

# The Security Impacts of the COVID-19 Pandemic

Follow up

**Sebastian von Münchow (Ed.)**

Study Group Information



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# **The Security Impacts of the COVID-19 Pandemic**

**Follow up**

**7/2022**

Vienna, May 2022

**Imprint:**

Copyright, Production, Publisher:

Republic of Austria / Federal Ministry of Defence  
Rossauer Lände 1  
1090 Vienna, Austria

Edited by:

National Defence Academy  
Command  
Stiftgasse 2a  
1070 Vienna, Austria

In co-operation with:

PfP Consortium of Defense Academies and Security Studies Institutes  
Garmisch-Partenkirchen, Germany

Study Group Information

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May 2022

ISBN 978-3-903359-51-2

Printing:

ReproZ W 22-2209  
Stiftgasse 2a  
1070 Wien

This publication was made possible through the hard work and dedication of the Partnership for Peace's Editorial Board and by the Austrian National Defence Academy's publishing team.

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# The Security Impacts of the COVID-19 Pandemic: Follow up

*Sebastian von Münchow*

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By the end of summer 2020, the Partnership for Peace Consortium of Defense Academies and Security Studies Institutes published a special edition of the *Connections: The Quarterly Journal*, titled “The Security Impacts of the COVID-19 Pandemic.”<sup>1</sup> The edition contained nine academic articles from the George C. Marshall Center and one policy recommendations article by the Study Group Regional Stability in South East Europe.

The articles were written in spring 2020, roughly two to three months after COVID-19 hit Western Europe and North America at the start of March last year. The first special edition received global attention and generated considerable debate on how the virus challenges the community of liberal-minded states and how its adversaries abuse the crisis to their advantage.

The articles of the first volume discussed the impact of the coronavirus on great power competition, the fight against terrorism, area studies, and good governance. The authors warned that the threat by Jihadi terrorists would not fade, the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) could destabilize further, revisionist powers seek political and economic dominance in Central Asia, China’s so-called “mask diplomacy” attempts to rebrand the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) into a “health road” project, the EU is well-advised to link its support with respect for its values, and governments should be mindful of the legitimate use of domestic instruments to control the pandemic.

After a dramatic second wave of the coronavirus in winter 2020/2021, discussions evolved if a special edition with post-second wave observations should be published. The guiding thought of this new publication is that

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<sup>1</sup> Sebastian von Münchow, ed., *The Security Impacts of the COVID-19 Pandemic, Connections: The Quarterly Journal* 19, no. 2 (2020), <https://doi.org/10.11610/Connections.19.2>.

those authors who contributed in *Connections*, would revisit their previous analysis and do stocktaking in terms of verifying or eventually modifying their previous conclusions. Being mindful of retirements, personal change, or other tasks absorbing Marshall Center academics, this publication does not offer the very same constellation of authors. In this light, one has to be aware that by the end of 2020, the Center started to run a lot of its resident, outreach, and alumni activities virtually. Thus, four of the prior writers could submit texts. Some evaluated the respective previous works. Others submitted a distinct paper still linked to the broader field of research on the topic of the *Connections* edition. Finally, in an effort to reach, and “cross-pollinate” within, a slightly different demographic, we decided to publish through the Austrian National Defence Academy who has graciously agreed to accept this project.

A unique strength of this volume is that additional authors joined; some from the Center’s College on International Security Studies and a few external academics. They either revisit a previously addressed challenge or add a new coronavirus-related theme. Hence, the new composition of authors allowed the expansion in the range of topics.

This volume starts with articles on Russian and Chinese policies related to COVID-19. Combined with two articles focused on Southeast and Central Asia, these contributions portray why some scholars suggest that vaccine diplomacy turned into vaccine wars, adding another cynical element to Great Power Competition. The volume then continues to address international and transnational aspects of the pandemic, namely a macroeconomic assessment, an observation of the changing dynamics in transnational organized crime, and a review of Salafi-Jihadi terrorism in the shadow of the coronavirus. This second edition also includes my article on an alleged superspreader incident. It zooms down to the pandemic’s impact on the community level and explains the legal difficulties to mitigate COVID-19, challenges to politicians in crisis communication, and the media’s critical role.

The edition at hand does differ for another reason from the first volume. When authors contributed to the first journal in spring 2020, more than 350 000 people had died, attributed to COVID-19, globally. By early 2022, the world’s death toll surpassed the six-million threshold. In order to prevent the virus from spreading, states have introduced a myriad of re-

strictions. By mid-2020, one could have had the impression that global inter-societal and economic interaction had halted.

Hope rose in November 2020 when a Rhineland-based biotechnology company and a US multinational pharmaceutical corporation announced that a vaccine was found. This caused new dynamics at stock exchanges around the world. A number of states launched successful vaccination campaigns. Frustration broke out again when the world noticed that vaccines often could not prevent an infection breakthrough. This depended a lot on the quality of the vaccine and the number of vaccine shots. Nevertheless, challenged by the highly contagious Omicron variant, western vaccines seem to contribute to a milder disease course compared to the products of eastern competitors. While the vaccination programs were saluted by the majority within western societies, bitter discussions started in many governments if a mandatory vaccination should be introduced. Politicians, virologists, epidemiologists, intensive care medics, mathematicians, and citizens continued to argue to keep the infection rates down, or to allow natural herd immunity, how to maintain the efficiency of the health sector, which ever-changing restrictions of citizens' basic rights should be eased or tightened, and how to ensure economic survival. What unifies the camps is the aim to pursue a pre-corona life with little to no restrictions.

When re-reading the first *Connections* edition, one phrase in the foreword proved of lasting validity: "None of the contributions claim that the observations and findings might not be superseded by an eventual second – perhaps even worse – wave of COVID-19 or national political unrest changing a nation's course." In an unfortunate way, this careful notion predicted the just-described developments as of fall 2020.

Yet again, it is hard to predict if post-Omicron waves can be avoided or if the world transitions from a pandemic to an endemic. Ultimately, the second edition will be an edition of interim stocktaking. A third volume may balance the accounts on which societies prevail in terms of productivity, resilience, innovation, and maintaining the rule of law and good governance principles. It may also elaborate on which global actors supported the global fair distribution of recognized vaccines and which powers sought gains when labeling vaccine deliveries as "aid." In the light of the latter, further research is needed to elaborate if the COVID-19 crisis contributed to Vla-

dimir Putin's miscalculation on Western reactions related to the invasion into Ukraine. While the Russian President might have concluded in 2020 and 2021 that Western governments depend fully on supplies, are internally polarized and will not be able to take a joint stance, he had to learn in February 2022 that this would not be the case. Further research is also needed on the domestic management of COVID-19 by China to include a reluctance to import more efficient vaccines from the West, the harsh restrictions in Shanghai and the impacts of the negative images that ensued from them. A next edition may elaborate on whether this was merely incompetent health management or a nervous regime fighting to keep control over its citizens.

For now, the Partnership for Peace Consortium staffers, the editors, reviewers, and authors wish the readers good health and security in reading the second special issue on the pandemic and its impact on international affairs.

May 2022

#### About the Author

Dr. Sebastian von Münchow is a member of the faculty at the George C. Marshall European Center for Security Studies in Garmisch-Partenkirchen, Bavaria. He studied law at the Free University of Berlin, the Université de Lausanne, and the Christian-Albrechts-University Kiel. In 2000, he earned his doctorate in International Relations at the University of Vienna. From 1998 to 2002, he worked for the field missions of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe in Bosnia and Herzegovina, as well as in Kosovo. He has also served in the Police Assistance Mission of the European Union in Tirana. Between 2003 and 2005, Dr. von Münchow led various home and justice-related initiatives in the Brussels-based Office of the Special Coordinator of the Stability Pact for South-Eastern Europe. In 2006, Dr. von Münchow returned to Germany and worked for several years in the Federal Chancellery in Berlin before joining the Marshall Center in 2012. His areas of expertise include parliamentary oversight, the rule of law, and capacity building in South-Eastern Europe. Since 2019, Dr. Sebastian von Münchow has been the Director of the European Security Seminar East, and since 2021 the Director of the European Security Seminar EU-NATO Cooperation.

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## Letter by the German Deputy Director of the George C. Marshall European Center for Security Studies

*Brigadier General (Ret.) Helmut Dotzler, German Air Force*

Dear Readers!

Welcome to this special publication on the security impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic. This edition follows up on an edition of *Connections Quarterly Journal*, which was published through the Partnership for Peace Consortium in late summer of 2020. After having read this edition and having followed the debate it sparked, I asked my faculty member Dr. Sebastian von Münchow if he would work on a follow-up publication.

I recently wondered how previous authors and additional writers would assess the developments since summer 2020. The preceding waves of COVID-19 caused additional hundreds of thousands of deaths attributed to the virus worldwide. Luckily, a Germany-based company developed a vaccine in fall 2020. Due to an American pharmaceutical distributor, it became one of today's major vaccines against the coronavirus. Other western consortia were also successful. However, they could not prevent many breakthrough infections. But the vaccines mitigated the virus' impact. In addition, the situation in hospitals eased, especially after omicron became the dominant SARS-CoV-2 variant. Immediately, global initiatives were formed to share the vaccines with countries in transition.

Hence, I was thankful that Sebastian had agreed to gather post second COVID-19 wave considerations from a number of authors. I am evenly grateful to all involved writers, involved staffers, editors and to the Austrian National Defence Academy, who is has taken on the burden of publication. I read the new papers with great interest and learned a lot about Russian and Chinese policies related to the coronavirus, but also about Central Asia, macroeconomic and legal observations, transnational organized crime, as well as Salafi-Jihadi terrorism.

Allow me to seize the opportunity to address younger and junior-ranking readers. Like universities around the world and often even schools, the Marshall Center conducts a lot of its activities digitally. Social distancing meant that pupils, students, and trainees were prevented from direct interaction with teaching staff. They were also prevented from interacting with each other and therefore also limited in building their peer networks. While I understand the necessity to stop the virus from spreading and applaud my Center's staff for its capability to run virtual events, I miss the representatives of security architectures from the Americas, Africa, Eurasia, The Middle and Near East, and the Pacific in our classrooms. I am equally touched by the fact that governments around the world asked an entire generation of youngsters to put their educational and social developments on hold. I believe we owe this generation a brighter future, providing opportunities to enhance their individual resilience. Now that conditions slowly allow, I hope pupils, students, and vocational training participants return to their classrooms.

As German Deputy Director of the George C. Marshall European Center for Security Studies, I will do my utmost to bring young talent back to Garmisch-Partenkirchen and to support in-residence capacity-building here in beautiful Bavaria, as well as networking amongst our guests and live interaction with our faculty professors.

On this lighter note, I wish all readers good health, joy in studying this very interesting second special edition, and do remain sincerely yours.

May 2022

# China, Russia, and Great Power Vaccine Competition<sup>1</sup>

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**Abstract:** Analysis of geopolitical competition during the COVID-19 crisis tends to portray China and Russia tightly joined in an axis that aims to promote the superiority of their health diplomacy at the expense of Western democracies. In recent years China and Russia have been consolidating their strategic partnership. Yet, the COVID-19 pandemic has tested the limits to their cooperation and introduced a competitive element into their parallel vaccine diplomacy initiatives. This article examines the trajectory of the Sino-Russian partnership during the COVID-19 pandemic, highlighting areas of agreement but also points of tension and competition, and draws some broader conclusions about the relationship.

**Keywords:** Russia, China, Central Asia, Mongolia, COVID-19, vaccine, Health Silk Road, vaccine diplomacy, soft power.

## Initial Steps

In response to the COVID-19 epidemic in China, revealed to the world in early 2020, the Russian government closed the land border with China on January 30, 2020, followed by border crossing points (February 1) and rail traffic (February 3). Despite their 4,209 km (2,615 miles) shared border, there were relatively few cases of COVID-19 in the Russian border regions in the first few months of the pandemic, which attested to the overall weakness of Sino-Russian regional relations more than to the effectiveness of Russian public health measures. Indeed, the virus appears to have traveled more circuitously to Russia from China through Europe and then to European regions within Russia.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> This article is a revised and expanded version of Elizabeth Wishnick, "China and Russia: Vaccine Competitors or Partners," February 22, 2021, <https://www.chinasresourcerisks.com/post/china-and-russia-vaccine-competitors-or-partners>. I would like to thank Samuel D. Robertson for his expert editorial assistance.

<sup>2</sup> Ivan Zuenko, "The Coronavirus Pandemic and the Russo-Chinese Border," *The Asan Forum*, accessed June 4, 2020, <http://www.theasanforum.org/the-coronavirus-pandemic-and-the-russo-chinese-border/>.

While Russian President Putin sent his Chinese counterpart, Xi Jinping, a message of support immediately after beginning the border closures, and the two pledged to cooperate against the pandemic, reactions across Russia's regions were mixed. While some bemoaned the loss of Chinese visitors,<sup>3</sup> other regions quarantined them or monitored them using facial recognition technology, prompting protests of ethnic profiling.<sup>4</sup> In February 2020, 37 percent of Russians polled by Ipsos-MORI said they would avoid individuals with a Chinese appearance.<sup>5</sup> By April 2020, as the pandemic spread in Russia but was under control in China, efforts by infected Chinese nationals to return home led the Chinese government to shut down border crossing points on its side of the border. This created new health risks for the Russian Far East as Chinese nationals, some of whom had contracted COVID-19, ended up stranded in eastern Russia, where they faced 28-day quarantines.<sup>6</sup> On the national level, however, the Russian and Chinese governments downplayed these problems and accentuated the positive aspects of their cooperation against the pandemic.<sup>7</sup>

## COVID Commonalities

Although China refused to share the live COVID-19 virus with Russia in the first few months of the pandemic (which would have facilitated Russian

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<sup>3</sup> "On the Border: How the Russian Region Most Intertwined with China Is Coping Economically amid the Coronavirus Outbreak," *Meduza*, March 5, 2020, accessed April 17, 2021, <https://meduza.io/en/feature/2020/03/05/on-the-border>.

<sup>4</sup> Felix Light, "Coronavirus Outbreak Is Major Test for Russia's Facial Recognition Network," *The Moscow Times*, March 25, 2020, <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2020/03/25/coronavirus-outbreak-is-major-test-for-russias-facial-recognition-network-a69736>; Liu Hui, "The Chinese Citizens Caught in Russia's COVID-19 Crackdown," *Sixth Tone*, March 13, 2020, <https://www.sixthtone.com/news/1005310/the-chinese-citizens-caught-in-russias-covid-19-crackdown>.

<sup>5</sup> Kelley Beaver, "COVID-19: One in Seven People Would Avoid People of Chinese Origin or Appearance," *IPSOS-Mori*, February 14, 2020, <https://www.ipsos.com/ipsos-mori/en-uk/covid-19-one-seven-people-would-avoid-people-chinese-origin-or-appearance>.

<sup>6</sup> Ankur Shah, "COVID-19: Trouble on the China-Russia Border," *The Diplomat*, May 5, 2020, <https://thediplomat.com/2020/05/covid-19-trouble-on-the-china-russia-border>; Ivan Zuenko, "Russia-China Partnership Proves Immune to Coronavirus," *Carnegie Moscow Center*, May 25, 2020, <https://carnegie.ru/commentary/81884>.

<sup>7</sup> Richard Weitz, "The COVID-19 Pandemic Boosts Sino-Russian Cooperation," *The Jamestown Foundation*, June 24, 2020, accessed February 12, 2021, <https://jamestown.org/program/the-covid-19-pandemic-boosts-sino-russian-cooperation/>.

vaccine research),<sup>8</sup> today, China and Russia are cooperating in vaccine production. Russia is carrying out the CanSino Biologics vaccine trials and could become the first country to authorize its use.<sup>9</sup> In addition, two Chinese companies are now producing 160 million doses of Russia's Sputnik V in China,<sup>10</sup> following what Russia's ambassador to China Andrei Denisov termed "very difficult" negotiations over a range of complex issues,<sup>11</sup> presumably including intellectual copyright issues which have long vexed Sino-Russian military ties. If resolved, vaccine cooperation would support ongoing high-level Russian and Chinese efforts to boost their technological cooperation.<sup>12</sup>

In addition to vaccine co-production, their COVID-19 response has other shared features: both Russia and China have been accused of underreporting their COVID-19 cases.<sup>13</sup> As of February 2022, Russian authorities claim

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<sup>8</sup> Maria Nedyuk, "Pharma Refusal: Why China Has Not Yet Transferred the 2019-nCoV Strain to Russia," *Izvestia*, February 6, 2020, <https://iz.ru/972087/mariia-nediuk/farma-otkaza-pochemu-knr-do-sikh-por-ne-peredala-rossii-shtamm-2019-ncov> – in Russian.

<sup>9</sup> Andrei Nikolaev, "Russia Could Be the First Country to Approve the Chinese CanSino Vaccine," *versia.ru*, January 15, 2021, accessed April 18, 2021, <https://versia.ru/rossiya-mozhet-stat-pervoj-stranoj-odobrivshej-kitajskuyu-vakcinu-cansino> – in Russian.

<sup>10</sup> RBK, "RBK Agreed to Produce More Than 100 Million Doses of Sputnik V in China," *RBK*, April 1, 2021, accessed April 18, 2021, <https://www.rbc.ru/society/01/04/2021/6065adfa9a7947765c378ef1> – in Russian.

<sup>11</sup> RIA Novosti, "Russian Ambassador Spoke about Negotiations with China on Sputnik Vaccine," *ria.ru*, December 29, 2020, <https://ria.ru/20201229/vaktsina-1591410160.html> – in Russian.

<sup>12</sup> Government of the Russian Federation, "Russia and China Have Opened the Year of Scientific and Technological Cooperation," August 26, 2020, <http://government.ru/news/40273/> – in Russian.

