isn't much of a display of strength either, and its success was brought by the

use of modern air force against rebels equipped with light weapons. Anyone could win a war if they have 20 fighter jets that bomb everything, without any regard for civilians and cannot be touched; however, 20 fighter jets do not make you a great power. Let us remember that awkward moment when the Russian aircraft carrier Admiral Kuznetsov had to be towed when it was sent to the Mediterranean Sea.

The Americans on the other hand, managed, without mobilizing too many forces, to successfully coordinate the war against the Islamic State (a campaign started by the Obama Administration), to get into Syria and to return to Iraq, several years after withdrawing from the country. Even a complete withdrawal from Syria and Iraq would mean, as I have already mentioned, a return to where they were in 2003, when the USA had been dominating the Middle East region for years.

I believe the episode regarding Turkey's offensive against the Kurds in north-eastern Syria is far more relevant, since US forces in the area were forced to step back by one of their allies.



Paraphrasing the old French saying *Le roi est mort, vive le roi!* we might say, at least according to official statements that the “Islamic State/Daesh is dead”. How plausible is the fact that another “caliph” may still exist or might awaken tying a new knot in the barbaric terrorist thread hidden behind religious garments?

The strain of Muslim radicalism displayed by the Islamic State group isn't a new; its emergence can be traced more than seven decades ago, and the first great *jihad* that mobilized extremists and helped them get organized took place in Afghanistan, in the 1980s; by the 1990s we were witnessing its current, anti-Western forms, with insurgencies in Algeria and Egypt, terrorism in France and Al-Qaida's first attacks. It's hard to believe that this

ideology will just disappear in the foreseeable future or that various radical movements will no longer be able to recruit followers, as long as social inequities will continue to push young people in the arms of extremist preachers. The Salafi community will likely be a recruiting pool because its religious approach is similar with that of the Jihadis.

The Islamic State itself has shown that it is a group with a remarkable power of survival. It started as the organization established by the Jordanian Abu Musab Al-Zarqawi to fight the Americans in Iraq; even if at one point in the late 2000s it seemed to have been defeated, the group managed to come back and get over the demise of an entire string of leaders – from Zarqawi to Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi, some more famous, some almost unknown. Nobody believes that once the group disappeared the so called caliphate had been destroyed, – it went underground in Syria and Iraq, where it kept on attacking, and once the pandemic spread it became more active, which proves it's capable of taking advantage of any instability and demobilization of those who try to eliminate it. Besides, the Islamic State continues to operate outside the former caliphate as well, in places like Afghanistan. So, at least for now, the Islamic State remains a threat. I believe it is highly unlikely that it will regain the power it once had in Syria and Iraq; however, it's possible that over the next few years we will see them establishing so called emirates, and manage to hold on to territories in some areas, for instance in parts of the post-withdrawal Afghanistan or in an Yemen abandoned by the Saudis, or even in West and East Africa.

“The Deal of the Century” launched by the Trump administration seems to have ended without the traditional hand shake between partners and is doomed to be forgotten deep in the rift that cut across the road to a viable and durable solution to the Palestinian dossier. Especially after the lengthy government crisis that Israel has experienced for the past year and in view of the future US presidential elections, what kind of “deals” could be discussed about in the foreseeable future? Be them disguised under what international law defines as “peace treaty”? To what extent do you think the Palestinians will agree to go through the ordeal of the “Oslo Accords” once again?

I wouldn't say that Oslo produced a trauma, but that a process representing the greatest opportunity for peace was derailed by extremists on both sides –

think of Rabin's assassination or the waves of Palestinian terrorist attacks, by narrow-minded political leaders who played the populist card (such as Benjamin Netanyahu) or by Yasser Arafat's hesitations and mistakes.

This being said, I believe Trump's plan was dead before it was even born, because the Palestinians and the Arab street will never agree to it. I cannot see how the stalemate will be overcome in the short term. For now, the relevant Israeli politicians don't really talk anymore about Oslo and the return to the borders in '67, and the Palestinians are not only fractured, but many of them stopped supporting their officials, whom they accuse of corruption and, in some cases, of fraternising with Israel. I believe that, in order to achieve a lasting peace, the parties should really want this and accept compromises, and this is where the foreign partners that they count on should play a role by exerting pressure. As far as compromises are concerned, the Palestinians should probably give up their right to return, because I cannot imagine how this could be achieved on the ground. Israel, on the other hand, should withdraw along the 1967 borders, and, maybe, hold on to some of the largest settlements in exchange for some land for the Palestinians. There is another solution - one state; however, this is even less likely at this moment, because it will take generations to achieve harmony.

