



INSTITUTE FOR SECURITY POLICY (ISP)  
WORKING PAPER

**THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC:  
IMPACT FOR THE POST-  
SOVIET SPACE AND  
RUSSIA'S ASPIRATIONS**

by Sergey MARKEDONOV

Moscow State Institute for International Studies  
(MGIMO-University)

VIENNA 2020

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dr. Sergey Markedonov is a Leading Researcher at the Euro-Atlantic Security Center of the Moscow State Institute for International Studies (MGIMO-University). He is an expert on the Caucasus, as well as the Black Sea region, regional security, nationalism, interethnic/ethno-political conflicts and de-facto states in the post-Soviet area. From May 2010 till October 2013 he was a visiting fellow in the CSIS Russia and Eurasia Program based in Washington, DC. In 2013-2018 he was an Associate Professor at the Russian State University for the Humanities. In April-May 2015 he was a Visiting Fellow in the Russia and Central Asia Program at Fudan University, Shanghai, China. In January-February 2016 he was a Visiting Lecturer at the Center of Central Eurasian Studies at the University of Mumbai, India and in August-September – at the German Council on Foreign Relations (DGAP), Berlin. His publications include several books and reports, about 150 academic articles, and more than 1000 media pieces.

## I. INTRODUCTION

Future historians will definitely name the year 2020 as the worldwide onset of coronavirus. Now, this issue has become the focal point of numerous discussions on sanitary and epidemiological issues. However, in the words of Marlene Laruelle and Madeline McCann, “pandemics are not only a medical and social issue. They also are deeply political-even geopolitical-and feed strong-state efforts to regulate human bodies in a way some refer to as “biopolitics”.<sup>1</sup> It seems like tons of research articles and expert reports on the impact of the pandemic on the global economy and international political processes have been published. At the same time, it is quite obvious that with the focus having been shifted towards the global perspective, the processes taking place in individual countries and regions appear to be falling out of sight. In the meantime, all of the conclusions drawn about the comprehensive implications of COVID-19 will remain somewhat schematic and generic without due consideration of their nuances and peculiarities.

The COVID-19 pandemic, which has become the largest global challenge of the current time, has had a significant impact on the post-Soviet countries. In order to understand the extent of its influence on socio-political and socio-economic processes in the CIS countries and in Georgia adequately it is necessary to estimate how the pandemic has changed their usual norms and rules. Analyzing the COVID-19 impact we can agree with the thesis of Ivan Krastev and Mark Leonard who rightly note that the coronavirus crisis “is probably the

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<sup>1</sup> Laruelle M.& McCann M. Post-Soviet State Responses to COVID-19: making or breaking authoritarianism? Washington. PONARS Eurasia Policy Memo. 2020 No. 641  
[https://www.ponarseurasia.org/sites/default/files/policy-memos-pdf/Pepm641\\_Laruelle-McCann\\_March2020.pdf](https://www.ponarseurasia.org/sites/default/files/policy-memos-pdf/Pepm641_Laruelle-McCann_March2020.pdf)

greatest social experiment of our lives. We do not know when or how it will end”.<sup>2</sup> The dynamics of some post-Soviet countries have clearly demonstrated some efforts to minimize sanitary restrictions (cases of Central Asia or Azerbaijan) resulted in the new outbreaks of infection. This is why it is too premature to start discussing the alleged “post-COVID-19” world and the former USSR area is no exemption of this general rule.

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<sup>2</sup> Krastev I., Leonard M. Europe’s pandemic politics: How the virus has changed the public’s worldview. Policy brief. European Council for Foreign Relations, 2020  
[https://www.ecfr.eu/publications/summary/europes\\_pandemic\\_politics\\_how\\_the\\_virus\\_has\\_changed\\_the\\_publics\\_worldview](https://www.ecfr.eu/publications/summary/europes_pandemic_politics_how_the_virus_has_changed_the_publics_worldview)

## II. THE PANDEMIC CHALLENGE FOR THE POST-SOVIET COUNTRIES: STRESS-TEST FOR THE STATE SUSTAINABILITY

The disruptive nature of the pandemic for the post-Soviet space should not be overestimated. COVID-19 has not revealed contradictions within integration associations or conflicting interests between the national sovereignty and decisions profitable for the international organizations as a whole. The desires of some states to take advantage of the benefits of integration making distance from the burden of allied obligations existed prior to 2020 and the pandemic has not established this collision. The coronavirus disease has caused no ethnopolitical conflicts in the South Caucasus, South-Eastern Ukraine, and Transnistria or difficulties in cross-border relationships between Central Asian countries. Prior to the pandemic, there were (and there will remain after it) conflicts between external players struggling for influence in Eurasia as a whole and in some of its regions. It was not the virus that caused the complex processes of power transfers in Kazakhstan and Tajikistan, anti-government protests in Georgia, and the desire of some Kyrgyz elites to get back to the presidential model. COVID-19 was not the reason behind serious intra-elite schisms (concerning not only power but also the foreign policy choice between European and Eurasian integration tracks) in Moldova and inefficiency of state institutions in Ukraine.