<sup>13</sup> Isaac Stone Fish and Maria Krol Sinclair, "Leaked Chinese Virus Database Covers 230 Cities, 640,000 Updates," *Foreign Policy*, May 12, 2020, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/05/12/leaked-chinese-coronavirus-database-number-cases/>; Julian E. Barnes, "C.I.A. Hunts for Authentic Virus Totals in China, Dismissing Government Tallies," *The New York Times*, April 2, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/02/us/politics/cia-coronavirus-china.html>; Mai He, Li Li, Louis P. Dehner, and Lucia F. Dunn, "Cremation Based Estimates Suggest Significant Under- and Delayed Reporting of COVID-19 Epidemic Data in Wuhan and China," *medRxiv*, <https://doi.org/10.1101/2020.05.28.20116012>; Alexandra Yatsyk, "'From Russia With Love': The Kremlin's COVID-19 Charm Offensive," *PONARS Eurasia*, February 2, 2021, [www.ponarseurasia.org/memo/from-russia-with-love-kremlin-covid-19-charm-offensive](http://www.ponarseurasia.org/memo/from-russia-with-love-kremlin-covid-19-charm-offensive); "Russian Coronavirus Fatalities Much Higher Than Initially Reported," *Radio Free Europe*, December 28, 2020, <https://www.rferl.org/a/russian-coronavirus-fatalities-much-higher-than-initially-reported/31023504.html>.

that their country experienced 336,721 deaths,<sup>14</sup> while Reuters reported Russia had 707,336 deaths since the beginning of the pandemic.<sup>15</sup> The US-based human rights activist website chinachange.org claims that China underreported the number of COVID deaths as well – based on Chinese reporting of funeral urns in use in China at the time, the country may have experienced up to 30,000 deaths from the Wuhan outbreak in 2020, a far cry from the 2,575 deaths officially reported.<sup>16</sup> The World Health Organization continues to seek data from China about the pandemic, and the US and other countries have urged greater data sharing regarding the virus' origins.

Even as they have been criticized for their own lack of transparency, Russia and China have acted in parallel to spread disinformation, according to a February 14, 2021 report by AP and the Atlantic Council.<sup>17</sup> Russia has echoed China's false claims about COVID-19 originating as a US biological attack or from other western countries. China has sought to discredit US vaccines, contributing to US vaccine skepticism in the process.<sup>18</sup> For China and Russia, the disarray in the US handling of COVID-19 and difficulties faced by European countries have provided an opportunity to promote their vaccine achievements and the superiority of authoritarian pandemic responses, while diverting attention from their domestic problems. The growing convergence between Chinese and Russian disinformation efforts

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<sup>14</sup> "Coronavirus in Russia: The Latest News | Feb. 8," *The Moscow Times*, accessed February 8, 2022, <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2022/02/08/coronavirus-in-russia-the-latest-news-feb-8-a69117>.

<sup>15</sup> "Russia: The Latest Coronavirus Counts, Charts and Maps," *Reuters*, accessed February 8, 2022, <https://graphics.reuters.com/world-coronavirus-tracker-and-maps/countries-and-territories/russia/>.

<sup>16</sup> Yaxue Cao, "No Access to the CIA Report? Let's DIY: Estimating Total Infections and Death Toll in Wuhan, the Epicenter of Covid-19," *China Change*, April 12, 2020, <https://chinachange.org/2020/04/12/no-access-to-the-cia-report-lets-diy-estimating-total-infections-and-deaths-toll-in-wuhan-the-epicenter-of-covid-19/>.

<sup>17</sup> Erika Kinetz, "Anatomy of a Conspiracy: With COVID, China Took Leading Role," *AP News*, February 15, 2021, <https://apnews.com/article/pandemics-beijing-only-on-ap-epidemics-media-122b73e134b780919cc1808f3f6f16e8>.

<sup>18</sup> Carmen Paun and Susannah Luthi, "What China's Vax Trolling Adds up to," *Politico*, January 28, 2021, <https://www.politico.com/newsletters/global-pulse/2021/01/28/what-chinas-vax-trolling-adds-up-to-491548>.

seen during the pandemic only compounds the challenge they pose individually in the information space.<sup>19</sup>

## Vaccine Diplomacy or Competition

The most valuable resource to the average person today is a dose of the COVID-19 vaccine. For China, which has rolled out two vaccines so far (Sinopharm and Sinovac), with another on the way (CanSino Biologics), providing vaccines to other countries is a key component of its efforts to reshape the narrative about the pandemic. Chinese officials want their country to be remembered for Health Silk Road diplomacy and successful vaccine development,<sup>20</sup> not China's role in the pandemic's origin and spread. In a June 2020 White Paper on COVID-19, the Chinese government outlined its aim to develop a "global public health system that will benefit all of humanity."<sup>21</sup> This goal is patterned on the "community of common destiny," long espoused by Xi Jinping as China's overall global governance objective.<sup>22</sup>

Russia has a similar agenda for vaccine diplomacy. Calling their vaccine Sputnik V – evoking the October 1957 satellite launch that changed global perceptions of Soviet military and space power – Russians see the vaccine enhancing their country's soft power overseas and raising the profile of Russian science.<sup>23</sup> Sputnik V made headlines as the first COVID-19 vaccine

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<sup>19</sup> Andrea Kendall-Taylor, "Mendacious Mixture: The Growing Convergence of Russian and Chinese Information Operations," in *Global Insights: COVID-19 and the Information Space*, ed. Dean Jackson (Washington, D.C.: National Endowment for Democracy, January 2021), 23, <https://www.ned.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/Convergence-Russian-Chinese-Information-Operations-Kendall-Taylor.pdf>.

<sup>20</sup> The Belt and Road Initiative Center, "BRI: A Review of Global Progress in 2020," *China Daily*, February 9, 2021, <https://global.chinadaily.com.cn/a/202102/09/WS60224ed1a31024ad0baa864b.html>.

<sup>21</sup> PRC State Council Information Office, "Full Text: White Paper on Fighting COVID-19: China in Action," June 7, 2020, [http://english.scio.gov.cn/whitepapers/2020-06/07/content\\_76135269\\_6.htm](http://english.scio.gov.cn/whitepapers/2020-06/07/content_76135269_6.htm).

<sup>22</sup> Jacob Mardell, "China's 'Health Silk Road': Adapting the BRI to a Pandemic Era World," *MERICIS* (Mercator Institute for China Studies), November 25, 2020, <https://merics.org/en/short-analysis/chinas-health-silk-road-adapting-bri-pandemic-era-world>.

<sup>23</sup> Artem Filippov, "Sputnik V Is Rapidly Changing Attitudes towards Russia Abroad," *Vzglyad*, February 18, 2021, <https://yandex.ru/turbo/vz.ru/s/world/2021/2/18/1085775.html> – in Russian.

to be released to the public, but also for cutting corners in the interest of speed.<sup>24</sup> Russian authorities approved the vaccine for domestic distribution on August 11, 2020, prior to the conclusion of Phase III trials, which typically test the effectiveness and safety of a vaccine in large sample groups.

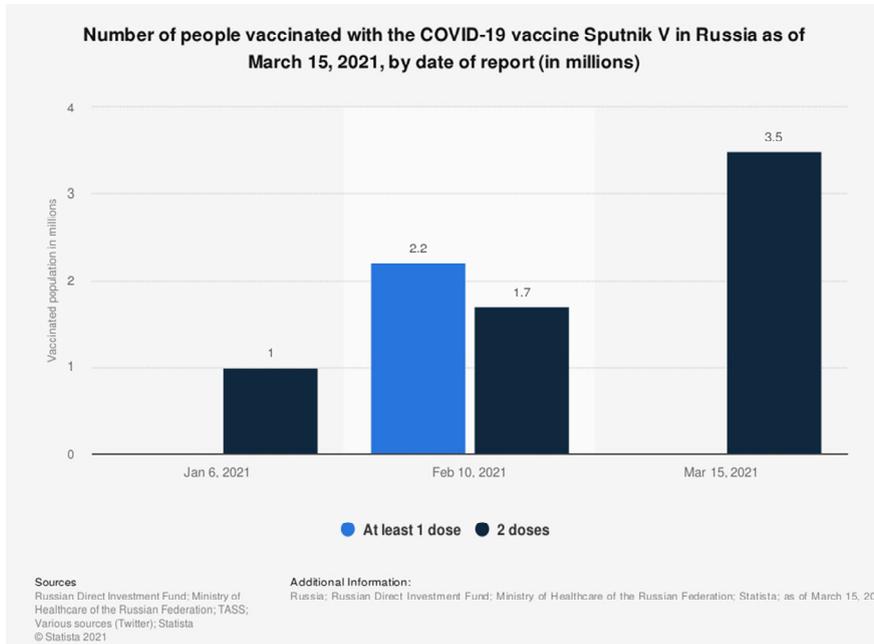


Figure 1: Statista – Population Vaccinated in Russia.<sup>25</sup>

On February 2, 2021, *The Lancet*, the highly regarded medical journal, published interim findings from these trials indicating a 91.6 % efficacy rate for the Sputnik V vaccine after 21 days and no adverse side effects.<sup>26</sup> Despite this apparent vindication, concerns about sufficient testing have depressed

<sup>24</sup> Robyn Dixon, “How Russian Biotech Trampled Protocols – and Challenged the West – in Race for Sputnik V Vaccine,” *The Washington Post*, February 8, 2021, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/europe/russia-vaccine-sputnik-coronavirus-lancet/2021/02/08/18d8d55c-6571-11eb-bab8-707f8769d785\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/europe/russia-vaccine-sputnik-coronavirus-lancet/2021/02/08/18d8d55c-6571-11eb-bab8-707f8769d785_story.html).

<sup>25</sup> Statista, “Number of People Vaccinated with the COVID-19 Vaccine Sputnik V in Russia as of March 15, 2021, by Date of Report (in Millions),” Chart, *Statista*, March 15, 2021, accessed April 18, 2021, <https://www-statista-com.ezproxy.cul.columbia.edu/statistics/1196113/sputnik-v-vaccinated-population-russia/>.

<sup>26</sup> Ian Jones and Polly Roy, “Sputnik V COVID-19 Vaccine Candidate Appears Safe and Effective,” *The Lancet*, February 2, 2021, [https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736\(21\)00191-4/fulltext](https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736(21)00191-4/fulltext).

demand. Without releasing any national data, the Russian government claimed that 1.5 million people had received the Sputnik V vaccine as of mid-January 2021. Yet, Russian regional data belied a much lower number – 300,000.<sup>27</sup> According to a December 23, 2020 poll by Moscow's Levada Center, just 38 % of respondents (though 48 % of those over age 55) said they were prepared to be vaccinated, largely due to concerns over incomplete testing of the vaccine and its side effects.<sup>28</sup> Russian statistics then claimed that as of March 31, 2021, 4.3 million Russians received both doses of the vaccine. If accurate, this still would mean that just 3 % of Russia's population has been vaccinated, putting Russia in 39<sup>th</sup> place globally,<sup>29</sup> a considerable underperformance given the Russian vaccine's early authorization, Russia's eager efforts to market Sputnik V overseas, and the high number of COVID-19 cases at home. By February 2022, only 48 % of the population was vaccinated.<sup>30</sup>

The apparent Sino-Russian harmony belies a competition for vaccine markets in traditional areas of Russian influence in Central Asia and Mongolia. In the distribution of Russian and Chinese vaccines, despite China's Health Silk Road diplomacy and efforts to expand Chinese soft power in Eurasia, it is Sputnik V that has been embraced more enthusiastically, with Indian vaccines placing second in the vaccine race. Kazakhstan and Mongolia have both approved the Russian vaccine,<sup>31</sup> as has Turkmenistan (despite claiming

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<sup>27</sup> Dmitry Kuznets, Svetlana Reiter, Anastasia Yakoreva, and Farida Rustamova, "Elusive Jabs: Meduza Digs into Official Claims that Millions of Russians Were Already Vaccinated against COVID-19 by mid-January," *Meduza*, January 20, 2021, <https://meduza.io/en/feature/2021/01/20/elusive-jabs>.

<sup>28</sup> "The Coronavirus: Fears and Vaccination," *Levada-Center*, February 2, 2021, <https://www.levada.ru/en/2021/02/02/the-coronavirus-fears-and-vaccination/>.

<sup>29</sup> Natalia Telegina, Valeria Mishina, and Ilya Rozhdestvensky, "Sputnik V or Nothing: Why Russians Do Not Receive a Foreign Vaccine or Other Domestic Vaccine," *Открытые Медиа [Open Media]*, March 31, 2021, <https://openmedia.io/investigation/sputnik-v-ili-nichego-pochemu-rossiyanam-ne-svetit-inostrannaya-ili-drugaya-otechestvennaya-vakcina> – in Russian.

<sup>30</sup> Hannah Ritchie et al., "Coronavirus Pandemic (COVID-19)," *Our World in Data*, March 5, 2020, <https://ourworldindata.org/covid-vaccinations>.

<sup>31</sup> Vijay Shankar Balakrishnan, "COVID-19 Response in Central Asia," *The Lancet* 1, no. 7, (November 2020), e281, [https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lanmic/article/PIIS2666-5247\(20\)30177-4/fulltext](https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lanmic/article/PIIS2666-5247(20)30177-4/fulltext); Reuters, "Mongolia Approves Russia's Sputnik V Vaccine against COVID-19," February 9, 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/article/health-coronavirus-russia-vaccine-mongol/mongolia-approves-russias-sputnik-v-vaccine-against-covid-19-idUSL1N2KF1DC>.

not to have *any* COVID-19 cases!). Mongolian officials at first demurred on an offer from China to supply vaccines, accepting instead India's offer of locally made AstraZeneca,<sup>32</sup> the vaccine developed jointly with Oxford University. Kazakhstan is the first country to locally produce Sputnik V.<sup>33</sup> As of August 2021, Kazakhstan's Karaganda plant produced 5 million doses of Sputnik V and committed to producing at least 2 million more. Kazakhstan also received one million doses of Sinopharm's Vero Cell vaccine in August 2021 and 500,000 doses of Sinovac's CoronaVac in June 2021.<sup>34</sup> In April 2021, Kazakhstan introduced its own QazVac vaccine and claimed that it was 96 % effective well before clinical trials were completed. Interestingly Kazakhstan's President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev opted for the Sputnik V vaccine prior to QazVac's release.<sup>35</sup>

Mongolia later accepted a donation of 300,000 doses of the Chinese Sinopharm vaccine and purchased additional doses of the Chinese vaccine, as well as the AstraZeneca, Pfizer, and Sputnik V vaccines, though the Prime Minister Oyun-Erdene Luvsannamsrai and the Health Minister, Enkhbold Sereejav, the first two Mongolians to be vaccinated, received the Oxford/AstraZeneca vaccine.<sup>36</sup> Although nearly half of Mongolians were vaccinated by the summer of 2021, mostly with the Sinopharm vaccine, Mongolia experienced a spike in cases, leading to questions about the effectiveness of the Chinese vaccine against new variants.<sup>37</sup> Thanks to a grant from

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<sup>32</sup> Reuters, "Vaccine Diplomacy: India Seeks to Rival China with Broad Shipments," *US News and World Report*, February 7, 2021, <https://www.usnews.com/news/world/articles/2021-02-07/vaccine-diplomacy-india-seeks-to-rival-china-with-broad-shipments>.

<sup>33</sup> "Kazakhstan to Roll Out First Locally Produced Sputnik Vaccine," *Medical Express*, February 16, 2021, <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2021-02-kazakhstan-locally-sputnik-vaccine.html>.

<sup>34</sup> "Dashboard: Vaccinating Eurasia – August," *Eurasianet*, August 16, 2021, <https://eurasianet.org/dashboard-vaccinating-eurasia-august>.

<sup>35</sup> David Meyer, "A New Vaccine on the Scene: Kazakhstan Begins Rollout of Home-grown QazVac," *Fortune*, April 26, 2021, accessed February 8, 2022, <https://fortune.com/2021/04/26/new-covid-19-vaccine-kazakhstan-qazvac/>.

<sup>36</sup> Uranbileg Tumurkhuyag, "Mongolia Starts Its COVID-19 Vaccinations," *The Diplomat*, February 26, 2021, accessed April 5, 2021, <https://thediplomat.com/2021/02/mongolia-starts-its-covid-19-vaccinations/>.

<sup>37</sup> Sui-Lee Wee, "They Relied on Chinese Vaccines. Now They're Battling Outbreaks," *The New York Times*, June 22, 2021, accessed February 8, 2022, sec. Business, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/06/22/business/economy/china-vaccines-covid-outbreak.html>.

Japan, Mongolia subsequently received 2.5 million doses of the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine from COVAX.<sup>38</sup>

Uzbekistan, which has long sought to maintain its freedom of maneuver with Russia and China, has approved both Sputnik V and trials of two Chinese vaccines (Sinopharm and Anhui Zhifei Longcom Biopharmaceutical).<sup>39</sup> Although there was some criticism in social media about participating as “guinea pigs” in the Chinese trials,<sup>40</sup> Uzbekistan sees an opportunity to produce the vaccine, now called ZF-UZ-VAC2001, locally. Uzbekistan is also producing the Sputnik V vaccine. The US donated 3 million doses of the Moderna vaccine to Uzbekistan in July 2021 and the country also received 710,000 doses of AstraZeneca.<sup>41</sup> Kyrgyzstan received a donation of 150,000 doses of China’s Sinopharm vaccine, subsequently purchased an additional 1.5 million doses of the Chinese vaccine, and has contracted half a million doses of Sputnik V.<sup>42</sup> Kyrgyzstan also received donations of the QazVac and AstraZeneca vaccines.<sup>43</sup>

Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and Kyrgyzstan are eligible for the World Health Organization’s COVAX initiative, which will provide vaccine access to developing countries.<sup>44</sup> While China is slated to contribute 10 million doses to the initiative, Kyrgyzstan also expects to access the U.K.’s Oxford-AstraZeneca vaccine and possibly some other European and American

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<sup>38</sup> Bolor Lkhaajav, “How Mongolia Turned the Tides of the Pandemic,” *The Diplomat*, December 9, 2021, accessed February 8, 2022, <https://thediplomat.com/2021/12/how-mongolia-turned-the-tides-of-the-pandemic/>.