It will take time before one of these solutions will work; at the moment, I believe the priority is Gaza, where the situation is truly dramatic because of the Israeli-Egyptian blockade.

To Syria, the current year is the calendar year for presidential elections. In this connection, the Western media is talking about certain differences between Vladimir Putin - who demands the adoption of the new Syrian constitution before the scrutiny, and Bashar Al-Assad - who rejects this condition under the pretext that Syria already has a valid constitution. How do you see the Syrian conflict in the near future, since the International Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons has, for the first time, officially accused the Damascus regime and president Assad of having repeatedly used chemical weapons against his opponents?

The most spectacular development we could see in Syria is the withdrawal of the US troops and a

shift of the fighting to the Kurdish area. If such a withdrawal does not take place, I believe the situation will largely remain the same – the East controlled by the Kurds under US protection, the North-West protected by the Turkish forces while Assad's troops would inch forward when allowed to, with the support of Russian air force and Iranian proxy militias, and a not very stable governmental area controlled by Assad's forces.

Does violence remain the only option with a view to live alongside contradicting interests of the political actors in the Middle East?

No, it doesn't, by no means. As everywhere else, people wish for a better life – which involves peace as well. Lebanon and Algeria have proved that there can be a solution to bloody conflicts and that some stability can be achieved. The Gulf countries prove that prosperity is another factor that can bring stability, Jordan has proved that a relatively open and allied to the West society is possible, while Tunisia (and not only) has proven that democracy is possible. Many things can be achieved with some money, political will and vision. However, they cannot be achieved overnight.



Israel: "Bibi" Netanyahu's Trial Has Started. How Will It End?

Ambassador Professor Dumitru CHICAN

On the 24th of May 2020, the day after the Sabbath, the trial of the Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu (Bibi for his friends) started in the Jerusalem District Court, after a long period of delays, backstage negotiations, incendiary statements and uncertainty. The one who indicted Netanyahu was Avichai Mandelblit, the Attorney General appointed by the Prime Minister himself.



Jerusalem District Court

The suspicions surrounding the Prime Minister can be classified into three main categories – bribery, fraud and breach of trust. In other words, they are: receiving gifts valued at almost 560,000 Euros and favourable media coverage, in exchange for financial or personal favours to media and telecommunications moguls. Under the Israeli law these crimes are punishable by three to ten years in prison.

The trial itself is not a first in the Israeli history of penal justice, however, it becomes attention-grabbing for various reasons. It is for the first time when a serving head of a government stands trial. The latest round of early elections ended with a period of 18 months alternative governing by the two parties – “Blue and White”, led by the retired general Benny Gantz and “Likud”, led by Netanyahu.

It is true that there once was an almost similar episode in Israel, when the former Prime Minister and leader of the “Kadima” Party, Ehud Olmert, stood trial for bribery and was sentenced to 16 months in prison. The difference in that case was that the trial and the conviction took place after the

prime ministerial mandate, which Olmert served between 2006 and 2009.

The court session on the 24th of May was rather procedural, without actually starting the trial. Nevertheless, the Prime Minister in office, using his well-known way of quarrelling and “with a straight back and [his] head held high”, in his own words, employed the well-known strategy “the best defence is a good offence”. Thus, Netanyahu attacked straight away, fully denying all the charges and claiming that he was the victim of a wide and complex conspiracy involving major “plotters”, such as the justice system, the police, the media and the opposition parties – all seeking, according to “Bibi”, to remove him from power and from the Israeli political life. To quote him again, Netanyahu believes he is the victim of a real “witch hunt”.



Benjamin Netanyahu

However, the trial against Benjamin Netanyahu exceeds the boundaries of a judicial action taken against one person so that it raises worrying and difficult questions regarding the impact the trial itself and, most of all, its conclusions might have on both the internal political chessboard and the regional conflicts in which Israel is involved. And we are referring to the decades-long efforts to finding a viable solution to the Palestinian issue, as well as to the extent the Israeli Prime Minister will be able or not to add another victory to the panoply of successes achieved by him or rather enabled by the Trump administration on the matter of Jerusalem and the Jewish settlements in the Palestinian territories.

