



Coronavirus Geopolitics. A Reflection on the Russian Case

CARMEN SCOCOZZA

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1. Affiliazione Autore / Authors' information

Universidad Católica de Colombia, Colombia

2. Contatti / Authors' contact

Carmen Scocoza: [cscocoza\[at\]ucatolica.edu.co](mailto:cscocoza@ucatolica.edu.co)

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Note of Editor-in-Chief

This is the first Special issue of the journal *Culture e Studi del Sociale-CuSSoc*. The idea behind the special issue comes from this consideration: around the world, individuals are facing a critical moment, the COVID-19 pandemic and its consequences require some reflections on many topics, often forgotten by scholars. This is the reason why many Italian and foreign scholars have been invited to give their contribution. Furthermore, now more than ever, it is crucial to share knowledge coming from multiple disciplines and that's why it was decided to write an entire issue in English.

For scientific and intellectual correctness, the contents of single articles refer to the situation as in mid-May 2020. It is necessary to clarify that because this Special issue was published when many countries were starting to reduce their emergency measures to cope with the pandemic.

Coronavirus Geopolitics. A Reflection on the Russian Case

Carmen Scocozza

Universidad Católica de Colombia, Colombia
E-mail: cscocozza[at]ucatolica.edu.co

Abstract

The current pandemic has shown that, over and above the more immediate consequences to be tackled, such as the health emergency and the economic crisis, there are long-term effects that will require reflection at a global level. In this article, we will analyse how the fight against coronavirus has become an interesting test of whether the Russian Government can enjoy comparative advantages over Western democracies. In particular, we highlight how the global health emergency is being used by the Kremlin to fuel the Russian narrative on an energetic and resolute country, against a divided and weakened West, and to loudly invoke a different world order where Moscow could find new centrality.

Keywords: Russia, Coronavirus, Geopolitics.

1. Russia between paraded and retracted calm

In a recent article on *The Wall Street Journal*, Henry Kissinger notes how the Covid-19 pandemic could have serious effects on the current world balance, risking irreversibly undermining the social contract between rulers and governments, both nationally and internationally. “When the Covid-19 pandemic is over, many countries’ institutions will be perceived as having failed” (Kissinger, 2020). It would seem that countries are striving not only to save the greatest number of their citizens and contain an economic crisis due to an unprecedented paralysis of the productive sectors – undoubtedly a priority – but also to preserve the legitimacy of their governments and the reference values guiding their political choices.

Putin’s Russia is not exempt from this challenge, having shown a rather contradictory attitude, flaunting calm first and then surrendering to the evidence of the facts.

In mid-March, when the global scale of the emergency was becoming clear, all the Kremlin was concerned with was confirming the national referendum on constitutional reform on 22 April, which could potentially extend Putin’s presidency until 2036. At that moment, it seemed that the president’s aim was mainly to save himself, rather than the country, perhaps to the point of exploiting a virus that could distract from the questionable political reforms inaugurated in January with the resignation of Medvedev’s whole government.

One could have rightly guessed that Putin would have capitalized on the critical situation by silencing internal oppositions, also through the cancellation, for alleged security reasons, of a series of events, including the demonstration planned in Moscow on 22 April against the constitutional reform. However, with time, and despite the government’s attempts to minimize the extent of the crisis (going so far as to declare, on March 20, less than 200 infections in a Federation housing about 144 million people), the progressive restrictions showed that the country was preparing for a situation far worse than the one feared (Figuera, 2020).

While Western leaders were beginning to impose lockdown measures, Putin was trying to follow the official agenda by going to the Crimea on March 18, the day after the Constitutional Court gave the go-ahead for the proposed amendments, to celebrate six years of the annexation of the peninsula and open the election campaign that was to carry him smoothly to the April referendum.

It seemed, therefore, that the coronavirus had been an unexpected ally in Putin's path towards "bulletproofing" his power without arousing too much sensation at the international level and with the least possible internal unrest. But if during the trip to Crimea, the president still did not hesitate to depict the situation as "under control", the urgent construction of a hospital for infectious diseases and the exemplary punishment for those who violated the quarantine – up to 5 years in prison – elucidated about the real internal situation.