<sup>39</sup> “Uzbekistan Begins Phase III Trials of Chinese Vaccine,” *Medical Xpress*, December 10, 2020, <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2020-12-uzbekistan-phase-trials-chinese-vaccine.html>.

<sup>40</sup> Umida Hashimova, “Uzbekistan to Host Chinese Vaccine Trials,” *The Diplomat*, November 9, 2020, <https://thediplomat.com/2020/11/uzbekistan-to-host-chinese-vaccine-trials/>.

<sup>41</sup> “Dashboard: Vaccinating Eurasia – August.”

<sup>42</sup> Tolkun Namatbayeva, “Kyrgyzstan Starts Vaccine Rollout With China’s Sinopharm,” *Barron’s*, March 29, 2021, accessed April 20, 2021, <https://www.barrons.com/news/kyrgyzstan-begins-vaccine-rollout-with-china-s-sinopharm-01617012906>.

<sup>43</sup> Anastasia Bengard, “COVID-19: Will Kyrgyzstan Buy Russian Sputnik V Vaccine?” *24.kg*, July 29, 2021, [https://24.kg/english/202531\\_COVID-19\\_Will\\_Kyrgyzstan\\_buy-Russian\\_Sputnik\\_V\\_vaccine/](https://24.kg/english/202531_COVID-19_Will_Kyrgyzstan_buy-Russian_Sputnik_V_vaccine/).

<sup>44</sup> World Health Organization, COVAX, <https://www.who.int/initiatives/act-accelerator/covax>, accessed April 18, 2021.

vaccines via COVAX.<sup>45</sup> Tajikistan, too, is slated to receive the Oxford-AstraZeneca vaccine through COVAX,<sup>46</sup> though it also discusses receiving supplies of Sputnik V from Russia.<sup>47</sup> An Economist Intelligence Unit study predicted that COVAX was unlikely to be able to vaccinate many developing countries,<sup>48</sup> including most of the Central Asian states, until the end of 2023, making alternatives more attractive in these countries. Vaccine preferences in Central Asia mirror some of the complex foreign policy choices these states must navigate as they seek to emerge from the pandemic.<sup>49</sup> Vaccine hesitancy remains a major barrier – in Kazakhstan, for example, where vaccines are widely available, just 49 % of the population was fully vaccinated as of February 2022,<sup>50</sup> and there is a thriving black market in fake vaccine certificates.

China's claim of success in keeping COVID-19 at bay has enhanced the priority of vaccine diplomacy over domestic inoculation.<sup>51</sup> Initially in 2020 the vaccine rate in China (3 doses per 100 people) was much lower than in the US (15 doses per 100 people) and it was feared that vaccine shortages

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<sup>45</sup> Paul Bartlett, "Russia Pulls Ahead of China in Central Asia Vaccine Diplomacy," *Nikkei Asia*, February 7, 2021, <https://asia.nikkei.com/Spotlight/Coronavirus/Russia-pulls-ahead-of-China-in-Central-Asia-vaccine-diplomacy>. After suspending its order for AstraZeneca due to revelations of complications in a small number of recipients, Kyrgyzstan later reaffirmed its contract for the vaccine via COVAX. See Anastasia Bengard, "COVID-19: Kyrgyzstan Expects 405,000 Doses of AstraZeneca Vaccine," *24.Kg News Agency*, April 14, 2021, [https://24.kg/english/190103\\_COVID-19\\_Kyrgyzstan\\_expects\\_405000\\_doses\\_of\\_AstraZeneca\\_vaccine/](https://24.kg/english/190103_COVID-19_Kyrgyzstan_expects_405000_doses_of_AstraZeneca_vaccine/).

<sup>46</sup> ASIA-Plus, "Tajikistan Expected to Receive 732,000 Doses of AstraZeneca/ Oxford Jab," *Kabar*, February 5, 2021, <http://en.kabar.kg/news/tajikistan-expected-to-receive-732-000-doses-of-astrazeneca-oxford-jab/>.

<sup>47</sup> Russiart, "Tajikistan Discusses with Russia the Issue of Supplying Sputnik V Vaccine," *Teller Report*, December 24, 2020, [https://www.tellerreport.com/news/2020-12-24-%0A--tajikistan-discusses-with-russia-the-issue-of-supplying-sputnik-v-vaccine%0A--r1\\_CzVzfTD.html](https://www.tellerreport.com/news/2020-12-24-%0A--tajikistan-discusses-with-russia-the-issue-of-supplying-sputnik-v-vaccine%0A--r1_CzVzfTD.html).

<sup>48</sup> Anelia Boshnakova, "EIU Report Warns of Significant Delays in Global Coronavirus Vaccine Rollout," *The Economist*, February 10, 2021, <https://eiuerspectives.economist.com/healthcare/eiu-report-warns-significant-delays-global-coronavirus-vaccine-rollout>.

<sup>49</sup> Gregory Gleason and Kuralay Baizakova, "COVID-19 in the Central Asian Region: National Responses and Regional Implications," *Connections: The Quarterly Journal* 19, no. 2 (2020): 112, <https://doi.org/10.11610/Connections.19.2.08>.

<sup>50</sup> Ritchie et al., "Coronavirus Pandemic (COVID-19)."

<sup>51</sup> Linda Lew, Mandy Zuo, and Simone McCarthy, "China Tilts to COVID-19 Vaccine Diplomacy as Domestic Jag Programme Lags," *South China Morning Post*, February 15, 2021, <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy/article/3121766/china-tilts-covid-19-vaccine-diplomacy-domestic-jag-programme>.

would make this goal unattainable.<sup>52</sup> These bottlenecks were resolved eventually and, by February 2022, 85 % of the Chinese population had been vaccinated.<sup>53</sup> However, lower efficacy compared to other approved vaccines, as well as China's stringent zero COVID policy, may prevent Chinese people from achieving herd immunity and put them at risk of future outbreaks. Curiously, as it sends its own vaccines abroad, China has purchased 100 million doses of the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine<sup>54</sup> to inoculate its population by the end of 2021.<sup>55</sup> China plans to produce the vaccine domestically to use as a booster shot, attesting to concerns about the efficacy of domestic vaccines against new variants.<sup>56</sup>

While many of China's immediate neighbors have opted for Sputnik V, China has been more successful in finding markets for its vaccines in Latin America and Africa, where it had been engaged in cooperation in the health sector before the pandemic.<sup>57</sup> China also has deftly leveraged vaccine supplies in exchange for other benefits from other countries. A delay in Turkey's receipt of Sinovac vaccines led to speculation that China has been seeking to pressure the Turkish parliament to sign an extradition treaty that would pave the way for repatriating Uyghurs to China.<sup>58</sup> Vaccine deals with

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<sup>52</sup> Samantha Kiernan and Yanzhong Huang, "China Cannot Win the Great Vaccine Diplomacy Game without Vaccines," *Nikkei Asia*, April 18, 2021, accessed April 20, 2021, <https://asia.nikkei.com/Opinion/China-cannot-win-the-great-vaccine-diplomacy-game-without-vaccines>.

<sup>53</sup> Ritchie et al., "Coronavirus Pandemic (COVID-19)"; Yanzhong Huang, "China's Immunity Gap," *Foreign Affairs*, January 26, 2022, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/china/2022-01-26/chinas-immunity-gap>.

<sup>54</sup> This vaccine, sold under the name Comirnaty, is a vaccine created by the German company BioNTech and then jointly developed with the US company Pfizer (remark by the editor).

<sup>55</sup> "China Secures 100 Million Doses of BioNTech Vaccine," *Bloomberg News*, December 16, 2020, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2020-12-16/china-secures-100-million-doses-of-biontech-shot-to-boost-supply>.

<sup>56</sup> Bao Zhiming, Zhu Siyan and Denise Jia, "China to Use BioNTech Vaccine as Booster Shot, Sources Say," *Nikkei Asia*, July 15, 2021 accessed February 8, 2022, <https://asia.nikkei.com/Spotlight/Caixin/China-to-use-BioNTech-vaccine-as-booster-shot-sources-say>.

<sup>57</sup> Frank Mouritz, "Implications of the COVID-19 Pandemic on China's Belt and Road Initiative," *Connections: The Quarterly Journal* 19, no. 2 (2020): 123, <https://doi.org/10.11610/Connections.19.2.09>.

<sup>58</sup> Bill Bostock, "Turkey Is Accused of Extraditing Uighur Muslims to China in Exchange for COVID-19 Vaccines," *Business Insider*, January 16, 2021, <https://www.businessinsider.com/turkey-accused-of-extraditing-uighur-muslims-for-china-coronavirus-vaccine-2021-1>.

Middle East countries could expand China's geopolitical clout in the region, and donations to Southeast Asian states could be a *quid pro quo* for agreement to Chinese positions on South China Sea maritime disputes.<sup>59</sup> Donations of Chinese vaccines also have been seen as a mechanism to encourage their approval in some countries such as the Philippines and Nepal.<sup>60</sup> China reportedly threatened to stop delivery of 500,000 vaccine doses for Ukraine unless the country withdrew its signature from a United Nations Human Rights Council document that demanded an independent investigation of China's treatment of the Uyghurs.<sup>61</sup>

Vaccines are being used for political leverage in cross-straits relations as well. Taiwan's health minister Chen Shih-Chung claimed in February 2021 that pressure from China led to the collapse of a December 2020 deal for five million doses of the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine, produced in China by a joint venture with a Chinese company, Fosun Pharma. Taiwan receives vaccine supplies from several countries (including 4 million doses of Moderna from the US, 3.4 million doses of AstraZeneca from Japan, and more than 250,000 doses of AstraZeneca from Lithuania)<sup>62</sup> though *not* China, despite Beijing's offer to provide it with free vaccines on a priority ba-

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<sup>59</sup> Kristina Jovanovski, "Vaccines Offer China Increased Leverage in the Middle East," *The Jerusalem Post*, February 8, 2021, <https://www.jpost.com/middle-east/vaccines-offer-china-increased-leverage-in-the-middle-east-658177>; Abigail Ng, "Developing Nations Are First in Line for China's COVID Vaccines. Analysts Question Beijing's Intent," *CNBC*, December 9, 2020, <https://www.cnbc.com/2020/12/10/covid-china-may-be-using-its-vaccines-to-expand-its-soft-power.html>.

<sup>60</sup> Neil Arwin Mercado, "Gov't Should Not Be Pressured by China's Donation of COVID-19 Vaccine, says Pangilinan," *inquirer.net*, January 17, 2021, <https://news.info.inquirer.net/1384697/china-should-not-pressure-ph-govt-to-approve-use-of-its-vaccine-pangilinan>; "China Pressured Nepal to Accept Its Vaccine: Leaked Documents," *The Tribune*, February 8, 2021, <https://www.tribuneindia.com/news/world/china-pressured-nepal-to-accept-its-vaccine-leaked-documents-209290>.

<sup>61</sup> Elizabeth Wishnick, "Ukraine: China's Burning Bridge to Europe?" *The Diplomat*, February 02, 2022, accessed February 8, 2022, <https://thediplomat.com/2022/02/ukraine-chinas-burning-bridge-to-europe/>.

<sup>62</sup> Michael Martina, "U.S. Gives 1.5 Million More COVID-19 Vaccine Doses to Taiwan," *Reuters*, November 1, 2021, accessed February 8, 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/us-gives-15-million-more-covid-19-vaccine-doses-taiwan-2021-10-31/>; Office of the President, Republic of China (Taiwan), "Presidential Office Thanks Japan for Fourth COVID-19 Vaccine Donation," September 7, 2021, accessed February 8, 2022, <https://english.president.gov.tw/NEWS/6160>; Reuters, "Lithuania Donates More COVID-19 Vaccines to Taiwan," *Reuters*, September 22, 2021, sec. Europe, <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/lithuania-donates-more-covid-19-vaccines-taiwan-2021-09-22/>.

sis.<sup>63</sup> Taiwan's epidemic command center has banned Chinese vaccines due to incomplete data about their efficacy and risks.<sup>64</sup> Taiwan also rolled out its own vaccine, Medigen, in August 2021.

A speedy end to the pandemic depends on global access to vaccines. Despite promises by the WHO to aid poorer nations, the vaccine rollout has been far from smooth and has highlighted the geopolitical stakes involved. While the focus has been on great power competition,<sup>65</sup> vaccine nationalism is more than a race to inoculate the world between the US and Europe on one side and China and Russia on the other. Chinese and Russian vaccines are in direct competition with one another, especially farther afield in the post-Soviet space and the Balkans.<sup>66</sup> Belarus embraced Sputnik V but, not surprisingly, Ukraine opted for Sinovac. Others, like Georgia, hope for western vaccines while poorer countries like Moldova look to COVAX. Delays in EU vaccines reaching the Balkans have led to Sino-Russian competition for market share there.<sup>67</sup>

### COVID-19 Origins: A Fishy Business or Red Herring?

As they compete to provide vaccines to their foreign partners, China and Russia are in danger of losing hold of their joint messaging on the pandemic's origins. China has sought to blame the introduction of COVID-19 into

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<sup>63</sup> Yimou Lee, "Vaccines Become Latest Frontline in China's Campaign to Win Hearts of Taiwanese," *Reuters*, January 21, 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-taiwan-china-vaccine/vaccines-become-latest-frontline-in-chinas-campaign-to-win-hearts-of-taiwanese-idUKKBN29Q0A5>.

<sup>64</sup> Hwang Chun-mei, "Taiwan's Ban on Chinese COVID-19 Vaccines Will Remain, Despite Report," *Radio Free Asia*, January 26, 2021, <https://www.rfa.org/english/news/china/vaccines-01262021115903.html>.

<sup>65</sup> Eyck Freymann and Justin Stebbing, "China Is Winning the Vaccine Race," *Foreign Affairs*, November 5, 2020, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/2020-11-05/china-winning-vaccine-race>; Leng Shumei, Zhang Hongpei, and Hu Yuwei, "China Likely to Take Lead along Russia in Accelerated Global Vaccine Race: Experts," *Global Times*, December 8, 2020, [www.globaltimes.cn/content/1197596.shtml](http://www.globaltimes.cn/content/1197596.shtml).

<sup>66</sup> Asli Aydıntaşbaş et al., "The Geopolitics of COVID Vaccines in Europe's Eastern Neighbourhood," *European Council on Foreign Relations*, January 27, 2021, <https://ecfr.eu/article/the-geopolitics-of-covid-vaccines-in-europes-eastern-neighbourhood/>.

<sup>67</sup> Reid Standish, "China's Strategic Vaccine Diplomacy Gains a Foothold in the Balkans," *Radio Free Europe*, February 16, 2021, <https://www.rferl.org/a/china-strategic-vaccine-diplomacy-gains-a-foothold-in-the-balkans/31106320.html>.

the country on frozen food, including fish from Russia, crippling its exports. Some 60 % of Russian fish, mostly from the Russian Far East,<sup>68</sup> is exported to China, which has refused to accept it since COVID-19 traces were found on Russian frozen fish in Jilin in September 2020. Faced with more than \$ 3 billion in losses, Russian fish exporters had to find other markets in Southeast Asia and even in Africa while officials try to negotiate an end to the Chinese ban.<sup>69</sup>

Although most experts argue that the virus was most likely transmitted by a bat to a wild animal sold in China,<sup>70</sup> the WHO mission to China in February 2021 declared the possibility of transmission via frozen food worthy of future study,<sup>71</sup> perhaps in an effort to assuage Chinese sensibilities and encourage greater data sharing. However, the US Department of Agriculture and FDA have rejected that interpretation, claiming that “there is no credible evidence of food or food packaging associated with or as a likely source of viral transmission” of COVID-19.<sup>72</sup>

The WHO did reject as “extremely unlikely” the theory, still propagated by Chinese officials, of the virus originating in a US military lab (or in a Chinese lab, as some in the Trump Administration had argued).<sup>73</sup> Despite this

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<sup>68</sup> “Russian proposals on fish remained unanswered in China – Presidential Plenipotentiary Envoy to the Far Eastern Federal District,” *PrimaMedia.ru*, February 9, 2021, <https://primamedia.ru/news/1058712/> – in Russian.

<sup>69</sup> Olga Solovieva, “Coronavirus Forced Russia to Look for New Buyers of Fish,” *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, January 19, 2021, [https://www.ng.ru/economics/2021-01-19/1\\_8060\\_fish.html](https://www.ng.ru/economics/2021-01-19/1_8060_fish.html) – in Russian.

<sup>70</sup> Betsy McKay, Jeremy Page, and Drew Hinshaw, “In Hunt for COVID-19 Origin, WHO Team Focuses on Two Animal Types in China,” *The Wall Street Journal*, February 18, 2021, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/in-hunt-for-covid-19-origin-who-team-focuses-on-two-animal-types-in-china-11613665015>.

<sup>71</sup> Javier C. Hernández, “China Scores a Public Relations Win After W.H.O. Mission to Wuhan,” *The New York Times*, February 9, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/02/09/world/asia/wuhan-china-who-covid.html>.

<sup>72</sup> Janet Woodcock, “COVID-19 Update: USDA, FDA Underscore Current Epidemiologic and Scientific Information Indicating No Transmission of COVID-19 Through Food or Food Packaging,” *US Food and Drug Administration*, February 18, 2021, <https://www.fda.gov/news-events/press-announcements/covid-19-update-usda-fda-underscore-current-epidemiologic-and-scientific-information-indicating-no>.

<sup>73</sup> WHO, COVID-19 Virtual Press Conference Transcript – 9 February 2021, <https://www.who.int/publications/m/item/covid-19-virtual-press-conference-transcript--9-february-2021>; James Griffiths and Yong Xiong, “As the WHO Investigated Coronavirus Origins in China, Beijing Pushed a Conspiracy about the US,” *CNN*, February

apparent setback in their messaging, Chinese media triumphantly reported the WHO's press conference statement that the virus origin would be fully explored and need "not be bound to any location."<sup>74</sup> However, China's eagerness to uncover a foreign origin for the pandemic now threatens its message of collaboration with Russia in pursuit of its Health Silk Road diplomacy and creates a new irritant in Sino-Russian regional relations, always the weakest link in their partnership.