The victory he wishes for and has already made public is about the annexation of new territories from the Palestinian autonomous territory West

Bank and of some pieces of land north of the Dead Sea, or part of the strategic Jordan Valley.

Netanyahu has reasons for concern, as his trial will be neither easy, nor swift and it could stretch for months or even years. While Netanyahu's next in person court appearance was set for the 19th of July, his lawyers filed for a one-year extension period to study the case files.

What can be the outcome of this fight? Two situations are normally possible.

Should Netanyahu be found not-guilty, and should he be acquitted, one may say the accused has won a confrontation against the State of Israel. This might tempt him to consider and proclaim, just like King

Louis XIV of France, "L'etat, c'est moi" ("I am the state"). At the same time, he could be tempted to terminate the power-sharing agreement reached with Benny Gantz.

There is a second situation, when the defendant is found guilty. Such a verdict could determine his supporters to challenge the court's ruling through protests and aggressive pressure.

Experts in the functioning mechanisms of Israeli democracy do not hesitate to state that Israeli democracy could suffer a blow in both cases – at least as far as its reputation for being "the best democracy in the world" is concerned.

However, Bibi's trial has just begun.

Between Moscow and Damascus: Zero Problems. For Now

Dinu COSTESCU

A Remember

Seventy six years ago, in July 1944, the Soviet Union and Syria – country that would gain its independence two years later, after the end of the French mandate instituted by the famous "Sykes-Picot" colonial agreements – established diplomatic relations, thus marking the beginning of a period of bilateral relations that would last throughout a history of almost 89 years.

Starting with 1971, when the Alawite general Hafez Al-Assad came to power, Syria would become known as the country ruled continuously by the Assad Alawite clan, for a period including two distinct stages – Hafez Al-Assad's presidency, from 1971 to his death in June 2000, and the "hereditary republic" starting on 17th of July 2000, when his son, Bashar Bin Hafez Al-Assad was invested with the supreme position – president of Syria.

Bashar Al-Assad's presidency of 20 years was not devoid of convulsions and chronic crises, thus:

- In September 2004, the United Nations adopted Resolution no. 1559 summoning Syria to withdraw its troops from Lebanon (14,000 people out of 40,000), following a 20 years old presence. By the end of April 2005, the last Syrian soldier left the Lebanese territory.
- On the 14th of February 2005, the former Lebanese prime minister, Rafik Hariri, was assassinated. Although Bashar Al-Assad's regime was blamed for it, a final verdict on the matter was never reached.

– On the 17th of March 2011 the "Syrian Arab Spring" started. In order to prevent the recurrence of the domino effect that had already removed from power the regimes in four Arab countries (Tunisia, Egypt, Libya and the Yemen), the leadership in Damascus chooses from the start to repress the riots and protests by use of military force.

– Amid the chaos produced by war, the opponents of the Syrian regime are joined by two formidable radical Islamist forces – Al-Qaeda in Syria, also known as "Jabhat Al-Nusra" and the "Islamic State in Iraq and Syria", or "Daesh". The Syrian Army is overwhelmed and on the verge of a disastrous collapse.

– On the 30th of September 2015, the Russian Federation begins its military intervention in the Syrian civil war, supporting the Syrian Armed Forces at the request of the Damascus regime. In almost five years, the Russian intervention changes the balance of power in favour of the loyalists. The Syrian chessboard of war witnesses the military intervention of several regional forces – Iran, Turkey, the Lebanese Hezbollah, foreign combatants financed by regional powers, the Kurdish separatist minority, but also powers from outside the region, besides the Russian Federation: the United States, Great Britain, France and so on.

This devastating, internationalised war was written and talked about a lot, since it actively produced human casualties, material losses and unimaginable suffering. In measurable indicators, that means almost half a million people dead and missing, a few million refugees and internal

displaced persons, as well as a financial aid for the post war reconstruction estimated at 400 billion US dollars.