Many of the pressing problems that currently present serious risks to the CIS (Commonwealth of Independent States) space already occurred in their recent history. These include decreases in budget revenues due to falling energy prices, which is an extremely painful issue for Russia, as well as for Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, and Turkmenistan,

and plummeting remittances from migrant workers coming from Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan, with their share in these countries' GDPs ranging from 20% to almost 40%. For example, the President of Azerbaijan Ilham Aliyev inaugurated the commencement of the "post-oil era" four years ago. In 2020, he reiterated the idea upon the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic.<sup>3</sup>

The potential danger of COVID-19 in the former USSR area is not so much in some special "novelty", but in the fact that the pandemic has become an additional stress test for post-Soviet countries. Without revealing any new problem, it sharpened them and highlighted the vulnerability of the CIS states and Georgia in the face of a large-scale challenge not related to wars but highly disastrous in its consequences, first of all, for their national economies and through the economic difficulties becoming a threat to the socio-political stability creating numerous uncertainties. The pandemic has provoked additional economic risks for all Central Asian countries, which is fraught with an increase of religious radicalism. In the Ukrainian case, it exposed the extreme weakness of state institutions, which caused a large-scale conflict between the central and local authorities where the issues of sanitary and epidemiological issues were one of the focal points of discussion. COVID-19 introduced new features to the Moldovan intra-elite split, making the receipt of foreign humanitarian assistance one of the key issues of domestic and foreign policy agenda. For Georgia, COVID-induced travel and transit losses maximize the relevance of the normalization of its relations with Russia, as Russian visitors on the one hand, and the Russian labor market on the other can be of great practical interest to Tbilisi. However, it is also obvious that Georgian political elites (both supporting the incumbents and those in

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<sup>3</sup> Цены на нефть говорят о наступлении постнефтяного периода – Алиев [The oil prices say on the beginning of post-oil era – Aliyev] <https://www.finanz.ru/novosti/aktsii/intervyu-ceny-na-neft-govoryat-o-nastuplenii-postneftyanogo-perioda-aliev-1029175445>

opposition) are unwilling to make concessions concerning Abkhazia and South Ossetia, while Western partners, primarily the U.S., are openly jealous of attempts by the government of the allied country to diversify its foreign policy, let alone move away from the Euro-Atlantic consensus. In Armenia, the pandemic has made it easier for Nikol Pashinyan's Cabinet to establish tighter control over the unrecognized Nagorno-Karabakh Republic, which is likely to harden Yerevan's negotiating position rather than make it more willing to offer concessions. Moreover, Pashinyan managed to win the other "political battle" for the Constitutional Court. He carried out the plan of constitutional amendments concerning the judges' rotation with no referenda.

### III. THE ANTI-VIRUS RESPONSES: COMMONALITIES AND DIFFERENCES

The onset of the pandemic disrupted the stable political constructs and politicized clichés with respect to post-Soviet states. We have seen a bunch of varied methods to contain the threat, from quarantine and even curfews to the rejection of strict sanitary and epidemiological limitations for economic motives. At the same time, those countries that traditionally stand high in Freedom House’s Freedom in the World rankings (Georgia and Kyrgyzstan) went all the way to the introduction of curfews, while Azerbaijan, Belarus, and Uzbekistan with permanently low ranks of political freedoms never imposed any curfews or formalized quarantine measures in the form of an “emergency situation” or a “state of emergency”. In the former case, it was about the introduction of “special quarantine”, and in the latter, recommendations of the national headquarters to combat the epidemic. In contrast, Georgia, which introduced not only a state of emergency but also a curfew, subsequently outpaced neighboring Armenia in terms of lifting its quarantine restrictions. At the same time “the cruelest” Tbilisi abolished most of the sanitary restrictions earlier than Yerevan and Baku. However new flashes of coronavirus in June 2020 pushed Armenia and Azerbaijan to retain a “state of emergency” and “special quarantine” but with no curfews. In the comparative perspective, Georgia’s “cruelty” demonstrated its effectiveness.