## Conclusions

COVID-19 has both highlighted the commonalities in the Chinese and Russian approaches to the pandemic and accentuated their differences. China has sought to reframe the narrative by calling attention to its Health Silk Road diplomacy – sending protective equipment and vaccines, especially to developing countries, but also to friendlier European states. At the same time, Chinese authorities have been slow to release data about their vaccines and unwilling to provide the scientific community with the access needed for a comprehensive study of the virus' origins. Emerging data about the low efficacy of Chinese vaccines<sup>75</sup> and evidence of *quid pro quos* for their use will do little to change the pandemic narrative in the direction Beijing desires. Moreover, the intense media focus on the incarceration of Uyghurs in Xinjiang further distracts attention from China's efforts to highlight its positive contributions to global governance.

Russia has been equally criticized for authorizing Sputnik V in advance of Stage III trials, though what data has been released appears to vindicate its claims for efficacy and safety. Nevertheless, the WHO and the EU have yet to approve Sputnik V for use, which has led many countries, including the US, to refuse to recognize the Sputnik V as a valid vaccine, posing a problem not just for Russians but for millions of other people who received the

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18, 2021, <https://www.cnn.com/2021/02/18/asia/china-coronavirus-disinformation-fort-detrick-intl-hnk/index.html>.

<sup>74</sup> Wang Xiaoyu, Zhang Zhihao, and Liu Kun, "WHO Team: Probe of Virus' Origin Should Not Be 'Geographically Bound,'" *The China Daily*, February 10, 2021, <http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/a/202102/10/WS60231905a31024ad0baa86d1.html>; COVID-19 Virtual Press Conference Transcript.

<sup>75</sup> Kiernan and Huang, "China Cannot Win the Great Vaccine Diplomacy Game."

jab.<sup>76</sup> With safety concerns emerging about the AstraZeneca and Johnson & Johnson vaccines, developing countries, in particular, are faced with a conundrum. Interestingly, most of the countries in China's Silk Road neighborhood thus far seem to prefer Sputnik V, attesting to the longer history of scientific cooperation with Moscow and the underlying concerns over China's growing footprint in the region.

Like China, Russia's apparently successful neighborhood vaccine diplomacy contrasts with problems at home with vaccine production and the quality of domestically produced equipment, such as ventilators.<sup>77</sup> In Europe, despite Russia's lack of transparency with vaccine data, the initially slow rollout of British and EU vaccines increased the appeal of Sputnik V in some European capitals, providing a rare avenue of potential cooperation at an otherwise fraught geopolitical juncture. The Russian vaccine remains controversial due to lingering doubts about the efficacy and safety of Sputnik V – the government of Slovakia actually fell after a scientific analysis raised questions about the quality of the delivered Russian vaccine.<sup>78</sup> Slovakia is one of two EU countries (Hungary is the second) authorizing the use of Sputnik V prior to formal EU approval. Despite some success in vaccine diplomacy, Russia's own vaccine hesitancy and distribution delays have tarnished Sputnik V's reputation. Of more than 600 million orders placed in 2021, just 80 million were fulfilled.<sup>79</sup>

What of the Sino-Russian partnership? The pandemic neither attests to its contingent nature nor reveals an authoritarian axis against COVID. While

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<sup>76</sup> Adam Taylor, "New U.S. Travel Rules Close Door on Those Fully Vaccinated with Russia's Sputnik V," *The Washington Post*, September 27, 2021, accessed February 8, 2022, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2021/09/27/us-travellers-sputnik-russia/>.

<sup>77</sup> Yatsyk, "'From Russia With Love.'" Fires attributed to Russian ventilators, initially slated for sale to the US, led FEMA to ban their use.

<sup>78</sup> Dalibor Rohac, "Sputnik V's Biggest Legacy May Be Political Turmoil," *Foreign Policy* (blog), April 14, 2021, accessed April 20, 2021, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/04/14/sputnik-vs-biggest-legacy-may-be-political-turmoil/>.

<sup>79</sup> Adam Taylor, "Beijing and Moscow Are Losing the Vaccine Diplomacy Battle," *The Washington Post*, January 11, 2022, accessed February 8, 2022, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2022/01/11/china-russia-omicron-vaccine/>; Ian Hill, "Russia and China's Vaccine Diplomacy: Not Quite the Geopolitical Slam Dunk," *Australian Institute of International Affairs* (blog), September 14, 2021, accessed February 8, 2022, <https://www.internationalaffairs.org.au/australianoutlook/russia-and-chinas-vaccine-diplomacy-not-quite-the-geopolitical-slam-dunk/>.

they agree on certain rules of authoritarian governance, such as media manipulation in service of the regime, and face a common primary opponent in the United States, the two countries play different roles in vaccine diplomacy. China, the rising power, seeks out targets of opportunity among new partners in Latin America and Africa, while Russia has used Sputnik V to reconnect with the neighbors and remind former friends of Russia's erstwhile scientific prowess. In Eurasia, India has emerged as a key producer of vaccines, including Sputnik V, and has offered other alternatives to states preferring not to choose between Russia and China, as the US and EU continue to be distracted by their own domestic needs.

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# Russia's More Than Sputnik V Diplomacy

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**Abstract:** This article presents the efforts and achievements of the Russian Federation to appear as an actor in the world with its own nationally developed vaccine(s) and thus contribute to fighting the coronavirus pandemic. This made Russia independent of the vaccines produced in other countries since it could autonomously supply its domestic market. Furthermore, as the announcement of the first vaccine that Russia declared to have developed had come months before vaccines developed elsewhere, Moscow wanted to gain recognition for its achievement and to market its product internationally. Both turned out to be ambitious, though not impossible. This article presents an analysis of how Russia prepared (or did not prepare) for appearing in the highly competitive and trust-based vaccine market. Trust of the customers that have a choice to decide by which vaccine to be injected. It also presents how various actors (the EU and its dedicated agency, states, certifying institutions, the research community, and companies) positioned themselves to support or contest the market access of the Russian vaccine. The situation has evolved amidst heightened tension between Russia and the West that raises the question of whether vaccine diplomacy could be singled out or it could not be understood without interpreting it as part and parcel, if not a hostage, of a broader array of the relations.

**Keywords:** coronavirus, COVID-19, pandemic, Russia, Sputnik V.

## Introduction

Soon after the outbreak of the coronavirus epidemic in China around November 2019, the spread of the virus left no doubt about the coming of a global pandemic. States reacted individually with some lax coordination by the World Health Organization (WHO). Beyond the immediate reaction by personal protection, several large countries started to develop longer-term protective measures, including vaccines. Development went in parallel in China, Germany, Russia, the UK, the US, and for some time France, whereas other states concluded that their capacity and expertise would not make a sufficiently fast development possible and stayed out of the race. The states that made efforts to develop an anti-COVID vaccine were called the group of 13, following the number of states involved.

States with recent experience of tackling infectious diseases, such as Taiwan and the Republic of Korea (ROK) (bird flu), were better prepared than most. However, this article focuses on how states reacted when it was understood how severe the challenge was. Thus, this study addresses three questions: 1. How did the states generally assess the pandemic disease? 2. How did states react to address the disease? And 3. How did they communicate with society?

1. How did the states assess the pandemic disease? States understood how severe the challenge was, and thus only as an exception a country concluded that the disease could be denied. Turkmenistan and the DPRK attempted it. Ashgabat continued to speak about pneumonia cases even 15 months after the outbreak of COVID-19. Other states that did not share the mainstream assessment remained more on the side of belittling the weight of the problem rather than denying it.
2. How did states react to address the disease? The reactions demonstrated that in terms of assessing the risks of the virus, the world largely acted as a global village. States followed the same rules, introduced lockdowns and travel restrictions, protected the most vulnerable population groups, the elderly in particular, and made attempts to increase healthcare capacity. Of course, states might differ in style and the degree of securitization of the virus. Russia, for example, occasionally called "lockdown" a "public holiday." Yet, it remained exceptional that a state deviated substantively from the overwhelming majority.
3. How did states communicate with society? In contrast to the two points above, where, apart from a few exceptions, the world followed the same direction in addressing COVID-19, the communication of the states varied significantly. It was expected that authoritarian regimes and democracies would communicate in this crisis differently. The former use the language of instruction, introduce administrative measures, apply enforcement and often harsh sanctions, and expect the population to follow unconditionally. As the spectrum of authoritarian regimes has become more varied, their reaction was by far not identical. While the most populous state of

the world, China, extended harsh sweeping measures and systematically enforced them, the state spread out on the world's largest territory, Russia, remained far more hesitant in its reactions and represented some kind of middle ground. Moscow, for example, remained ambiguous on how it is assessing the outbreak and, given the declining popularity of the leadership, avoided measures that could have resulted in large-scale alienation of the population. The Russian reaction remained measured and economical with the truth as far as the situation.<sup>1</sup> Lasting lockdowns were eased by social measures and partial compensation for lost salaries. At the same time, volunteers helped the elderly follow the state decrees and isolate themselves by shopping for primary commodities. However, the measures did not help those many people that were "informally" employed. The population was obedient due not only to Soviet traditions but also to their insights into the reality of Russian healthcare, where hospitalization and intensive therapy often carried higher risks than in the West. The healthcare shortfalls were also demonstrated in the rapid erection of new hospital buildings with heavy reliance on the military construction service.

Democracies had to convince the population and bring it on board to follow the government based on acceptance. However, the reaction of democracies was not identical either. In some democratic states, the leadership underestimated the severity of the situation at the onset or more lastingly and communicated accordingly. Populist messages prevented timely reaction and contributed to human suffering, including the loss of human life. Brazil, the UK, and the US certainly belonged in this category.<sup>2</sup> However, the latter two soon changed their course and joined the mainstream. Other

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<sup>1</sup> Statistics based on the calculation of excess deaths "which some epidemiologists say are the best way to measure the true toll from COVID-19" indicate approximately 929,000 excess deaths in Russia between April 2020 and the end of December 2021 significantly higher than published by the Russian statistical agency, Rosstat, for the same period. "Russia's Excess Death Toll Hits 930K," *The Moscow Times*, December 30, 2021, accessed February 7, 2022, <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2021/12/30/russias-excess-death-toll-hits-930k-a75964>.

<sup>2</sup> Two years after the outbreak of the Coronavirus pandemic, the first publications appear that provide empirical analysis on the correctness of this observation. Michael Bayerlein et al., "Populism and COVID-19: How Populist Governments (Mis)Handle the Pandemic," *Journal of Political Institutions and Political Economy* 2, no. 3 (2021): 389-428, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1561/113.00000043>.

countries, including Denmark, Germany, New Zealand, and those most severely hit early in the pandemic, like Italy and Spain, opted for honest and mature communication with the population. Still, those states also faced a challenge. Namely, the people did not want to lose their liberty lastingly.

## The Vaccines

It was clear that a lasting solution for the pandemic would come about only through the wide-ranging vaccination of the world's population. Extensive vaccination reduces loss of life and human sacrifice, relieves the health services, and decreases the collateral damage due to the shortage of capacity to treat unrelated illnesses. It was also important to reduce the burden on governments by reopening their countries, starting economic recovery, and alleviating the pressure to return individual liberty to the people according to the foundations of their political systems.

In early 2020 vaccination research started and continued in parallel. Some Western companies, notably Pfizer/BioNTech and Moderna, opted for the so-called mRNA technology. In that case, the molecule uses a genetic code to make the antigen protein specific to COVID-19. This code tells our body to make the antigen itself, prompting an immune response. Johnson and Johnson's vaccine takes a small amount of genetic material from the coronavirus and combines it with a weakened version of a common cold virus called adenovirus.<sup>3</sup> Both technologies have been used before. The mRNA technology was used against the Zika virus, bird flu, and herpes, whereas the adenovirus was used for the Ebola and tuberculosis vaccines. AstraZeneca is using the modified chimpanzee adenovirus as a vector. Such "viral vector vaccines use a harmless virus to deliver a piece of genetic code to our cells, allowing them to make a pathogen's protein. This trains the immune system to react to future infections."<sup>4</sup> With this, AstraZeneca, Johnson & Johnson, and Sputnik V are based on a similar mechanism of action.

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<sup>3</sup> Scripps National, "Johnson & Johnson's Vaccine Uses Different Technology than Moderna, Pfizer's," *The Denver Channel*, March 2, 2021, accessed May 2, 2021, <https://www.thedenverchannel.com/news/national/coronavirus/johnson-johnsons-vaccine-uses-different-technology-than-moderna-pfizers>.

<sup>4</sup> Yella Hewings-Martin, "COVID-19: How Do Viral Vector Vaccines Work?," *Medical News Today Newsletter*, January 15, 2021, accessed May 2, 2021, [www.medicalnewstoday.com/articles/covid-19-how-do-viral-vector-vaccines-work](http://www.medicalnewstoday.com/articles/covid-19-how-do-viral-vector-vaccines-work).

Interestingly, in the case of the two former vaccines, causing rare blood clots was identified as a problem that resulted in the restriction of their use in the European Union.<sup>5</sup> However, no similar problem was identified with the first Russian vaccine. The two Chinese and the Indian vaccines use inactivated viruses.

Russia started developing a coronavirus vaccine at three research institutes, the Gamaleya Research Institute of Epidemiology and Microbiology, the State Research Centre of Virology and Biotechnology VECTOR, and the Chumakov Institute of Poliomyelitis and Viral Encephalitis of the Russian Academy of Medical Sciences. While the Russian media focused public attention on the VECTOR effort based in Novosibirsk, the Gamaleya Institute in Moscow was ready with the first and still most widely used vaccine, Sputnik V. The first registered Russian vaccine did not rely on the most sophisticated and modern technology. Instead, it chose the “safe way” and used well-established “old technology.”

“The researchers developed their vaccine from adenoviruses, a kind of virus that causes colds. They added the gene for the coronavirus spike protein gene to two types of adenovirus, one called Ad26 and one called Ad5, and engineered them so they could invade cells but not replicate.”<sup>6</sup>

An Austrian virologist hit the nail on its head when he pointed out “Sputnik V is like a Kalashnikov, this Russian rifle: simple, reliable and effective.”<sup>7</sup>

Russian research institutes continued to develop vaccines, including the Gamaleya Institute, whose Sputnik Light one phase vaccine was registered on May 6, 2021. According to the Russian Direct Investment Fund (RDIF) that will provide for its distribution, similarly to other COVID-19 vaccines,

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<sup>5</sup> Sue Hughes, “New Side Effects With AstraZeneca and Janssen COVID-19 Vaccines,” *Medscape*, April 9, 2021, accessed May 5, 2021, <https://www.medscape.com/viewarticle/949048>.

<sup>6</sup> Jonathan Corum and Carl Zimmer, “How Gamaleya’s Vaccine Works,” *The New York Times*, May 7, 2021, accessed May 8, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2021/health/gamaleya-covid-19-vaccine.html>.

<sup>7</sup> Anna Schadrina, “Österreichischer Infektiologe: ‘Sputnik V’ ist wie eine ‘Kalaschnikow’,” *SNA News*, February 21, 2021, accessed May 1, 2021, <https://sna-news.de/20210221/oesterreichischer-infektiologe-sputnik-v-ist-wie-eine-kalaschnikow-999967.html>. Two and a half months later, the Russian President picked up the same expression. “COVID: Putin Says Sputnik Vaccines ‘Reliable as Kalashnikovs’,” *BBC News*, May 6, 2021, accessed May 8, 2021, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-57016265>.

it reported 79.4 efficacy.<sup>8</sup> However, those data were not based on standard clinical trials. The doubts this fact generated could not be dispelled and could only be analyzed by real-world data. Further, as long as those data could be supported by Russian sources exclusively, the doubts have understandably persisted. RDIF claimed that the Russian single-dose vaccine was more effective than some double-dose vaccines, such as three Chinese vaccines and AstraZeneca. Still, it also provides significantly lower efficacy than double dose Pfizer/BioNTech, Moderna, or Sputnik V proper.<sup>9</sup>

The second Russian vaccine, EpiVacCorona, is a so-called peptide vaccine, developed by the VECTOR Institute in Koltsovo (Novosibirsk),<sup>10</sup> approved by the authorities on October 15, 2020. The “vaccine does not contain either the live virus or any elements of the viral genome. In this, it differs from the other Russian vaccine, Sputnik V approved earlier, which was developed on a vector platform (it contains adenoviruses). In this respect, EpiVacCorona is regarded as the safer of the two” ... as “it doesn’t cause an allergic reaction or complications.”<sup>11</sup> It was registered based on phase I and II trials carried out on one hundred people, and without waiting for the phase III trial, just as in the case of Sputnik V. According to the Russian Federal Service for Surveillance on Consumer Rights Protection and Human Well-Being (*Rospotrebnadzor*) it has 100 percent immunological efficiency and efficacy against severe COVID infections. It was 94 percent effective in developing antibodies in people above 60 years of age.<sup>12</sup> Third phase trials were carried out on a sample of three thousand persons. Finally, its use started in April 2021. Curiously, EpiVacCorona was far less pro-

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<sup>8</sup> “Single Dose Vaccine, Sputnik Light, Authorized for Use in Russia,” *Sputnik V*, May 6, 2021, accessed May 8, 2021, <https://sputnikvaccine.com/newsroom/pressreleases/single-dose-vaccine-sputnik-light-authorized-for-use-in-russia/>.

<sup>9</sup> Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation, “COVID-19 Vaccine Efficacy Summary,” April 26, 2021, accessed May 8, 2021, <http://www.healthdata.org/covid/covid-19-vaccine-efficacy-summary>.

<sup>10</sup> The VECTOR Institute is the successor of the Soviet microbiology institute that was part of the so-called Biopreparat network of 18 nominally civilian but in fact military research laboratories and centers. The predecessor of VECTOR has been involved in the country’s biological weapons program, including small pox research, since 1974.