Nine years after the start of the civil war, and thanks to the dynamic military assistance provided by Vladimir Putin, the Damascus regime controls over 60% of its national territory. Furthermore, media analyses and official political estimates – both in the Middle East and the Western community - say that the “key to the Syrian peace lies in Vladimir Putin’s pocket”, since the Russian Federation strengthened a *sine die* presence in Syria and *mutatis mutandis* in the Arab region of the Middle East.



a norm abided by even when old Hafez Al-Assad accused (in 1984) his own brother, Dr. Rifaat Al-Assad, for mutiny and thirst of power and exiled him for life. However, the whole affair was kept quiet. We are now talking about a public conflict where, apparently, first lady Asma Al-Assad is involved. However, such “incidents” are not significant enough to point to a possible divorce between two loves almost a century old.



Bashar Al-Assad

Asma Al-Assad

Rami Makhlouf

Red Paintball Shooting

The Kremlin’s dissatisfaction with Bashar Al-Assad’s “overreactions” has led to the impression that the Russian leader was playing a red paintball game, where the ammunition breaks on impact, thus marking the enemy with the colour of the blood – a warning without injuring the target. The trigger was not pulled by Putin, but by the media in his entourage, such as the publication “Ria Fan” – owned by the businessman Yevgeny Prigozhin, who the Russian streets see as “Vladimir Putin’s handyman” and owner of the “Wagner Group”, whose paramilitary were present on the Syrian front alongside Bashar Al-Assad’s armed forces.

In the absence of an official Russian position, disagreements were somewhat inevitable – in Russia – over the nature of the relations between Russia and Syria, and whether the Russian Federation still needs Bashar Al-Assad playing a role in Moscow’s regional strategy. Against this background, though, an official reaction came when the pro-government press agency “Novosti” published a series of interviews and analyses done with the participation of several Russian personalities close to the Russian power circles. The leitmotif of this initiative was whether Russia still needed its relation with Syria. Bashar was accused of being obstinate and inflexible with regard to implementing the reform that Russia desperately needed with a view to relieve itself of the burden represented by Syria, while keeping intact the privileges and influence it had obtained

During the long “honeymoon” that lasted for all five years of “brotherly fight” against the “global conspiracy” and for the “defence of Syria’s unity, sovereignty and territorial integrity” (according to Putin and Bashar), the relationship between the two evolved with very little disturbances from small misunderstandings, that were rapidly settled. However, the introduction of the Syrian dossier in the “era of diplomacy” and political actions brought along the first public disagreements between the Kremlin leader and the Damascus “commander-in-chief president”. It is true that at this – limited and controllable – outburst contributed several outside factors, such as the resolution that the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons adopted on the 8th of April 2020 to officially confirm, for the first time, the charges against the Syrian regime for having used, over the past three years, chemical weapons on their opponents on the battlefield.

More recently, Moscow caused annoyance by the public scandal which broke out at the top of the Assad clan between president Bashar and his maternal cousin, the oligarch Rami Makhlouf, believed to be the richest businessman in Syria but also one of the most corrupt. They thus broke the code of silence requiring that family misunderstandings be dealt with inside the family –

over the past five years. The conclusion reached by “Novosti” was that “for now”, Bashar is “indispensable” in Russia’s relation with Syria. A widely used phrase in the Russian media. „Svobodnaya Pressa”, though, has brought a supplementary nuance according to which, “Bashar is indispensable as long as he has no successor or no one has been found to replace him” – someone who is powerful, influential and capable of successfully taking the necessary steps to complete the Syrian political process as laid down by Russia in Astana and under the auspices of the international framework offered by the Geneva process.

When it comes to Syria’s reconstruction, Vladimir Putin asks his Syrian partner to be open to some lines of action in the near future and in the context of the presidential elections scheduled to take place (in Syria) in 2021. We are referring to drafting and adopting a new constitution, accepting dialogue and negotiations with the opposition’s political parties and forces, and giving up the inflexibility Bashar has been showing in his relationship with the international community (which, among other things, has been called to finance the burdensome process of economic and social reconstruction and revival of Syria. Nonetheless, as far as Bashar Al-Assad is concerned, he strongly believes that Syria and his regime have won the war – a victory that leaves no room for compromise. At the same time, President Bashar Al-Assad strongly believes that the war in Syria was not caused by domestic economic and social mismanagement, but was the result of a cosmic conspiracy. Consequently, he is convinced that since the catastrophe that started nine years ago was not caused by internal political shortcomings, but by foreign conspiracies, it is only logical that the political regime must stay to resume and then maintain Syria’s course towards prosperity.