It is important to note that the Russian strategy was characterized by an initial attempt to minimize the extent of the problem, so as not to hinder the projects aimed at strengthening internal stability with the referendum. The further ambition was to project the image of a strong country to the outside world thanks to the 75th anniversary of the Soviet victory over Nazi-Fascism – to be grandiosely celebrated on May 9. At the same time, the global health emergency has been used to fuel the Russian narrative about an energetic and determined country against a divided and weakened West. To this end, the government has also facilitated the spread of tales according to which the virus had been created by the US military, to be used in the trade war against China. The destabilizing scale of the virus in the year of the U.S. presidential elections represents an unmissable opportunity to promote anti-Western propaganda around which to compact domestic public opinion, demonstrating the alleged superiority of "strong" governments – Russia and China in the first place – in addressing this exceptional situation compared to the questionable choices of the Trump presidency (Milosevich-Juaristi, 2020).

In this way, the Kremlin makes misinformation and conspiracy theories a valuable tool to capitalize both on the ambiguity of Washington's politics and on the weakness shown by the European Union in managing the crisis. The aim, not too hidden, is the definitive questioning of the supremacy of the existing liberal order.

In general, we can say that the news about the actual number of contagions and the decisions taken by the government appear unclear and unlikely to be truthful, particularly if we consider the permeability of the immense borders shared between Russia and China. Moreover, the accusations that the Kremlin was playing down the real extent of the problem were confirmed by the government's actions, culminating in Putin's decision to address the nation with two speeches just a week apart. With the first, on 25 March, it became clear that the image of an almost-immune country was no longer viable, as the first deaths were recorded. The president thus announced the now inevitable postponement of the referendum until a date to be set, and a week of paid national holidays, encouraging Russians to stay home (Putin, 2020a). With the second, on April 2, when the number of cases had reached 3500, he surrendered to the evidence by declaring a state of emergency, extending the quarantine to the end of April and implementing economic and social measures to help the population (Putin, 2020b).

2. Coronavirus and authoritarian governments: a likely alliance?

It cannot be underestimated that the health crisis has called for an extension of government powers, necessary to implement decisions as quickly as possible. As the

controversial Hungarian case shows, the exceptional measures that have restricted individual freedoms in the interests of public health have also ended up legitimising the weakening of democratic institutions and the progressive silencing of opposition. If such a risk exists in all authoritarian countries, or those with weaker democracies, in the Russian case the trial had been going on for a long time and was further accelerated at the beginning of the year. The amendment proposed by Valentina Tereshkova – approved by Parliament and ratified by the Constitutional Court – to eliminate the two-mandates cap for the presidential candidacy is emblematic in this regard; Putin, who had excluded this possibility on previous occasions, accepted the proposal, citing, among other things, precisely the “complex, if not turbulent” global situation that seems to require “stable, decisive and consistent policies”¹.

It is conceivable that in exceptional situations (*e.g.* calamities), such as the one we are experiencing, authoritarian governments can even come out strengthened thanks to a decision-making capacity which allows them to face problems more quickly and in the absence of interlocutory opposition; moreover, their control of the media allows them to convey a strong and decisive image of government action, even if this does not necessarily correspond to reality.

Coronavirus can thus become almost a resource to further legitimize a strong power, presented as the natural aspiration of citizens seeking stability and protection. However, economic prospects are very different. If they appear dramatic at world level, they can have a truly devastating impact on Russia. The country is already facing increasing unemployment and both the rouble and oil prices nosedived. All this against the backdrop of a general economic crisis, where the lack of agreement between OPEC and Russia has brought the price of crude oil to its lowest level since 2003. It is therefore difficult to predict Russia’s economic resilience, but it seems that its projects to contain the consequences of the coronavirus are quite ambitious and risk being put to the test in the event of a prolonged emergency.

In any case, faced with the growing number of contagions, which by mid-April has exceeded 20,000 cases, the president had to revise his initial positions by adopting lockdown measures and economic policies in an already precarious context. Since the Ukrainian crisis of 2014, the country has tried to increase its economic sovereignty and decrease interdependence with other economies, with positive consequences in agriculture but much worse outcomes in more advanced sectors. In the face of a crisis like the current one, the situation could only worsen. Furthermore, it seems that Putin wants to delegate the internal management of the pandemic; on the one hand, the mayor of Moscow Sobyenin and the new prime minister Mishustin are on the front line, and on the other hand, the regional governors are being asked to deal with the emergency in their respective territories.

3. Covid-19, Russia, and the crisis of the liberal order

One could almost speculate that the President wishes to turn down responsibility for a pandemic which, internally, can cause serious and unpredictable consequences, focusing instead on foreign policy. Indeed, coronavirus can represent an opportunity at the international level to gain prominence in the West after years of relative marginalization.