<sup>11</sup> Yekaterina Sinelschikova, “What Is Known (and Not Known) about the SECOND Russian COVID-19 Vaccine,” *Russia Beyond the Headlines*, March 31, 2021, accessed May 5, 2021, <https://www.rbth.com/science-and-tech/333611-known-epivaccorona-russian-vaccine>.

<sup>12</sup> Sinelschikova, “What Is Known (and Not Known).”

moted in the international market than Sputnik V, thus raising questions concerning data reliability again.

The third Russian vaccine CoviVac, developed by the Chumakov Institute in Saint Petersburg, was approved in February 2021. The approval process followed the same logic and took place without large-scale clinical trials in contravention to all accepted international vaccine development and safety standards.<sup>13</sup>

### Russian Efforts to Gain International Recognition During the Coronavirus Crisis

The Russian Federation is a status-seeking power that uses a broad variety of means to achieve its objective to be a pole of a multipolar international system, a declared objective of the country for nearly two decades. Russia's aspirations are increasing given its strengths (territory, natural resources, armed forces, nuclear arsenal, capable diplomacy, large security services, propagandist machinery), yet degraded by major weaknesses (absence of high value-adding consumer economy, no role model function, revelations about the extra-judicial activities of its secret services). Like many others, Russia combines cooperation with coercion and blackmail in order to achieve its sought-after status. Over the last 15 or more years, Moscow often relied on a spoiler role, noticing that it is "less costly" than being a cooperative actor.

Not much after the Coronavirus pandemic broke out, Russia seized the opportunity to contribute to its status-seeking by cooperative action.<sup>14</sup> In a highly visible and symbolic act, Russia sent decontamination units and army medical staff in Italy's most severely contaminated area, Lombardy, in March 2020. It consisted of 15 planeloads, including 180 doctors, nurses, ventilators, and masks. This contribution was contrasted with the invisibility of the EU and the fairly limited engagement of a few of its member-

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<sup>13</sup> Polina Ivanova, "Russia Approves Its Third COVID-19 Vaccine, CoviVac," *Reuters*, February 20, 2021, accessed May 5, 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-health-coronavirus-russia-vaccine-idUSKBN2AK07H>.

<sup>14</sup> Graeme P. Herd, "COVID-19, Russian Responses, and President Putin's Operational Code," *Security Insights*, George C. Marshall European Center for Security Studies, April 2020, accessed May 4, 2021, <https://www.marshallcenter.org/de/node/1427>.

states (France, Germany, Poland), hospitalizing Italian patients, supplying masks, a small number of ventilators, and other supplies. The mission was certainly appreciated by the local people and the government of Lombardy. However, there were some discussions when the Italian daily *La Stampa* published three articles claiming that 80 percent of the Russian supplies were substandard, if not outright useless or superfluous.<sup>15</sup> This prompted a strong reaction from the Russian MoD. There are reports according to which

“Russian military experts have chosen to clear terrain and structures in close proximity to US and NATO bases. They directed their services and Kamaz trucks to sanitary facilities, where there were outbreaks of infection, but were also in close proximity to one of the key military bases in the country – Ghedi – which reportedly hosts 150 US nuclear warheads.”<sup>16</sup>

Understandably, this meant the end of the Russian assistance in early May 2020, with Moscow referring to the completion of the tasks while official Italy stayed, understandably, silent.

Whether it is accurate to speak about an intelligence operation, a public diplomacy mission, or genuine humanitarian assistance is difficult to decide and impossible to dissect. It may well be that the mission merged all three activities. It is remarkable how rapidly Russia decided to act upon the Italian request and how it used public diplomacy in its best interest. Although the mission started at a time when Russia was still somewhat belittling the danger of COVID-19, it indicated that the country was able and ready to assist. It has also been clear that the actions of Russia will be subject to various interpretations and, due to a long history, will be closely scrutinized.

While Russia provided lasting support to Italy, it found the opportunity to send certain medical supplies to the US in April 2020. In that case, it did not have the element of a lasting presence; it was simply airlifting medical equipment, including ventilators. Interestingly, the ventilators were pro-

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<sup>15</sup> Jacopo Iacoboni, “Coronavirus e Italia, così l'emergenza rischia di far accettare uno stato d'eccezione,” *La Stampa*, April 14, 2020, accessed May 5, 2020, <https://www.lastampa.it/topnews/primo-piano/2020/04/14/news/coronavirus-e-italia-cosi-l-emergenza-rischia-di-far-accettare-uno-stato-d-eccezione-1.38716360>.

<sup>16</sup> Antoinette Nikolova, “Russian COVID-19 Aid to Italy: PR Stunt or Covert Operation,” *EURACTIV Bulgaria*, May 7, 2020, accessed May 7, 2021, <https://www.euractiv.com/section/defence-and-security/news/russian-covid-19-aid-to-italy-pr-stunt-or-covert-operation/>.

duced by a subsidiary of Rostec, subject to sanctions. The discourse was different on the two sides. Russia emphasized to be a friend of the West generally, the EU and the US specifically, and that its step was purely altruistic. The view of the West was more complex. There some expected that, in turn, Russia wanted to achieve the lifting of sanctions introduced upon the annexation of Crimea. In contrast, others were of the view that they were “part of a broader propaganda campaign of burnishing Russia’s image abroad and existing ties with particular states.”<sup>17</sup> With this, the West moved from those reasons that were striking the eye to either the assumed and perceived reasons or the underlying motivations of Russia. The different starting points in assessing Russia’s activity resulted in different conclusions.

During the summer of 2020, Russia was active primarily in other former Soviet republics. It demonstrated selective support with masks, gowns, test kits, and by sending a limited number of medical professionals. However, help with material continued to dominate, extending to 8 of the other 11 former Soviet republics.<sup>18</sup> An internal dividing line appeared in the post-Soviet space. Western-leaning countries were reluctant to depend upon Russian assistance, while others were glad to welcome it. The process that began in 2020 has continued since. Russia has certainly achieved much with its highly visible and well-marketed assistance to those countries where its position was lastingly strong. According to polling in Central Asia, an

“astounding 75.5 percent of Kyrgyz surveyed ranked Russia as ‘best able’ to help them; 57.8 of Uzbeks said the same and 51.6 percent of Kazakhs did. As for China, 19.1 percent of Kazakhs said Beijing was ‘best able’ to help them, followed by 13.6 percent of Uzbeks and 7.5 percent of Kyrgyz.”<sup>19</sup>

It is also important to mention that older respondents were of the view Russia could help best in the pandemic, whereas younger respondents were of the opinion that other actors, e.g., China and the US, could support their

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<sup>17</sup> Holly Ellyatt, “From Russia with Love? Why the Kremlin’s Coronavirus Aid to the West Is Controversial,” *CNBC*, April 7, 2020, accessed May 5, 2021, <https://www.cnbc.com/2020/04/07/why-the-kremlins-coronavirus-aid-to-the-west-is-controversial.html>.

<sup>18</sup> It was Georgia, Ukraine and Turkmenistan that stayed out of Russian assistance fully. The first and the second due to their political reservations whereas the third due to the denial of COVID-19.

<sup>19</sup> Catherine Putz, “Vaccine Diplomacy in Central Asia: Russia vs. China,” *The Diplomat*, March 5, 2021, accessed May 12, 2021, <https://thediplomat.com/2021/03/vaccine-diplomacy-in-central-asia-russia-vs-china/>.

country more. Consequently, it seems Russia could further consolidate its presence during COVID-19 in those countries where it had had a strong position before.

The Russian Federation announced to have a vaccine, Sputnik V, on August 11, 2020. Minister of Health Mikhail Murashko made the announcement at a meeting of the government that President Putin chaired. It was confirmed there was no other vaccine registered, and hence it was an important matter of national pride to declare to be the first globally.<sup>20</sup>

Nevertheless, it became soon clear that Russia deviated from internationally recognized standards. The vaccine was registered before the phase III clinical trials. This is all the more surprising as the chief scientist of the WHO following meetings in Moscow made it clear: "We will only be able to have a position on a vaccine when we see results of the phase III clinical trials."<sup>21</sup> The recognition was not problem-free later either. The WHO suspended the approval process due to manufacturing infringements identified when its representatives visited a production site in Russia.<sup>22</sup> It took another five months when Sputnik V got its full permanent approval in February 2022.<sup>23</sup> Consequently, the Russian vaccines could not gain international recognition and were not marketable beyond the borders of Russia. However, this was not initially problematic as Russia fairly slowly moved from registration to mass production, and in this period, several other vaccines in the US, and Europe, which had undergone phase III tests, caught up with Russia's Sputnik V. This results in a situation that Russia is quite low on the list of the share of vaccinated people. It is in the 98<sup>th</sup> position in February 2022,

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<sup>20</sup> In reaction to the announcement of Minister of Health, Mikhail Murashko, the president pronounced: "... we had the first registration," Meeting with the members of the government, August 11, 2020, accessed May 7, 2021, <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/63877>.

<sup>21</sup> Anulekha Ray, "COVID-19 Vaccine: WHO in Talks with Russia on Its Second Vaccine EpiVacCorona," *Mint*, October 16, 2020, accessed July 3, 2021 [www.livemint.com/science/health/covid-19-vaccine-who-in-talks-with-russia-on-its-second-vaccine-epivaccorona-11602865577927.html](http://www.livemint.com/science/health/covid-19-vaccine-who-in-talks-with-russia-on-its-second-vaccine-epivaccorona-11602865577927.html).

<sup>22</sup> "Sputnik V: WHO Suspends Approval Process for COVID Vaccine Due to 'Manufacturing' Concerns," *Euronews*, September 16, 2021, accessed February 7, 2022, <https://www.euronews.com/next/2021/09/16/sputnik-v-who-suspends-approval-process-for-covid-vaccine-due-to-manufacturing-concerns>.

<sup>23</sup> "Sputnik V Vaccine Granted Full Permanent Approval in Russia," *Sputnik V*, February 4, 2022, accessed February 8, 2022, <https://sputnikvaccine.com/newsroom/pressreleases/sputnik-v-vaccine-granted-full-permanent-approval-in-russia>.

and it slipped down the list further due to the successful vaccination in several other states – from rank 57 in April 2021 to rank 98 by February 2022.<sup>24</sup>

In line with Russia's desire to be a strategically autonomous actor in the international system, Russia sought to leverage its sizeable Soviet legacy built vaccine research and development capacity to be self-sufficient in the vaccine against the coronavirus. This would allow it to vaccinate its own population safely and cost-effectively without being dependent upon vaccines of any other producer. In addition, Russia could then provide other countries with vaccines developed and produced by Russia or permit their production under license.

There are three aspects to analyze in this regard: 1. International politics, 2. Diplomacy, 3. Economy.

1. If we accept that power distribution is relative in the international system, it is natural that every actor would like to maximize its power. This certainly motivates the Russian Federation as it has been struggling to achieve the status of being a pole of a multipolar international order. The areas where Russia rivals other players, first of all, the West, are all-encompassing. Any emerging issue is interpreted in the framework of its potential use to influence the country's international position favorably. As Russia is a status-seeking power that is not satisfied with the level of recognition it has achieved, great importance is attributed to this in its politics.
2. During the last two decades, Russia has changed its course and realized that its contribution to conflicts and crises could not be restricted to fighting them. It has developed a complementary active humanitarian engagement (and its demonstration) that forms an essential part of its policy. This is noticeable in situations like in Syria, where Russia promotes an illiberal model of conflict management supported by coercive diplomacy.<sup>25</sup> Russia has the capacity to sup-

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<sup>24</sup> Josh Holder, "Tracking Coronavirus Vaccinations Around the World," *The New York Times*, February 8, 2022, accessed February 8, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2021/world/covid-vaccinations-tracker.html>.

<sup>25</sup> David G. Lewis, "Russian Diplomacy and Conflict Management," in *Russia's Global*

port and assist other countries in a variety of ways – COVID provided the opportunity. Russian humanitarian diplomacy brought about partial success. It was also understandable that Russia reacted nervously when its demonstration of goodwill was questioned or set against some of its malign activities.

3. Russia's production of high-value-adding consumer products is among its weaknesses. Most of the income it has realized on the international market derives from selling primary produce (natural resources, energy bearers, and agricultural products) complemented by armaments and equipment. Consequently, the international marketing of competitive consumer goods of high added value, possibly creating a lasting dependency of the customers due to the need to regularly repeat the vaccination (and the early uncertainty of whether the customers can replace one vaccine with another), was quite important for Russia. However, the country was not prepared adequately for competing in a highly competitive market and participating in a multi-level competition that it has entailed.

### The "Battlefields" of Russian Vaccine Diplomacy

When we address vaccine diplomacy, it is meant to have an international element. A state produces vaccines that it intends to sell or donate to other states directly or through some network, framework, or institution. This means domestic activity is not part of vaccine diplomacy. However, it may have international relevance. When Russia, close to the end of 2020, finally was ready to start a vaccination campaign of its own population as its vaccine reached the mass production phase, the willingness of the people to be vaccinated turned out to be a major issue. The situation remained somewhat inconclusive despite the wide-ranging availability of Sputnik V for free to every Russian citizen. The process also highlighted certain problems with reaching out to the population. In January 2021, the situation improved due to the opening of vaccination points in shopping centers of

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*Reach: A Security and Statecraft Assessment*, ed. Graeme P. Herd (Garmisch-Partenkirchen: George C. Marshall European Center for Security Studies, 2021), 109-117, accessed May 4, 2021, [www.marshallcenter.org/en/publications/marshall-center-books/russias-global-reach-security-and-statecraft-assessment/chapter-13-russian-diplomacy-and-conflict-management](http://www.marshallcenter.org/en/publications/marshall-center-books/russias-global-reach-security-and-statecraft-assessment/chapter-13-russian-diplomacy-and-conflict-management).

some cities operating 24/7. It took another three months when Russian health services started to reach out to village-dwellers by road-mobile vaccination. This was absolutely necessary as, due to road conditions, many people could not be vaccinated in villages, including the vulnerable elderly population. Still, at the beginning of May 2021, of a total population of 145 million,<sup>26</sup> there were only approximately 14 million Russians vaccinated.<sup>27</sup> A month later, it was publicized that by the end of June 2021, 16 percent of the Russian population received its first dose, and 12 percent had been fully vaccinated,<sup>28</sup> a sobering result. The public opinion campaign combined with some administrative measures moved the matter ahead, and as of February 2022, the number of vaccinated Russians has reached the following level: 48.21 percent has been fully vaccinated, whereas an additional 4.7 percent received at least one jab. This means that 52.91 percent of the country's population has been vaccinated at least once.<sup>29</sup> Some population group-specific data were already published during May 2021 that could be regarded as part of some kind of a transparency campaign. It was announced that the Russian armed forces procured 850 thousand vaccine doses. More than 800 thousand service members were vaccinated, indicating a nearly comprehensive vaccination in that part of the state apparatus.<sup>30</sup> One of the more credible politicians of Russia, mayor Sergey

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<sup>26</sup> Taking into account the 1.8 million inhabitants of Crimea as well. This does not in any manner mean condoning the annexation of Crimea.

<sup>27</sup> In early May, on the basis of reports from 23 EU member-states to the European Center for Disease Prevention and Control (ECDC), every country got beyond 30 percent of the vaccination of the grown-up population and only three member-states (Croatia, Latvia and Romania) were lagging somewhat behind. However, the process has certainly gained speed in May-June 2021. Daniel Boffey, "COVID Vaccine Roll-out Rapidly Gathering Pace Across Europe," *The Guardian*, May 3, 2021, accessed May 28, 2021, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/may/03/covid-vaccine-rollout-rapidly-gathering-pace-across-europe>. In the U.S., the share of vaccinated adults reached 42.6 percent by May 7, 2021; that means more than one-third of the total population has been vaccinated. See "Nearly a Third of the U.S. Population Is Fully Vaccinated Against COVID-19," *The Wall Street Journal*, May 10, 2021, accessed May 28, 2021, <https://www.wsj.com/livecoverage/covid-2021-05-07>.

<sup>28</sup> Josh Holder, "Tracking Coronavirus Vaccinations Around the World," *The New York Times*, July 2, 2021, accessed July 3, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2021/world/covid-vaccinations-tracker.html>.

<sup>29</sup> "Coronavirus (COVID-19) Vaccinations," *Our World in Data*, accessed February 7, 2022, <https://ourworldindata.org/covid-vaccinations?country=~RUS>.

<sup>30</sup> TASS, "COVID-19 Vaccination Plan in Russia's Armed Forces Completed, Says Defense Chief," May 11, 2021, accessed May 21, 2021, <https://tass.com/defense/1288345>.

Sobyanin shared data on the level of vaccination in Moscow. According to him, as of late May 2021, 1.3 million inhabitants were vaccinated in a city of 12 million people.<sup>31</sup> This indicates that herd immunity will eventually never be achieved in Russia unless administrative measures – that Russia would like to avoid – are taken.<sup>32</sup> Russian media is closely monitoring the administrative measures western democracies have introduced. It remains to be seen whether it is reported in order to indicate that western democracies are using measures that Russia does not (i.e., Russia is more liberal) or it is preparing the ground to introduce administrative measures itself. Whether those data indicate distrust to Sputnik V, vaccination generally, or the regime is open to question. According to the internationally recognized research and opinion polling institution, the Levada Analytical Center, all these factors contributed to the situation at the end of April 2021, when 62 percent of the Russian population was against vaccination.<sup>33</sup> It is among the consequences of this situation that more vaccines could be exported.