Zero Problems...

What happens currently between the Russian Federation and Syria is not new, neither to Putin nor to Bashar. And it is certainly not the sign of a split. There is something, though, and that is each of the two allies believes to be a winner of the war and of Syria. However, they are both aware that Bashar without Putin would lose his position and future, while Putin without Bashar could lose the entire Middle East.

At the same time, the chronicle of the Russian-Syrian cooperation in the civil war includes a phrase that is still valid; it was uttered at the time

by president Putin and has been repeated on several occasions by the head of the Russian diplomacy, Sergey Lavrov, according to which, “Russia did not come to Syria to support Bashar Al-Assad, but to defend Syria’s integrity and unity, as well as that of its people”.

This is why it can be stated that the current stage of the relationship between Moscow and Damascus can be labelled as “zero problems”, a phrase first used by the former Turkish prime minister and minister of foreign affairs, Ahmet Davutoglu.

It remains to be seen whether in the predictable future the following phrase will stay valid or not: Davutoglu left, the problems remained and multiplied.

Syria, Once a Player on the Stage of the Middle East, Now a Stage for Strollers

Ambassador Professor Dumitru CHICAN

On the morning of the 10th of June 2000, front pages of newspapers and TV screens from the entire Arab world showed but one headline, accompanied by a funeral speech: *Hafez Al-Assad fi djimmat Allah*. (Hafez Al-Assad, in God's care)

The 10th of June 2020 marked the 20-year anniversary of the death of the former Syrian president, after almost 30 years of governing that ended with his son, Bashar Al-Assad, being instated as supreme leader. It marked the first Arab hereditary republic in the Middle East and ensured the continuity of the Al-Assad Alawite family at the control board of absolute power over Syria and its society.

The late president was laid to rest in the small town of Qardaha, close to the Mediterranean coast, the fief of the Syrian Alawites.



Today, the anniversary of the death of the former Syrian leader chronologically marks 20 years since Bashar Al-Assad started governing Syria, as well as 50 years since the Assad family have been its supreme leaders – the longest gerontocracy in the modern history of the Arab Middle East and Maghrib.

When in March 2011 the Arab Spring tore through Northern Africa, swiftly overthrowing the ossified regimes in Tunisia, Egypt and Libya, long outdated by present realities, the young “lion”, having as his only support the fame left by his father, to whom Syria was the “vanguard and the stronghold of the Arab nation”, calmly stated that “Syria isn't Tunisia or Libya”. When the Arab revolt reached Syria through the south with protests and claims, Bashar Al-Assad acted the same way as those before him, choosing to use force when

dealing with the protesters, just like his father had done in 1982, when he bloodily put down the protests in Hama, Aleppo or Palmyra. The only difference was that, at that time, those who mutinied were, officially, the Islamists from the Muslim Brotherhood, while in 2011, according to the same official narratives, it had been a universal conspiracy – at least tactically speaking – related to terrorism, whether secular or religious/Islamist. And then the destructive civil war started.



Today, 20 years after Hafez Al-Assad's death and after 9 years of “Syria isn't Tunisia”, the Damascus regime governs over a country that faces a series of major challenges: a state of ruin, in the literal sense, an unprecedented economic crisis that threatens to cause new waves of protests, already seen in Daraa, in the south of the country, in the north-east, and in the foreign-controlled west, and last but not least, a major deploy of forces that stake their claim over these districts – the regime, which controls over 60% of the national territory, the Kurdish separatists, the Syrian military opposition and the scarce enclaves controlled by the rest of the Jihadist groups. And, to complete the list we must mention the fierce competition between the regional and extra-regional powers, which use their strategic advantages provided by the Syrian political geography, for influence and control over this country, and by extension over the Middle East and the Eastern Mediterranean.