These distinct country differences notwithstanding, some common features have emerged in Eurasia as well. In general, the ideology of combat against coronavirus is based on mobilization rhetoric and nationalism, even in those cases where the involvement in integration projects remains highly relevant. Asserting domestic economic and political interests is perceived as a more valuable cause than any alliance. Meanwhile, the pandemic

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

Describing the consequences of COVID-19 for the European Union Ivan Krastev and Mark Leonard insist that «rather than a ‘Hamilton moment’ of proto-federalization, we are instead living through a ‘Milward moment’ of strong nation-state identities searching for protection in a dangerous world”.<sup>4</sup> However, this formula is much more applicable to the former USSR area than for the EU. In the current circumstances, the post-Soviet space in general and individual countries on particular face a serious dilemma. Almost all CIS countries and Georgia, as newly independent entities with the not long historical experience of state-building, strive to emphasize the indivisibility and priority of their sovereignty, territorial integrity, and self-sufficiency. However, all of them have a lack of resources and efficiency of the elites in order to survive without involvement in integration structures and support of external actors. The pandemic has clearly identified a clear perspective. Following the countries’ lockdowns to counter the virus, they will inevitably be opened and serious competition for the right to be the first in this process will unfold. In contrast to previous sanitary and epidemiological crises of the XXI century, COVID-19 forms a request for

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<sup>4</sup> Krastev I., Leonard M. Europe’s pandemic politics: How the virus has changed the public’s worldview. Policy brief. European Council for Foreign Relations, 2020  
[https://www.ecfr.eu/publications/summary/europes\\_pandemic\\_politics\\_how\\_the\\_virus\\_has\\_changed\\_the\\_publics\\_worldview](https://www.ecfr.eu/publications/summary/europes_pandemic_politics_how_the_virus_has_changed_the_publics_worldview)

pragmatism, the competence of the authorities, and readiness to implement state decisions at the expense of people's own comfort and interests. General formulas are them "democratic values" or nostalgia for the lost USSR will not be requested in the foreseeable future.

## IV. RUSSIA: PRIORITIZING THE POST-SOVIET SPACE

In this context, Russia faces such a fundamental task in the "post-coronavirus" period as preventing the chaotic and atomization of the post-Soviet space, whose geopolitical capitalization may temporarily (!) fall in the wake of growing economic problems during the period of recovery from the pandemic. However sooner or later the interest of external actors (the US, EU, and China) to the former USSR area will be restored quickly. It is important not to miss the period of recovery from the pandemic and the opportunities that open up during this time. In case of loss of control over integration processes or failure of existing projects, Moscow will get a galloping uncertainty and unpredictability, in which the dominant role will belong to a multidirectional nationalism (it is possible that sub-nationalist or particularism ideas and practices will have a serious impact) as well as the ideologies of religious exclusivity. No less important is the prevention of archaization and degradation of post-Soviet countries and plunging them into some kind of raw materials areas for great powers' competition.

Moscow can offer an alternative way to the negative developments promoting the technological and financial-economic chains within the framework of Eurasian integration projects. However, they need to be re-launched. It should be noted that after the end of the pandemic and being influenced by its negative consequences a number of Central Asian countries (Uzbekistan and Tajikistan) will be interested in speeding up negotiations on cooperation with the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU). Russia can use this opportunity to strengthen integration processes in the region as a whole. At the same time, forcing new members to join simply for the sake of their formal participation in integration associations should not become an end in itself. Loyalty to Russia's foreign policy and interests to build

building up cooperation ties with Moscow should come first. The formalization of membership in the Eurasian structures can be the final stage of a great effort to strengthen Moscow's interests in the post-Soviet regions and promote the strategy of Greater Eurasia. As for the Common Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) covering three Central Asian countries as well as Armenia and Belarus are also required more effectiveness. As Siarhei Bohdan, the Belarusian expert rightly notes, “until now, the organization has been a symbol, rather than an instrument, of Russian influence in the post-Soviet space”<sup>5</sup> although only Moscow is interested to provide the security integration in all the three directions within the CSTO (South Caucasus, Central Asia and the European part of the former USSR) while the other partners try to follow the national egoism than the integrative common denominator. However, now we see a clear request for the mobilization of collective efforts combating the negative effects of the epidemic (religious radicalization, the growth of nationalist sentiments). It is equally important for Russia to strengthen bilateral military cooperation with Armenia and Belarus to deter uncertainties in the Nagorno-Karabakh and along the CSTO-NATO lines, as well as between the Central Asian countries jointly prevent possible negative scenarios from Afghanistan.

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

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<sup>5</sup> Bohdan S, The World HandCOV'd: CSTO: in search of raisons d'être. Minsk Dialogue. Strategic Insight. 2020. N°11  
<https://minskdialogue.by/en/research/opinions/the-world-handcov-d-csto-in-search-of-raisons-d-tre>

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