President Putin faced a delicate choice: He did not want to change his earlier position to introduce mandatory vaccination. He did not want to take responsibility for an unpopular decision. However, it was clear the propaganda campaign for vaccination, and the somewhat improved organization

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<sup>31</sup> "Moscow's Coronavirus Vaccination Rate Lower Than Any Other European City, Mayor Says," *The Moscow Times*, May 21, 2021, accessed May 22, 2021, [www.themoscowtimes.com/2021/05/21/moscows-coronavirus-vaccination-rate-lower-than-any-other-european-city-mayor-says-a73971](http://www.themoscowtimes.com/2021/05/21/moscows-coronavirus-vaccination-rate-lower-than-any-other-european-city-mayor-says-a73971). Interestingly, the text on the official website of the city of Moscow does not contain this important and worrying reference. "Fight against COVID-19: Sergey Sobyanin spoke about the work of the city's healthcare system," May 21, 2021, accessed May 22, 2021, <https://www.mos.ru/mayor/themes/18299/7360050/> (in Russian), whereas the mayor's website offers access to a YouTube video with the speech of mayor Sobyanin, May 21, 2021, accessed May 22, 2021, <https://www.sobyanin.ru/dialogi-s-lyudmi-vaksinatsiya>. This may indicate that the Russian authorities want and do not want transparency on the matter at the same time.

<sup>32</sup> President Putin left no doubt on this matter: "I would like to express my position on this once again. I believe mandatory vaccination is inexpedient and should not be introduced. People should realise themselves the need for vaccination. They should understand that if they do not do it, they could face a very serious and even lethal danger," Meeting on economic matters, May 26, 2021, accessed May 28, 2021, <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/65677>.

<sup>33</sup> "Why Russians Are in No Hurry to Get Vaccinated against COVID. Opinion of sociologist Denis Volkov on political and social reasons of distrust of vaccination," *Levada Centre*, May 18, 2021, accessed July 3, 2021, <https://www.levada.ru/2021/05/18/pochemu-rossiyane-ne-spushat-privivatsya-ot-kovida/> – in Russian.

of vaccine distribution (mobile units reaching out to people in small habitations far away), could not solve the problem of the Russian population's reluctance to vaccinate. The solution that was found was conspicuous. The Russian state did not issue an order to vaccinate. However, rules were introduced that left no room for maneuvering for many citizens. As of now, returning to the workplace from the home office, taking an oral exam at the university, moving into a university dormitory have all been made conditional of vaccination. In sum, if people do not want to lose their jobs or leave the university, they will have no choice but to vaccinate.<sup>34</sup> Russia now seems to pay the price for its current development:

“despite having a clear advantage – a safe and effective vaccine – which could have been used to elevate Russia's strength, the Kremlin managed to undermine it through misguided policy decisions, absence of public trust, and lack of interest in public health and safety.”<sup>35</sup>

Interestingly, the President of the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen, raised the question of whether Russia does not vaccinate its own population to export more of its vaccine and gain international recognition.<sup>36</sup> The question was unfortunate from the leader of an organization that did not stand out managing the purchasing of vaccines at the onset. Russia's EU mission reacted in a measured way. It stated it was “perplexed to hear” Mrs. von der Leyen's criticism and found it either “deplorable ... politicization” or “an inadequate level of awareness of the top-level official.”<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Vasilisa Strizh, Alexander V. Marchenko, and Bela Pelman, “COVID-19: Is Vaccination Mandatory to Work in Russia?,” *Morgan Lewis Lawflash*, April 1, 2021, accessed July 2, 2021, [www.morganlewis.com/pubs/2021/04/covid-19-is-vaccination-mandatory-to-work-in-russia-cv19-lf](http://www.morganlewis.com/pubs/2021/04/covid-19-is-vaccination-mandatory-to-work-in-russia-cv19-lf).

<sup>35</sup> Vera Michlin-Shapir, “Why the Kremlin's Disinformation Campaigns Hurt Russia's Vaccination Efforts,” *Analysis of the Institute of Modern Russia*, June 17, 2021, accessed July 5, 2021, <https://imrussia.org/en/analysis/3299-why-the-kremlin>.

<sup>36</sup> Jillian Deutsch and David M. Herszenhorn, “Von der Leyen Asks Russia Why It's Selling Sputnik Abroad before Vaccinating Citizens,” *Politico*, February 17, 2021, accessed May 5, 2021, <https://www.politico.eu/article/vdl-questions-why-russia-is-selling-sputnik-vaccine-abroad-before-jabbing-own-citizens>.

<sup>37</sup> “Press Release by the Permanent Mission of Russia to the EU on Remarks by the President of the European Commission Mrs. Ursula von der Leyen regarding the Russian ‘Sputnik V’ Vaccine,” February 18, 2021, accessed May 5, 2021, <https://russiaeu.ru/en/news/press-release-permanent-mission-russia-eu-remarks-president-european-commission-mrs-ursula-von>.

Russia marketed its first registered vaccine, Sputnik V, quite successfully. By February 2022, 31 countries bought it on various continents, including Africa, Asia, Latin America, and Europe. Eleven countries have been producing the Sputnik V vaccine based on licenses from Russia.<sup>38</sup> Negotiations are going on with some further countries to produce Sputnik V under license. However, the Russian authorities wanted to export to one part of the world, specifically: The European Union. If one looks for the underlying motivations of this desire, they are probably less about direct economic benefits than indirect advantages and prestige. The Russian medical sector completed the third phase of medical tests and had a vaccine ready for being put on the market. However, it still required international scientific recognition. This partly happened when the prestigious and peer-reviewed medical journal, *The Lancet*, published an article by Russian scholars, including the Director of the Gamaleya Institute that developed the vaccine, which shared the results of Russian clinical tests. The purported 91.6 percent success rate was just slightly shying away from the effects of Pfizer/BioNTech and Moderna. An important hurdle was thus overcome.<sup>39</sup> However, three months later, western researchers published an open letter raising doubts about the accuracy of the primary data cited in *The Lancet*.<sup>40</sup>

It was the next step that Russia submitted the registration request to the EU. Since January 29, 2021, when it happened, the situation was everything but uneventful. First, Russia was firmly of the view to have submitted the request while the EU “could not find it.” It turned out that the request arrived at the Common European Submission Portal, Heads of Medicines

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<sup>38</sup> Statista, “Number of doses of the COVID-19 vaccine Sputnik V ordered from Russia or agreed to be produced abroad as of January 18, 2022, by country (in millions),” accessed February 8, 2022, <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1123927/sputnik-v-exports-from-russia-by-country/>.

<sup>39</sup> Denis Y. Logunov et al., “Safety and Efficacy of an rAd26 and rAd5 Vector-based Heterologous Prime-boost COVID-19 Vaccine: An Interim Analysis of a Randomised Controlled Phase 3 Trial in Russia,” *The Lancet* 397 (2021): 671-81, February 2, 2021, accessed May 8, 2021, <https://www.thelancet.com/action/showPdf?pii=S0140-6736%2821%2900234-8>. It may be important to note that the Chinese Sinopharm vaccine still has not gained the same level of scientific recognition. Only an article of a lesser category was published about it that did not go through the same scrutiny including peer review.

<sup>40</sup> Enrico M. Bucci et al., “Data Discrepancies and Substandard Reporting of Interim Data of Sputnik V Phase 3 Trial,” *The Lancet* 397, no. 10288 (2021): 1881-83, May 12, 2021, accessed May 18, 2021, [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736\(21\)00899-0](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736(21)00899-0).

Agencies, and not where it should have been placed. The matter was sorted in a few days, and the so-called rolling review of Sputnik V could start. Second, and unlike in cases of vaccines produced in the West, the process was slow. Russia and the EU certainly did not assess the reasons identically. The EU noted that, unlike western vaccine developers, Russia did not cooperate with the European Medicines Agency (EMA) during the research and development phase. Although this is not a requirement, EMA believed that it could facilitate the registration process once the vaccine was ready for production. Clearly, EMA had to put forward some reasons why four months after the submittal of the registration request, the approval was not issued yet, while that happened in weeks for Pfizer/BioNTech, Moderna, AstraZeneca, and Johnson and Johnson. Some comments were also found unhelpful. In an Austrian television talk show, the Chairperson of EMA's Board of Directors, Christa Wirthumer-Hoche, pronounced that issuing a government regulation for emergency approval of the use of Sputnik would be "in part comparable to Russian roulette."<sup>41</sup> The comment was not well received in some expert circles. The Oxford-based Euro-intelligence think tank stated: "The EMA's job is to approve a medicine or not, but not to speculate."<sup>42</sup> The developer of the Russian vaccine requested an apology from the EMA.<sup>43</sup>

As time elapsed and Sputnik V ostensibly did not get closer to EMA certification, the atmosphere got all the more heated and the exchanges tougher. The West blamed Russia for attempting to put the Pfizer/BioNTech vaccine appear in a bad light and using Russian intelligence to support this with arguments.<sup>44</sup> The four websites – New Eastern Outlook, Oriental Re-

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<sup>41</sup> ORF2, "Im Zentrum: Wettlauf um die Impfung – Warum geht das nicht schneller?," March 7, 2021, accessed May 8, 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=C1bKb2bGzM0>. Later it was widely reported in the world press.

<sup>42</sup> Wolfgang von Münchau is quoted by Laura O'Callaghan, "EU Playing 'Politically Motivated Blame Game' in Desperate Bid To Hide Vaccine Fiasco," *Express*, March 22, 2021, accessed May 20, 2021, <https://www.express.co.uk/news/politics/1413277/eu-covid-vaccine-row-latest-brussels-astrazeneca-ban-overturned-brexit-uk>.

<sup>43</sup> "Sputnik-V-Hersteller fordert Entschuldigung für 'Russisches Roulette'," *Microsoft News (MSN)*, March 9, 2021, accessed May 21, 2021, <https://www.msn.com/de-de/nachrichten/video/sputnik-v-hersteller-fordert-entschuldigung-f%C3%BCr-russisches-roulette/ar-BB1eoZPn>.

<sup>44</sup> Michael R. Gordon and Dustin Volz, "Russian Disinformation Campaign Aims to Undermine Confidence in Pfizer, Other COVID-19 Vaccines, U.S. Officials Say," *The Wall Street Journal*, March 7, 2021, accessed May 15, 2021, <https://www.wsj.com/>

view, News Front, and Rebel Inside – that spread such information were traced with the Russian government’s server.<sup>45</sup> Two months later, the Director of Russia’s external intelligence, SVR, Sergey Naryshkin, stated in an interview on Russian public television:

“The European Medicines Agency, which registers all medicines, stalls. I do not want to blame the experts, specialists of the European Medicines Agency. Still, we know for sure that this delay is connected with the relevant signals from the European Union’s high offices. Why is this happening? There are only reasons of political nature, or there is also an economic factor, I do not know, let the citizens of European countries and law enforcement agencies understand it, but we understand that it is just immoral.”<sup>46</sup>

Clearly, the state appeared on every side of the contest and not only in Russia, where the developer of Sputnik V was a state-owned research institute and not a private company. Naryshkin noted that economic and political considerations coexisted. The Russian vaccine is certainly competitive as far as its price. As the Russian Direct Investment Fund states: “The cost of one dose of the vaccine for international markets is less than \$10.”<sup>47</sup> As time elapsed and Russia probably understood that Sputnik V’s EU market share would remain fairly limited, it was possibly no longer about selling the vaccine to the EU rather than an issue of prestige and eventually establishing Russian vaccine production capacity *in* the EU one day. The delay in registration possibly also defeated the second reason to build other vaccine production sites as Sputnik’s competitors had a massive roll-out of their vaccines. In sum, it remained perhaps the most important for Russia to gain recognition for its vaccine and to be able to refer to EU registration in its global marketing and political strategy. Although the process has not been completed yet, a comment by Italian prime minister Mario Draghi

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articles/russian-disinformation-campaign-aims-to-undermine-confidence-in-pfizer-other-covid-19-vaccines-u-s-officials-say-11615129200.

<sup>45</sup> Zaini Majeed, “Russian Intelligence Behind ‘Disinformation Campaign’ Against US Vaccines: State Dept,” *republicworld.com*, March 8, 2021, accessed May 20, 2021, <https://www.republicworld.com/world-news/rest-of-the-world-news/russian-intelligence-behind-disinformation-campaign-against-us-vaccines-state-dept.html>.

<sup>46</sup> “The director of SVR Spoke in an Interview to the first channel about the Attempts not to Allow the Russian Vaccine to the International Markets,” May 19, 2021, accessed May 21, 2021, <http://svr.gov.ru/smi/2021/05/o-popytkakh-ne-pustit-rossiyskuyu-vaktsinu-na-mezhdunarodnye-rynki-rasskazal-v-intervyu-pervomu-kana.htm> – in Russian.

<sup>47</sup> “About Vaccine, General Information: Sputnik V,” accessed May 21, 2021, <https://sputnikvaccine.com/about-vaccine/>.

gave an early indication of where it may boil down to: “Sputnik failed to get approval from EMA and may never have it.”<sup>48</sup> Russia has taken note of the inconvenience and problems this situation causes to Russian people when they intend to travel to parts of the world where the most widely used Russian vaccine, Sputnik, has not been recognized. It took a proactive conciliatory stance and initiated mutual recognition of vaccines between western states and the Russian Federation. It expressed its readiness to recognize AstraZeneca and a Chinese vaccine. The initiative fell on deaf ears partly due to its poor timing, partly due to the offer to recognize a vaccine that was not widely used in the West any longer and also as the western reservations concerning Sputnik V remained.<sup>49</sup>

EU member-states have since February 2021 remained overwhelmingly ambiguous on Sputnik V, and the next steps were made conditional on EMA registration.<sup>50</sup> However, exceptions do apply. There are two EU member-states, Hungary and Slovakia, that have already bought and used the Russian vaccine. Hungary’s case is more interesting because it was a deliberate decision of the government to diversify the vaccines it has been relying upon. Slovakia used it when the country’s health services were massively challenged in spring 2021, and the country was in doubt whether it could reduce the new cases of infection without an additional vaccination campaign. Hungary was the first EU country that established contractual relations to import Sputnik V, and it was also importing a large amount of the Chinese Sinopharm vaccine. What followed was quite telling both as far as positive and negative sides of the outcome.

The Hungarian minister of foreign affairs and trade agreed upon the conditions of Sputnik V delivery on January 22, 2021. The accord, unlike the

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<sup>48</sup> Marco Galluzzo, “Draghi chiede di riformare l’Ema: ‘Con le varianti rischia la ripresa’,” *Corriere della Sera*, June 26, 2021, accessed July 2, 2021, [https://www.corriere.it/esteri/21\\_giugno\\_26/10-esteri-1111-txcorriere-web-sezioni-f3f67478-d5e7-11eb-92c5-338927e361b4.shtml](https://www.corriere.it/esteri/21_giugno_26/10-esteri-1111-txcorriere-web-sezioni-f3f67478-d5e7-11eb-92c5-338927e361b4.shtml).

<sup>49</sup> “Mutual Recognition of COVID Vaccines between Western Countries and Russia Is Necessary,” *smotrim.ru*, January 28, 2022, accessed February 8, 2022 [https://smotrim.ru/article/2669371?utm\\_source=sidebar](https://smotrim.ru/article/2669371?utm_source=sidebar) – in Russian.

<sup>50</sup> The Austrian chancellor, Sebastian Kurz, the prime minister of Bavaria, Markus Söder, of Saxony, Michael Kretschmer indicated the willingness of their state to purchase Sputnik V whereas Italy was waiting for the EMA registration in order to start producing it under license.

deal, concluded for purchasing Chinese vaccine through a middleman that was massively overpriced, did not indicate corruption. When considering the benefits of the Hungarian decision to rely on vaccines that were not approved by EMA, it is to be recognized that 1. Hungary was in the position to vaccinate its residents more rapidly than several other EU member-states. The correctness of its decision was confirmed by the demonstrated tardiness of the European Commission that resulted in delays in the delivery of vaccines and the severe side effects caused by AstraZeneca and Johnson & Johnson that temporarily resulted in reduced vaccine supply. 2. Sputnik V was not as popular as the two most widely used western vaccines. However, it was far more in demand than Sinopharm, and by the end of May 2021, the amount imported was largely used up. Thus, it indeed contributed to a higher level of vaccination. 3. The government achieved a major propaganda success with the high share of the population vaccinated. This was badly needed in light of the highest share of persons deceased due to COVID-19 globally in Hungary per 100 000 inhabitants, a sobering result.<sup>51</sup> 4. It was a success shared with Russia. Moscow found it essential to emphasize that “Sputnik V has the best safety (7-32 times fewer deaths cases) and efficacy (2-7 times fewer COVID infections) per 100,000 vaccinated.”<sup>52</sup> Eager to win a propaganda victory, the Russian media “shared the pride” with the Russian population that, according to Hungary, “Sinopharm is better than Pfizer, but Sputnik V is the best.”<sup>53</sup> Irrespective of what the Hungarian government said and Russian media took over, such calculations and statements were, in fact, dubious. Amplified by the largely state-controlled media, Russian official media and the Hungarian authorities played a calculated game that told a lot about “faking news.” The latter published incorrect (but favorable for Russia) information that Russia could refer to as originating from an EU member-state. Namely, the relatively high efficacy of Sinopharm and Sputnik V was due to the fact that those two vaccines could not be used for individuals with various pre-existing diseases, including those that put individuals at much higher risk of

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<sup>51</sup> Finally the 30 000 COVID-19 related death was reached fortunately slower than predicted and crossed this line on 8 July 2021. See [koronavirus.gov.hu](https://koronavirus.gov.hu), the dedicated website of the Hungarian government, accessed July 8, 2021.

<sup>52</sup> TASS, “Russia’s Sputnik V Recognized as Safest and Most Efficient COVID Vaccine in Hungary,” April 25, 2021, accessed May 20, 2021, <https://tass.com/society/1282847>.