One may say that ever since the beginning of the Syrian civil war, this crisis has gradually become international, not only because of the political and diplomatic actions and initiatives taken to reduce the violence, but also because of the tempestuous interference of the regional and international powers, which are divided into two categories, depending on their stance and policy related to the Damascus regime. Starting with the Arab monarchies in the Gulf, led by Saudi Arabia

and the United Arab Emirates, and moving on to the “big” players from the Euro-Atlantic community – the USA, under the successive administrations of Barack Obama and Donald Trump, Great Britain, France, Germany – they all took a dynamic and versatile stance against Bashar Al-Assad’s regime, supporting the political and military Syrian opposition. This largely directed the internal evolution of events towards the disarray of the Damascus leadership and its military swiftly drifting into chaos.

It was this moment that marked a new and violent stage, which started in December 2015, when Vladimir Putin’s Russian air forces became directly involved in the conflict, siding with the Syrian National Army. The Russian air forces, logistic support, Russian military police and Russian special forces rapidly managed to prevent the fall of the Syrian regime and turned the balance of power in favour of Bashar Al-Assad. Actually, by joining Syria, Vladimir Putin joined the so called “Axis of Resistance” – a highly ideological agreement established by Iran since the time of the former Syrian president Hafez Al-Assad, immediately after Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini’s Islamic regime came to power in Tehran, an agreement seconded by the pro-Iranian militias and groups led by the Lebanese Hezbollah.

There also is a third Syrian extension of the foreign presence on the Syrian chessboard – Recep Tayyip Erdogan’s Turkey. The country abandoned the old doctrine “zero problems with regional neighbours” and, by skilfully navigating between the USA led West and the Russian Federation and pretending to fight terrorism in general and the “Kurdish terrorism” in particular, pursues its own agenda of regional political expansion based on what commentators call “Neo-Ottomanism”.



The war in Syria has not come to an end and peace is still unclear and far away.

Despite the triumphant rhetoric of the Damascus political leadership, the future of this country and its people don’t depend on the decisions taken by its official leaders or by the Syrian people, but by the foreign powers that have claimed their victories in their competition for Syria.

After Donald Trump withdrew a considerable part of his war machine from Syria and gave up the alliance with a Syrian Kurdish minority that have been used for as long as they had proven themselves useful to the structural and combative break-up of the Jihad practiced by the Islamic State and Syrian Al-Qaeda – he seems to have given a new, stronger meaning to the concept of “extreme pressure”, a term found in the so-called “Caesar Syria Civilian Protection Act”. Signed by the US president on the 20th of December 2019, due to be enforced in the following period, it extends the individual or institutional sanctions and penalties imposed on the Syrian regime, to the Syrian figures who support Bashar Al-Assad’s regime, as well as to third parties (which do not comply with the measures imposed by the Caesar Act).

Targeting objectives vital to the functioning of the institutions and society – such as stopping the post-war reconstruction process by blocking foreign financial contributions, which might aid the proper functioning of the country, its economy and society, or implementing a severe embargo on the delivery and import of oil and petroleum products and other types of merchandise – the document raises doubts, at least as far as analysts are concerned, regarding the impact these measures might have on the civil society. Thus, the latest measures in “Caesar Act” are actually aimed at supporting a “rebirth” of the Syrian people, that, if well organised, coordinated and supported, would eventually lead to a new “Arab Spring”, capable of causing the implosion of the Syrian regime. There already are relevant signs to support this theory, in the south of the country, in Daraa and Suwaida, where the first riots took place in 2011, as well as in the northeastern regions of the Syrian territory, in the areas controlled by Bashar Al-Assad’s regime. The plan of the Washington “Caesar” is meant, at the same time, to show that even in the short time left until the presidential elections, it can hinder, for as long as possible, the normalisation of Syria’s international relations. These are the circumstances under which Syria is still isolated and kept out of the Arab League, despite the fact that out of mercantile reasons or political vendetta, some countries have reopened or decided to reopen their diplomatic missions in Damascus (as is the case with Cyprus, which did it

to protest against the Turkish intervention in Syria – a protest related to the well-known tensions between Nicosia and Ankara).

In Arabic the word “Assad” means “lion” and was used as an appellation for the former president, Hafez Al-Assad who was referred to as “the Lion of Damascus”.