¹ See the article published on March 12, “Kremlin: Putin accepts idea of removing presidential term limits amid global challenges”, <https://tass.com/politics/1129349>.

The fight against coronavirus becomes, therefore, a test of whether the authoritarian Russian government can enjoy comparative advantages over Western democracies. Although the results can only be seen in the long term, there is no doubt that Putin is willing to invest in this direction, especially since “the fragility of globalism has been underscored as the international community grows more fractious and the liberal order recedes” (Trenin, 2020). From this perspective, while governments have been called to manage the crisis at the national level, and international organizations developed internal rifts, unable to act in unison and solidarity, it would seem that the Russian position, favouring the central role of the state against uncontrolled globalization, often translated into the pursuit of the interests of a few, can regain vigour.

We agree with Andrew Foxall, director of the Russia and Eurasia Studies Centre at the Henry Jackson Society, in claiming that democracies have not been more effective than authoritarian governments in coping with the crisis and, on the contrary, have had to expand their powers and reduce individual freedoms in the face of the dramatic emergency. This has led to an almost paradoxical situation in which “in contrast to the early post-Cold War period when many believed that Russia would become more like the West, in the coronavirus crisis the West has become more like Russia” (Foxall, 2020).

The weakening of democratic cohesion, generalized chaos and internal divisions can thus confirm Russia’s vision of an international system where countries are guided by the defence of their own interests and national demands prevail over global dynamics. In the face of the crisis, the West has shown his more illiberal side; it seems then inevitable to revise the international order based on its reference values. Russia can, therefore, reappear on the international chessboard as the bearer of a geopolitical mission, in defence of the inviolability of national sovereignty and a multipolar world, which, starting from the “conservative turning point” achieved with Putin’s return to the presidency in 2012, resists the homogenizing influence of Western liberalism (Robinson, 2020).

We can read in this perspective also Russia’s activism of recent weeks. From the assistance to Italy to the plane sent to the United States, these actions are in line with the foreign policy of recent years. Faced with problems that transcend national borders (*e.g.* after September 11 or in the war against the Islamic State) Putin has always offered his help in favour of international alliances. These choices should not be interpreted as Russian adherence to Western standards, but rather as an opportunity to set aside more controversial issues in the name of a common cause that can help to relax relations between the parties.

Once again, a global crisis becomes the means to radically change the global agenda. Sending aid to Western countries seems consistent with this project; taking advantage of the vacuum left, particularly in the initial phase, by the United States, deaf to its partners’ pleas, Russia and China choose to intervene, aware that in this way they would easily steer international public opinion (particularly changeable in the absence of clear reference points) in their favour.

As Trenin warns us, “In international relations there is no goodwill without some calculus (...) There is a propaganda element, certainly” (see Dixon, 2020). The Russians are aware of this and, after the Ukrainian crisis of 2014 and the sanctions imposed by the West, they can demonstrate not only that they are no less than Westerners, but even potentially superior: after years of violent criticism and detrimental actions, they still offer their help, apparently unconditional, to the United States that, in evident difficulty, receive it “gratefully”.

It is clear, therefore, that humanitarian aid has become another geopolitical instrument in this parallel war that is being played out at the same time as the fight

against the coronavirus. From China to Russia, there are many powers that, taking advantage of western divisions, compete for world leadership by proposing alternative models of development and defending the existence of different centres of power. Every war or event of global significance brings radical changes and imposes a new world order based on “a set of commonly accepted rules defining the limits of permissible action and a balance of power imposing control when the rules are broken” (Kissinger, 2014, p.11) While it is obvious that we are living in a momentous juncture, the definition of how the pandemic will change the current international scenario is still uncertain.

Russia is certainly reacting to the crisis in line with the nature of its authoritarian system: lack of transparency on internal management; disclosure of conspiracy theories that foster a sense of opposition to an external enemy, thus strengthening internal cohesion; political and geopolitical opportunism that helps to spread the image of a strong and resolute country (Pipes, 2006). Whether such strategies will be useful in questioning the current international order is still difficult to predict; much will also depend on the response capacity of Western leaders and institutions who, after an understandable moment of difficulty, will have to show that they can effectively manage this crisis in the name of supportive and responsible globalization. The success or otherwise of this action will also affect the ongoing process of “de-westernisation”, a process from which Russia has much to gain.

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