<sup>53</sup> TASS, “Russia’s Sputnik V Recognized as Safest and Most Efficient.”

severe or lethal COVID.<sup>54</sup> It meant that the number of fatalities when Sputnik V (and Sinopharm) were used remained understandably lower than in the use of those western vaccines that could be used in the case of people with diabetes, cancer, and other severe acute diseases. A few months later, when the National Institute of Pharmacy and Nutrition could no longer withhold the information related to the licensing of Sputnik V and the Sinopharm vaccines, it turned out that Hungarian experts had very strong professional reservations towards the issuing of a Hungarian license that was pushed through by governmental forces.<sup>55</sup>

When assessing the situation, the following irregularities can be identified: 1. The first question was whether Sputnik V met the requirements set against vaccine safety. It turned out rapidly that Hungary did not carry out laboratory tests. It simply took over the Russian test results as they were dictated on the telephone. This facilitated early vaccination but raised serious doubts. Sputnik V was tested later by an EU-certified laboratory in Hungary. 2. Hungary calculated the vaccinated share of the population in a particular manner. Everybody who got the first vaccine was immediately regarded as “vaccinated.” The number of vaccinated was thus running high quickly and without adequate medical protection. It was the main reason that the prime minister could announce Hungary was in the lead in the EU as far as the share of vaccinated persons, and this was due to purchasing vaccines not only from the West but also from the East and in turn due to the wisdom of the government. There was an even more peculiar reason. Namely, the prime minister could allow football games of the European championship to take place in the presence of fans as the Union of European Football Associations (UEFA) made this a condition of hosting matches. 3. Hence, Hungary’s residents have been vaccinated by a broader than average variety of vaccines, including those not certified by EMA. The country challenged thus the common effort of the EU to issue vaccination certificates recognized by each EU member state. The first challenge ar-

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<sup>54</sup> The table published on government websites was “complemented” by Dr. Katalin Kárikó, a Hungarian biologist living in the US, whose research has served as foundation to mRNA.

<sup>55</sup> Ábrahám Vass, “Independent MP Presses Charges after Controversial Methods in Licensing of Eastern Vaccines,” *Hungary Today*, January 7, 2022, accessed February 7, 2022, <https://hungarytoday.hu/charges-licensing-eastern-vaccines-sputnik-sinopharm-fidesz-government/>.

rived before the EU agreement was achieved in late May, with July 1, 2021, as the date of entry into force.<sup>56</sup> It came from an unexpected direction: Poland, a country with close allegiance to many other matters with Hungary. It has been reluctant to recognize the Sputnik V (and Sinopharm) vaccines as a foundation of free entry in Poland. In a move that had no other reason than flexing its muscles, Hungary decided in turn not to recognize vaccination certificates issued by other states, except on the basis of reciprocity. This unnecessary and hasty move resulted in a situation that people traveling to other EU member states, including approximately 700 thousand who work or study abroad (many of them vaccinated in Hungary), were pushed in the direction to insist on getting EMA certified vaccines. Those familiar with Hungarian politics precisely know that the Hungarian government does not seek compromise, does not recognize its mistakes, although occasionally corrects them, and gives in only to superior power. It pursues an offensive structural realist agenda that is remarkable for a country of its size. In this case, the solution came about by Hungary's joining EU consensus that means the country will accept the EU vaccination certificate and also modified the Hungarian certificate so that those vaccinated by EMA recognized vaccines could travel with it inside the EU. Thus, with some delay, many Hungarian residents were no longer disadvantaged in the EU. Those vaccinated by Sputnik V or Sinopharm would be able to travel on the basis of national recognition by other member states, a privilege granted only by five EU members and some others not among the primary destinations of Hungarian travelers, including states like Andorra, Bahrain, Kazakhstan, Mongolia, Montenegro, Morocco, Serbia, Turkey, and Ukraine.

Unlike Hungary, which decided to rely on Sputnik V as a premeditated effort to diversify its vaccine stock and demonstrate its government's solidarity with Russia, Slovakia was reluctant to do the same. However, when in spring 2021, the health crisis got out of hand, it changed its mind in an emergency. Hungary "helped" Slovakia to gain access to two million doses of Sputnik V that Russia provided. There were two major consequences of this step. First, it resulted in a political crisis in Slovakia. The prime minister had to resign as one of the coalition partners withdrew its support and be-

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<sup>56</sup> Alfahir, "Poland toughens up, does not accept vaccination certificate of Russian or Chinese vaccines," February 24, 2021, accessed May 1, 2021, [https://alfahir.hu/2021/02/24/lengyelorszag\\_adam\\_niedzielski\\_koronavirusjarvany\\_kinai\\_vakcina\\_szputnyik\\_v\\_sinopharm](https://alfahir.hu/2021/02/24/lengyelorszag_adam_niedzielski_koronavirusjarvany_kinai_vakcina_szputnyik_v_sinopharm) – in Hungarian.

came minister of finance as part of a deal. Second, Slovakia carried out tests and concluded that the vaccine supplied by Russia did not meet the same quality requirements as the earlier sample. The Russian Direct Investment Fund (RDIF) expressed its view that the Slovak State Institute for Drug Control (SIDC) intentionally sent the sample to a non-EU-certified laboratory and decided to withdraw the delivered vaccine. Hungary carried out follow-on tests in an EU-certified laboratory, and the results were found reassuring.<sup>57</sup> Therefore, Slovakia could continue to use the two million Sputnik V doses. The Slovak government passed a resolution on May 26, 2021, that formally accepted Sputnik V. Accordingly, the minister of health is obliged to make the vaccine available. Overall two million vaccines were committed, of which 200 000 arrived.<sup>58</sup> However, due to the very limited demand for a vaccination with Sputnik V, Slovakia first stopped using the Russian vaccine. Soon afterward, it agreed with Russia to sell back 1.8 million doses (90 percent of those bought initially) and physically returned 160 000 doses. Russia, which started an intensive vaccination campaign<sup>59</sup> at about the same time, repurchased the vaccines at their original selling price, indeed a smart political move in a period of tense atmosphere between the two states.<sup>60</sup> Whether the small demand for Sputnik V was due to general aversion towards the Russian produce or the absence of its recognition by the EMA, strictly limiting travel opportunities inside the EU, is not known. Most probably, both factors played a role.

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<sup>57</sup> "Slovak Health Ministry Says Sputnik V Doses Tested in Hungary Satisfactory," *Reuters*, May 9, 2021, accessed May 21, 2021, [www.reuters.com/world/europe/slovak-health-ministry-says-sputnik-v-doses-tested-hungary-satisfactory-2021-05-09/](https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/slovak-health-ministry-says-sputnik-v-doses-tested-hungary-satisfactory-2021-05-09/).

<sup>58</sup> "Slovakia, Despite Some Unease, to Start Administering Russia's Sputnik V Shots," *Reuters*, May 26, 2021, accessed May 28, 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/business/healthcare-pharmaceuticals/slovakia-despite-some-unease-start-administering-russias-sputnik-v-shots-2021-05-26/>.

<sup>59</sup> Judy Twigg, "Is Russia's Vaccine Diplomacy Going South," *The Moscow Times*, July 1, 2021, accessed July 3, 2021, <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2021/07/01/is-russias-vaccine-diplomacy-going-south-a74395>, was reporting first that due to the measures mentioned above "demand finally outstrips supply in Russia's vaccination race."

<sup>60</sup> "Slovakia Sells Most Sputnik V Vaccine Doses Back to Russia," *Reuters*, July 2, 2021, accessed July 3, 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/slovakia-sells-most-sputnik-v-vaccine-doses-back-russia-2021-07-02>.

## Conclusions

The “story” of Sputnik V in the European Union has remained controversial while Russia continued to achieve success both in its neighborhood and far further on four continents. Sputnik V remained both an export commodity and a source of Russian assistance. While the production of Sputnik V did not start under license in the EU, it did in Kazakhstan already in February, and plans were advancing to do the same in Uzbekistan.

Increasingly, Sputnik V is globally regarded as a “reserve” vaccine that is reliable and effective in its comparative simplicity that can be employed when shortages emerge. This was the situation when, due to the upsurge of the Coronavirus pandemic in India in late March-May 2021, export from there was no longer available while China also faced difficulties to deliver. As a result, states like Bangladesh, Nepal, and Sri Lanka turned to Russia for help.<sup>61</sup> Both the hesitation, if not outright reluctance, of the Russian population to vaccinate and the non-registered status of Sputnik V in the EU have become contributing factors to making the Russian vaccine a global commodity.

Russia faced an uphill battle when it tried to compete with its vaccine and market it globally. Its entire COVID-19 related international activity has been exposed to close scrutiny by its partners. On the one hand, the approach of the West reflected continuity in the relations with Russia since 2014 based on reservations, suspicion, and distrust. On the other, however, Russia also found reasons to suspect Western behavior, especially when the initial hesitantly positive atmosphere towards its vaccine turned largely negative, and the certification of Sputnik V was subject to procrastination. Some elements of the Russian behavior were in close continuity with its recent past. Moscow fears, partly erroneously, an adversarial external environment interested in causing damage irrespective of what Russia does. This is part of a discursive message that is important for domestic communication, while it is, however, hardly credible in the West, given that Russia denies responsibility for a long series of disruptive, manipulative, violent,

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<sup>61</sup> Shafiqul Alam and Amal Jayashinghe, “Bangladesh, Nepal and Sri Lanka Nearly Out of COVID Vaccines: Officials,” *International Business Times*, May 21, 2021, accessed May 22, 2021, <https://www.ibtimes.com/bangladesh-nepal-sri-lanka-nearly-out-covid-vaccines-officials-3205121>.

and illegal actions since 2014 following the annexation of Crimea and the backing of separatists in Donetsk and Luhansk. It included the attempt to murder two members of the Skripal family in 2018 and Alexei Navalny in 2020, and executing Boris Nemtsov in 2015 and Zelimkhan Khangoshvili in 2019, to mention just a few of a dismal record.

Russia is undoubtedly among those countries that can develop and produce a vaccine when a pandemic breaks out. However, it did not fully understand and hence could not cope with the challenge of marketing its vaccine when it faced a highly competitive economic environment and a branding “made in Russia” problem in Western Europe. Its reluctance to apply internationally recognized phase III clinical trials before attempting to register its vaccines aggravated the situation further. The current international atmosphere between Russia and the West certainly did not facilitate the situation as Russia’s undeniable mistakes were occasionally exaggerated.

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# Disease-Trap Diplomacy: China's BRI and Southeast Asia

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Abstract: China's Belt-Road Initiative (BRI) is the country's transcontinental infrastructure program to connect China to nations throughout the world. However, the BRI has cost numerous countries their strategic assets built through the Initiative due to their inability to repay Chinese loans, a strategy commonly referred to as "debt-trap diplomacy." With the threat of COVID-19 bearing down on societies around the world, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has begun a new campaign to offer developing nations – such as those within Southeast Asia, many of which are participants in the BRI – a loan/vaccine program to distribute Chinese versions of the COVID-19 vaccine. Whereas the BRI has focused on infrastructure projects, vaccines target a country's most valuable asset – its people. China's central role in the transmission of the disease raises questions of whether loan/vaccine strategies are examples of the CCP's generosity and the nation's role as an emerging world leader, or simply a new trap targeting countries that can benefit its larger political objectives.

Keywords: China, Belt-Road Initiative, debt-trap diplomacy, COVID-19, vaccine, Southeast Asia.

## Introduction

COVID-19 has precipitated a military and political agenda by China that at any other time would have likely been more gradual. Hong Kong's autonomy, which the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) promised to continue until 2047 as part of the UK's handover of the city in 1997, has been crushed by a simple decree.<sup>1</sup> Control over the South China Sea and China's continued build-up in the area has accelerated,<sup>2</sup> while Beijing's new military

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<sup>1</sup> James T. Areddy and Chun Han Wong, "China's Security Law Tightens Vise on Hong Kong," *The Wall Street Journal*, June 30, 2020, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/as-china-national-security-law-looms-hong-kong-activists-disband-11593528117>.

<sup>2</sup> Robert A. Manning and Patrick M. Cronin, "Under Cover of Pandemic, China Steps Up Brinkmanship in South China Sea," *Foreign Policy*, May 14, 2020, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/05/14/south-china-sea-dispute-accelerated-by-coronavirus>.

flexing in contested border areas with India and the Indian Ocean<sup>3</sup> may be a sign of expansion in other regions.

Keeping promises and abiding by international standards has never been the CCP's strong suit. The origin of the virus – and thus, the Chinese government's role in its transmission – is still a matter of debate. Two dominant hypotheses regarding its spread are through either animal-to-human (zoonotic) transmission sprung from a live animal market in the Chinese city of Wuhan or lax safety standards at the nearby Wuhan Virology Institute (WVI) – China's only Biosafety Level 4 lab (BSL-4) – which was conducting research on similar coronaviruses.<sup>4</sup>

Identifying its point of origin is obviously important. But so, too, is the fact that the pandemic is the direct result of one of two equally avoidable actions. The first is the Chinese government's refusal to enforce restrictions on live animal markets<sup>5</sup> as it had pledged following the SARS outbreak of 2002. The second is the unwillingness to abide by international safety standards for BSL-4 labs conducting research on highly contagious coronaviruses.<sup>6</sup> International inspectors called out the Chinese government on both issues. However, both times it failed to make substantive changes to existing protocols.

Furthermore, the pandemic has opened the door to a new type of leverage for the CCP. Countries burdened by debt garnered through participation in China's Belt-Road Initiative (BRI) and, thus, forced to forfeit projects built through it – commonly referred to as “debt-trap diplomacy” – are now

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<sup>3</sup> Bertil Lintner, “China Eyes a COVID-19 Edge in the Indian Ocean,” *Asia Times*, April 23, 2020, <https://asiatimes.com/2020/04/china-eyes-a-covid-19-edge-in-the-indian-ocean>.

<sup>4</sup> George Arbuthnott, Jonathan Calvert, and Philip Sherwell, “Revealed: Seven Year Coronavirus Trail from Mine Deaths to a Wuhan Lab,” *The Times*, July 04, 2020, <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/seven-year-covid-trail-revealed-l5vxt7jqp>.

<sup>5</sup> Joseph Guzman, “Fauci: It's Mind-Boggling that China's Wet Markets Are Still Operating During Coronavirus Pandemic,” *The Hill*, April 2, 2020, <https://thehill.com/changing-america/well-being/prevention-cures/491025-fauci-mind-boggling-that-chinas-wet-markets>.

<sup>6</sup> Josh Rogin, “State Department Cables Warned of Safety Issues at Wuhan Lab Studying Bat Coronaviruses,” *The Washington Post*, April 14, 2020, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2020/04/14/state-department-cables-warned-safety-issues-wuhan-lab-studying-bat-coronaviruses>.

faced with the equally burdensome task of securing a vaccine for COVID-19. Vaccines produced in the US and UK will be sold to developing countries, but 'developing' is a catchall term that hides vast differences between nations. Laos is a developing country; so is neighboring Thailand. Both have majority populations that are Theravada Buddhists; both have overlapping linguistic and cultural histories. But one only needs to travel between the two to realize that Thailand is closer to the US in terms of its economy and infrastructure than it is to Laos. Two countries, two shared histories, but worlds apart.

And so is the case for many countries throughout Southeast Asia. For those countries which were previously more than happy to participate in the BRI but stand at the unfortunate confluence of impoverishment, underdevelopment, and weak rule of law, the realization that the fiddler will eventually demand his due is now more apparent than ever. The Indo-Pacific region is not lacking in its choice of development programs, though, with eight major initiatives on offer funded by dozens of countries around the world.<sup>7</sup> The appeal of China's development programs is rooted in the fact that they are more than just picks and shovels: they are no-questions-asked aid. Compare that with aid from the US, EU, or Japan, which comes with benchmarks on improvements in human rights, something few governments with authoritarian tendencies would pursue on their own.

But unlike other BRI participant countries in Africa and Latin America, Southeast Asia's proximity to China makes the situation for the region all the more tenuous. The inability to stop the defacto takeover of land, industries, as well as the unchecked influx of people via the BRI,<sup>8</sup> has put several regional nations in danger of becoming little more than satellites, if not outright colonies, of their colossal neighbor. COVID-19 has added another layer of complexity to any potential debt trap that may await regional powers (or those elsewhere): their willingness to fall in line with China's broader geopolitical goals may also affect their access to Chinese-made vaccines for this or any other disease in the future.

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<sup>7</sup> Jeffrey Wilson, "Infrastructure Choices and the Future of the Indo-Pacific," *Security Challenges* 16, no. 3 (2020): 64-68, 66.

<sup>8</sup> Denis D. Gray, "Chinese Influx Transforming Myanmar's Quintessential City," *Associated Press*, May 1, 2018, <https://apnews.com/article/d2d6b21f61f64178aa5b017633fiddlerb4f83e>.

## Southeast Asia: Debt-Trap to Disease-Trap

The countries along the Mekong River (Myanmar, Thailand, Laos, Cambodia, and Vietnam) provide a good template for the impact of the BRI and China's multipronged influence. China has been building hydroelectric dams along the river in Cambodia and Laos, but also upriver in Yunnan, where the Mekong begins. Cambodia and Laos are also among the largest recipients of Chinese aid. But unlike Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos do not have similar disputes with China over territorial claims in the South China Sea.

China's ultimate control over the rate of flow of the Mekong puts all the countries along the river in a difficult spot, particularly with regards to the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and its members' stance towards China's maritime claims.<sup>9</sup> As with the South China Sea, the Mekong has become a source of tension for ASEAN, whose members face the double-edged sword of China controlling the Sea through artificial islands/bases and choking off the Mekong, forcing countries to turn to China for support.<sup>10</sup>

The countries of Mainland Southeast Asia have already experienced both droughts and floods due to China's apathetic water management of the upper portion of the river.<sup>11</sup> Thailand and Vietnam's economies are better positioned to weather disruptions along the Mekong than Myanmar, Cambodia, and Laos, although the populace Mekong Delta in southern Vietnam would likely be much harder hit than riverine areas in Thailand. But for Cambodia and Laos, two of the poorest countries in Asia with equally poor infrastructure, significant changes in the Mekong's flow could spell disaster for their economies and the livelihoods of millions who depend on the river for their very existence.

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<sup>9</sup> Shaun Turton, "Beijing-Friendly Cambodia and Laos Pushed Out to ASEAN's Fringe," *Nikkei Asia*, November 13, 2020, <https://asia.nikkei.com/Politics/International-relations/Beijing-friendly-Cambodia-and-Laos-pushed-out-to-ASEAN-s-fringe2>.