Today, caught between Trump the “Caesar”, Putin the Czar, Erdogan the Sultan and Ayatollah Khamenei, the new “Lion of Damascus” watches from the top of Mount Qasioun over a Godot, who would not come...or leave.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS



Valentin Lazea is Chief Economist for the National Bank of Romania, as well as Chairman of STFD-TRANSFOND. He attended training courses at the IMF Institute, Washington DC, USA, Sussex University, Brighton, Great Britain, and Istituto Giordano dell'Amore, Milan, Italy. He is co-founding member and Chairman of the Romanian Centre for Economic Policies (RCEP). He also attended three technical assistance programmes for the National Commission for Strategy and Prognosis, for the Romanian Ministry of Public Finance and for the Office of the Prime Minister of Romania, financed via PHARE (2001-2007).



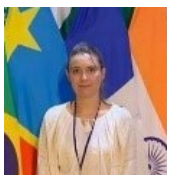
Radu Magdin is a political analyst and international consultant, CEO Smartlink Communications, former adviser to Prime Ministers in Romania and Republic of Moldova. Between 2007 and 2012, he worked in Brussels for one of the political families of the European Parliament, for EurActiv and for Google. Previously he was a journalist at AGERPRES and worked for the Romanian Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Passionate about politics, technology and energy, Radu Magdin is a member of the Working Group of NATO Emerging Leaders.



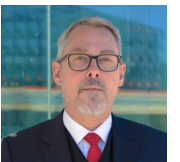
Dan Pavel is a writer, philosopher, political consultant, and member of the Writers' Union, founder and vice president of the Revoluționari fără Privilegii (Revolutionaries without Privileges Association), editor in chief of Timpul Magazine. He is a professor at the Faculty of Political Sciences, University of Bucharest. He graduated from the Faculty of History and Philosophy, University of Bucharest (1982). He was the editor in chief of the *Viața Studentească* and *Amfiteatru* Magazines (1986-1989). Ever since 1994, he has been a professor at the faculty of Political Sciences and Journalism, Babes-Bolyai University in Cluj-Napoca. Since 1997, he has been a professor at the Faculty of Political Sciences, University of Bucharest.



Vladimir-Adrian Costea is a graduate student at the Faculty of Political Science, University of Bucharest, under the supervision of Prof. Georgeta Ghebrea PHD. (E-mail: costea.vladimir-adrian@fspub.unibuc.ro). He has published articles on clemency and the state of occupancy of Romanian prisons in magazines such as *Studia*, *Romanian Political Science Review*, *Revista de Drept Constituțional* (Constitutional Law Magazine), *Revista Română de Sociologie* (The Romanian Sociology Magazine) and *Revista Polis* (Polis Magazine).



Andreea Stoian Karadeli is an independent researcher and lives in Turkey and has a working relation with different international organizations and institutions (NATO, UN, EU). She is also an associate Professor to the South Wales University, UK and an associate member of the Centre for Security Policies in Geneva, Switzerland.



Jean-Paul ROUILLER is the chief of the Terrorism Joint Analysis Group (T-JAG) of the Centre for Security Policies in Geneva, Switzerland. . Between December 2003 - January 2010 he worked for the Federal Police Office of Switzerland (Fedpol), creating the first Counter-terrorism Unit within the Swiss Federal Criminal Police (SFCP). He then developed the structures and concepts of the first counter-terrorism analysis unit of the SFCP (in charge of intelligence collection and risk analysis in the field of counter-terrorism and terrorism).



Jean-Pierre KELLER is a Senior Analyst and Deputy at the Terrorism-Joint Analysis Group (T-JAG) at the Geneva Centre for Security Policy (GCSP). His research focuses on local terrorist networks, terrorist financing and inter-related terrorism threats. In his role Jean-Pierre developed projects, teaches and lectures in intelligence/counter-terrorism analysis and management.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS (Contd.)



Major General (retired) **Volodymyr Havrylov** served as Defense Attaché at the Ukrainian Embassy to the United States in 2015-2018, Romania in 2010-2012 and the United Kingdom in 2002-2007. He is currently a Director of the “Veterans Dozen” Foundation.



Vladimir Socor is a Senior Fellow of the Washington-based Jamestown Foundation and its flagship publication, Eurasia Daily Monitor (1995 to date), where he writes analytical articles on a daily basis. An internationally recognized expert on the former Soviet-ruled countries in Eastern Europe, the South Caucasus, and Central Asia, he covers Russian and Western policies, focusing on energy, regional security issues, Russian foreign affairs, secessionist conflicts, and NATO policies and programs. Mr. Socor is a frequent speaker at U.S. and European policy conferences and think-tank institutions; as well as a regular guest lecturer at the NATO Defense College and at Harvard University’s National Security Program’s Black Sea Program. He is also a frequent contributor to edited volumes. Mr. Socor was previously an analyst with the Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty Research Institute (1983-1994). He is a Romanian-born citizen of the United States based in Munich, Germany.



Ambassador Professor Dumitru CHICAN graduated from the Faculty of Foreign Languages - University of Bucharest and majored in Arabic. He has a post-graduate degree in Arabic from the University of Cairo - Egypt. He was an Arabic interpreter, diplomat and an advisor on the Middle East. He is an associate professor, a published author in this field, the founder of the Arab-Romanian Friendship League, a regional expert for the Geostrategic Pulse magazine as well as an editor for the Romanian press agency “RADOR” (Radio Orient/Radio Observer).



Cătălin GOMBOȘ lived and studied in the Middle East in the 1990s, and between 2003-2017 he travelled to the region several times, mainly Iraq, where he was a correspondent for Radio Romania both in Baghdad and embedded with the Romanian army units deployed in the South of the country. He is a graduate of the Faculty of Political Sciences – University of Bucharest, and has a master’s degree on “Middle East – Languages and Cultures in Contact” from the Faculty of Foreign Languages and Literatures – University of Bucharest. His thesis was about “Salafī Jihad”. He received several honours and awards, including “Young Journalist of the Year - 2008”, awarded by Freedom House Romania and the “Manfred Woerner” Euro-Atlantic Association Award for war correspondence.

**Your
advertisement
HERE!**

Advertising is available.

For details and terms please contact us at office@pulsulgeostrategic.ro

“GEOSTRATEGIC PULSE” - founded in 2007
Bilingual Publication of Geopolitical Analysis, edited by
INGEPO Consulting - Bucharest
www.pulsulgeostrategic.ro; Tel: +4-031 1011934
J40/4984/2019, CUI RO19298677

Editor-in-Chief:
Constantin IACOBIȚĂ

Assistant Editor: Pompilia VLĂDESCU
Assistant Editor & Editing: Ciprian RĂDULESCU



ISSN: 1844-167X

Cover: Self Editing

SUBSCRIPTIONS (1 Year) - 599 LEI

You have free access to the site (www.pulsulgeostrategic.ro) and to all the other materials we publish

On request, we deliver the printed magazines at the address you indicate

The price includes the VAT and delivery costs

Advertising

Advertising is available.

For details and terms please contact us at office@pulsulgeostrategic.ro

This publication cannot be multiplied and reproduced without the written consent of INGEPO Consulting. Use of certain articles or quotations is allowed, as long as their wording and content are kept intact, and the source is mentioned.

The opinions expressed in the published articles belong to their authors, who take full responsibility for the content. These opinions do not necessarily reflect INGEPO Consulting's point of view.

Partners:



STOCKHOLM INTERNATIONAL PEACE RESEARCH INSTITUTE
The independent resource on global security


Stockholm
Beijing
Washington



Academia Română
Institutul de Științe Politice și Relații Internaționale (ISPRI)



World Security Network
NETWORKING A SAFER WORLD




ifimes
MEDNARODNI INŠTITUT ZA BLIŽNJEVZHODNE IN BALKANSKE ŠTUDIJE
INTERNATIONAL INSTITUTE FOR MIDDLE-EAST AND BALKAN STUDIES

RIEAS Research Institute for European and American Studies



American Military University
American Public University



AMU **APU**

School of Security & Global Studies

DIPLOMAT
MAGAZINE
By / For Diplomats
www.diplomatmagazine.nl



ISAG
ISTITUTO DI ALTI STUDI DI GEOPOLITICA E SCIENZE AUXILIARI



RIAC
Russian International Affairs Council

Pulsul Geostrategie este studiat și la Harvard!



Borysten Intel



Starting with December 2010 **GEOSTRATEGIC PULSE** is registered in the international **INDEX COPERNICUS JOURNAL MASTERS LIST**