<sup>10</sup> Thitinan Pongsudhirak, "China-US Rivalry on Mekong Mainland," *Bangkok Post*, November 27, 2020, <https://www.bangkokpost.com/opinion/opinion/2026215/china-us-rivalry-on-mekong-mainland>.

<sup>11</sup> Hannah Beech, "China Limited the Mekong's Flow. Other Countries Suffered a Drought," *The New York Times*, April 13, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/13/world/asia/china-mekong-drought.html>.

Add to this the burden of Chinese loans that Cambodia and Laos will likely never get out from (which has cost Cambodia its port city of Sihanoukville and Laos its national electrical grid),<sup>12</sup> and the pressure to side with China regarding its maritime claims or other issues which the former two have no natural stake in becoming clearer. In hindsight, the brutal reality of the CCP's debt-trap diplomacy – extending beyond the ports of the Indian Ocean and oil fields in West Africa to the larger sphere of nations connected in the global economic system – was built on an unreasonably naïve belief. Namely, that an authoritarian regime responsible for the deaths of tens of millions of ordinary Chinese would treat people in other countries better than its own.

As COVID-19 vaccines become available, who will ultimately be able to claim victory over the pandemic will similarly shape world perception regarding societal ascent and decline. Although several vaccines have been produced in the US and UK, the Chinese state-owned companies Sinovac, Sinopharm, and CanSino Biologics have also developed experimental drugs. Their entrance does not come without questions, though, such as Sinovac's checkered past involving bribes,<sup>13</sup> the numerous side-effects of Sinopharm's version,<sup>14</sup> and CanSino's connection to the CCP's "Thousand Talents Plan" to acquire foreign research.<sup>15</sup> China has also joined COVAX, the international initiative led by the World Health Organization (WHO) to distribute a vaccine, filling the void left by the US after the Trump administration pulled out of the organization.<sup>16</sup> Even though President Biden has

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<sup>12</sup> Hannah Ellis-Petersen, "'No Cambodia Left': How Chinese Money Is Changing Sihanoukville," *The Guardian*, July 31, 2018. <https://www.theguardian.com/cities/2018/jul/31/no-cambodia-left-chinese-money-changing-sihanoukville>; Patrick Winn, "How a Chinese Company Took Control of an Entire Nation's Electrical Grid," *The World*, September 30, 2020, <https://www.pri.org/stories/2020-09-30/how-chinese-company-took-control-entire-nation-s-electrical-grid>.

<sup>13</sup> Eva Dou, "As China Nears a Coronavirus Vaccine, Bribery Cloud Hangs Over Drug-maker Sinovac," *The Washington Post*, December 4, 2020, [www.washingtonpost.com/world/asia\\_pacific/coronavirus-vaccine-china-bribery-sinovac/2020/12/04/7c09ae68-28c6-11eb-9c21-3cc501d0981f\\_story.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/asia_pacific/coronavirus-vaccine-china-bribery-sinovac/2020/12/04/7c09ae68-28c6-11eb-9c21-3cc501d0981f_story.html).

<sup>14</sup> Keoni Everington, "China's Sinopharm Vaccine 'Most Unsafe in World' with 73 Side Effects," *Taiwan News*, January 6, 2021, <https://www.taiwannews.com.tw/en/news/4095622>.

<sup>15</sup> Sam Cooper, "Chinese Vaccine Company Executives Worked in Program Now Targeted by Western Intelligence Agencies," *Global News*, December 2, 2020, <https://globalnews.ca/news/7483970/cansino-nrc-covid-vaccine>.

<sup>16</sup> Huizhong Wu, "China Joins COVAX Coronavirus Vaccine Alliance," *Associated Press*,

since rejoined the WHO, should China distribute a vaccine globally at a pace that outstrips its Western competitors, the resulting propaganda scoop would be invaluable.

For its part, Cambodia has vacillated between rejecting and accepting Chinese support. Initially, the kingdom opted out of Sinovac's version in favor of the COVAX program. Cambodia's Prime Minister Hun Sen pointedly remarked, "Cambodia is not a dustbin ... and not a place for a vaccine trial,"<sup>17</sup> a seemingly clear rebuke of China, Cambodia's largest foreign direct investor. By mid-January, Hun Sen made an abrupt change and accepted an offer of one million doses of Sinopharm's vaccine, citing the urgency of the situation.<sup>18</sup> Alongside offers of assistance from China, Cambodia has also benefitted from large public support in the way of tens of millions of dollars, mainly from wealthy and well-connected individuals ensconced within the country's system of patronage.<sup>19</sup>

But a country such as Laos, whose development is far behind that of Cambodia, is not so fortunate. Cambodia has made tremendous, albeit rocky, economic strides since its rejection of socialism and shift to a market-based economy following the 1993 UN-backed elections. Laos, on the other hand, has never shrugged off its communist party-dominated government, leaving its economic and infrastructural development to mire in decades-long stagnation – easy prey for Chinese "special economic zones" within the country and the cession of sovereignty over local affairs.<sup>20</sup> For countries in similar positions developmentally with little voice on the broader geopolitical stage, yielding to China's BRI and promises of a vaccine may not be a matter of 'if' but 'when.'

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October 9, 2020, <https://apnews.com/article/virus-outbreak-xi-jinping-taiwan-china-archive-aae1708207d3510a434d35aec994d4d1>.

<sup>17</sup> Shaun Turton, "Cambodia Shuns China's Sinovac Vaccine in Favor of COVAX Shots," *Nikkei Asia*, December 15, 2020, <https://asia.nikkei.com/Spotlight/Coronavirus/Cambodia-shuns-China-s-Sinovac-vaccine-in-favor-of-COVAX-shots>.

<sup>18</sup> Niem Chheng, "Kingdom Accepts Chinese Vaccine, PM First to Get Jab," *The Phnom Penh Post*, January 17, 2021, <https://phnompenhpost.com/national/kingdom-accepts-chinese-vaccine-pm-first-get-jab>.

<sup>19</sup> David Hutt, "Cambodia's COVID-19 Vaccine Boondoggle," *The Diplomat*, December 14, 2020, <https://thediplomat.com/2020/12/cambodias-covid-19-vaccine-boondoggle>.

<sup>20</sup> Dai Wei Tsang, "Will Laos Become a Model for China's Economic Colonialism?" *Fair Observer*, October 16, 2020, <https://www.fairobserver.com/economics/dai-wei-tsang-laos-covid-19-economy-boten-railway-belt-road-initiative-china-colonialism-news-13312>.

Imagine a country caught in the web of China's debt-trap diplomacy faced with the prospect of acquiring a vaccine for COVID-19. The West offers to sell its versions. China also offers one, perhaps at a much-reduced rate, perhaps for free – maybe even in addition to loans for infrastructure projects. Help for developing countries in acquiring a vaccine has been announced by the WHO, World Bank, and Beijing-based Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank.<sup>21</sup> But Chinese loans for infrastructure coupled with a vaccine would be more than the West would be willing to offer and something many developing nations would be incapable of rejecting.

The potential that COVID-19 offers China to become a major benefactor for a “healthcare silk road”<sup>22</sup> and thereby enlarging its bevy of client nations will depend largely on the trust it can garner from its vaccine rollout. China is already pursuing a loan/vaccine strategy in Latin America and the Caribbean,<sup>23</sup> but also in the Philippines, with similar promises of vaccine priority for Malaysia and the aforementioned Mekong River nations.<sup>24</sup> The Indonesian government has also embraced China's “vaccine diplomacy” and is currently in Phase 3 trials of Sinovac's vaccine, thus complicating the two nations' competing claims within the South China Sea.<sup>25</sup> Through a combination of territorial belligerence (South China Sea), indifference to shared natural resources (Mekong River), and the takeover of strategic foreign assets via the BRI (debt-trap diplomacy), China has been able to drive a wedge between ASEAN members with the implicit posturing that it can be both friend and foe, source of disease and cure.

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<sup>21</sup> Wendy Wu, “Coronavirus: China-Led AIIB to Support Vaccine Roll-Outs in Developing Nations,” *South China Morning Post*, January 13, 2021, <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/science/article/3117590/coronavirus-china-led-aiib-support-vaccine-roll-outs-developing>.

<sup>22</sup> Frank Mouritz, “Implications of the COVID-19 Pandemic on China's Belt and Road Initiative,” *Connections: The Quarterly Journal* 19, no. 2 (Spring 2020): 115-124, 123, <https://doi.org/10.11610/Connections.19.2.09>.

<sup>23</sup> Karol Suarez, “China Offers \$1 Billion Loan to Latin America and the Caribbean for Access to Its COVID-19 Vaccine,” *CNN*, July 24, 2020, <https://edition.cnn.com/2020/07/23/americas/china-billion-vaccine-latin-america-coronavirus-intl/index.html>.

<sup>24</sup> Raissa Robles, “China Offers Free COVID-19 Vaccines, Loans to Philippines as Wang Yi Wraps Up Southeast Asia Tour,” *South China Morning Post*, January 16, 2021, <https://www.scmp.com/week-asia/politics/article/3118034/china-offers-free-covid-19-vaccines-loans-philippines-wang-yi>.

<sup>25</sup> CK Tan and Erwida Maulia, “Red Pill? Behind China's COVID-19 Vaccine Diplomacy,” *Nikkei Asia*, November 4, 2020, <https://asia.nikkei.com/Spotlight/The-Big-Story/Red-Pill-Behind-China-s-COVID-19-vaccine-diplomacy>.

## Malleable Perceptions, Uncertain Future

The takeaway from all of this for the CCP is not very promising for the rest of the world. China has proved willing to continue with lax safety standards for its biological research labs and allow market activities that have been responsible for the spread of past pandemics, even when singled out for those activities by the international community. Yet, China has also witnessed firsthand how quickly such apathy can damage its key rivals and bring the global economy to a standstill while simultaneously profiting from its role as a global manufacturer of medical supplies,<sup>26</sup> and now a vaccine, as nations look to it for a remedy for that very indifference.

At the same time, the country has demonstrated a remarkable ability to spin a narrative that paints it as a global leader in combating the pandemic, to the point where Western media continues to accept China's absurdly low official Covid deaths two years on.<sup>27</sup> Even while making a rare admission of "shortcomings and deficiencies," the Chinese state-controlled media agency Xinhua reported that a meeting by the Standing Committee of the Political Bureau

"emphasized the need to do a good job of propaganda, education, and public opinion guidance, to coordinate online and offline, domestic and international, major events and small matters, to better strengthen confidence, warm people's hearts, and gather people's hearts."<sup>28</sup>

The CCP knows that history and perception are malleable. With enough confusion sown over COVID-19's origin (including the wild accusation that it was brought to China by the US military), images of Chinese doctors carrying forth a vaccine to countries in need would erase much of the antipathy surrounding the pandemic's origin and cement the CCP's munifi-

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<sup>26</sup> Lily Kuo, "China Sends Doctors and Masks Overseas as Domestic Coronavirus Infections Drop," *The Guardian*, March 19, 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/mar/19/china-positions-itself-as-a-leader-in-tackling-the-coronavirus>.

<sup>27</sup> Chad De Guzman, "Asia Has Kept COVID-19 at Bay for 2 Years. Omicron Could Change That," *Time*, January 18, 2022, <https://time.com/6139851/asia-omicron-covid-surge/>.

<sup>28</sup> Xinhuanet, "The Standing Committee of the Political Bureau of the CPC Central Committee Held a Meeting to Study and Strengthen the Prevention and Control of Pneumonia Caused by the New Coronavirus Infection. Xi Jinping, General Secretary of the CPC Central Committee, Chaired the Meeting," *Xinhua News Agency*, February 3, 2020, [http://www.xinhuanet.com/politics/leaders/2020-02/03/c\\_1125527334.htm](http://www.xinhuanet.com/politics/leaders/2020-02/03/c_1125527334.htm).

cence; the so-called “public opinion guidance.” Guidance helped in large part through its influence over the WHO, which has done yeoman’s work to paint China as a nation whose work deserves praise instead of objective critique,<sup>29</sup> even as the WVI’s research comes under greater scrutiny.<sup>30</sup>

Such lauding of China’s efforts in grappling with a pandemic that likely emerged from either its continued allowance for live animal markets or a leak from its only BSL-4 lab is akin to praising a reckless homeowner who sets his neighborhood on fire but then helps put out the blaze. But with its willingness to pursue aims antithetical to international law and growing clout within international organizations such as the WHO, the CCP has the capacity to maintain a benign façade regarding its aims, even when the nature of those aims can be reasonably discerned.

This clout was evident throughout 2020 but driven home during the WHO’s most recent fact-finding mission in Wuhan. Part of the WVI’s work on coronaviruses includes gain-of-function research, which places selective pressures on viruses through several iterations to increase their virulence, thereby providing a better understanding of their transmissibility. The head of the WVI, Shi Zhengli, has also worked closely with a member of the WHO team, Peter Daszak, a vociferous defender of the lab and president of the non-profit EcoHealth Alliance, which has previously helped secure funding for the WVI from the National Institute of Health in the US.<sup>31</sup> Despite these issues, the head of the mission, Peter Ben Embarek, flatly stated that it was “extremely unlikely” that a lab leak occurred at the WVI;<sup>32</sup> a conclusion the WHO team reached after a three-hour, non-forensic tour of the facility more than a year after the initial outbreak.

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<sup>29</sup> Jenni Fink, “WHO Praises China as Country That Deserves ‘Gratitude and Respect’ As Some Question Coronavirus Transparency,” *Newsweek*, January 29, 2020, <https://www.newsweek.com/who-praises-china-country-that-deserves-gratitude-respect-some-question-coronavirus-1484716>.

<sup>30</sup> Nicholson Baker, “The Lab-Leak Hypothesis: For Decades, Scientists Have Been Hot-Wiring Viruses in Hopes of Preventing a Pandemic, Not Causing One. But What If ...?” *New York*, January 4, 2021, <https://nymag.com/intelligencer/article/coronavirus-lab-escape-theory.html>.

<sup>31</sup> Jerry Dunleavy, “WHO Origins Investigator Defends Wuhan Lab and Blames Lack of Access on ‘Anti-China Political Rhetoric,’” *Washington Examiner*, March 12, 2021, <https://www.washingtonexaminer.com/news/who-origins-investigator-defends-wuhan-lab-blames-lack-access-anti-china-political-rhetoric>.

<sup>32</sup> Michelle Roberts, “COVID: WHO Says ‘Extremely unlikely’ Virus Leaked from Lab in China,” *BBC*, February 9, 2021, [www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-china-55996728](http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-china-55996728).

With the emergence of the Omicron variant (a name the WHO arrived at after skipping over the Greek letter 'Xi' to avoid offending anyone),<sup>33</sup> countries throughout Asia have once again reverted to entry restrictions,<sup>34</sup> despite Omicron's reduced virulence compared to Delta<sup>35</sup> and the near impossibility of preventing the variant's spread. As China's Sinovac and Sinopharm vaccines have shown to provide little to no protection against Omicron, a claim which Sinovac disputes,<sup>36</sup> whether continued boosters will be required in the future remains unclear. Perpetual rounds of boosters or even new Omicron-specific vaccines, which China claims to be developing,<sup>37</sup> are not likely to go over well among populations in Southeast Asia already wary of China's influence. Convincing those same populations to accept a new type of vaccine (such as mRNA) may be similarly difficult and potentially represent a diplomatic loss of face for Beijing should they be popularly rejected, something all parties would like to avoid. But as Sinovac and Sinopharm account for more than 5 billion of the 11 billion vaccine doses administered globally, those countries that have accepted China's vaccine aid may have little choice but to continue on the road they are already on, particularly if alternative aid is not forthcoming.

Given the conflict of interests among senior members of the WHO and the WVI, the less than thorough investigations thus far into Covid-19's origin, China's own virology research (which is gaining ground with the US), and now the world's reaction to the new Omicron variant, perhaps a reasonable question to ask is, *why should China change?*

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<sup>33</sup> Steven Lee Myers, "The WHO Skips Forward Two Greek Letters, Avoiding a Xi Variant," *The New York Times*, November 28, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/11/28/world/asia/omicron-variant-name-covid.html>.

<sup>34</sup> Sebastian Strangio, "Omicron Variant Threatens to Upend Southeast Asia's COVID-19 Recovery," *The Diplomat*, December 2, 2021, <https://thediplomat.com/2021/12/omicron-variant-threatens-to-upend-southeast-asias-covid-19-recovery/>.

<sup>35</sup> Mary-Ann Davies et al., "Outcomes of Laboratory-Confirmed SARS-CoV-2 Infection in the Omicron-Driven Fourth Wave Compared with Previous Waves in the Western Cape Province, South Africa," *medRxiv*, January 12, 2022, <https://doi.org/10.1101/2022.01.12.22269148>.

<sup>36</sup> Elie Dolgin, "Omicron Thwarts Some of the World's Most-Used Vaccines," *Nature* 601 (January 2022): 311, <https://www.nature.com/articles/d41586-022-00079-6>.

<sup>37</sup> Wang Xiaoyu, "China Pushing Development of Vaccine Against Omicron," *China Daily*, December 2, 2021, <http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/a/202112/02/WS61a8a2d5a310cdd39bc78feb.html>.

On the one hand, it can continue with market activities that have caused previous pandemics unabated, knowing that the rest of the world can do little more than stand by and complain. On the other, its virology research is far enough along – and has an equally long list of international advocates and funding bodies – to give it inflated confidence in its ability to investigate any new disease that develops, regardless of its point of origin. As COVID-19 has demonstrated, responsibility for the emergence and spread of a pandemic can be managed, deflected, and obscured. The real prize is a vaccine and all of the accolades, client states, and political leverage that go along with it.

The BRI has lured numerous countries into a false sense of security that, as a developing nation, China understands the developing world better than the West. Its debt-trap diplomacy has already resulted in countries forfeiting strategic assets to China as they struggle beneath loans the CCP likely knew could never be repaid. COVID-19 has now provided another layer – a new trap – which no offer of a port or electrical grid could provide: vaccinating a nation's population against a global pandemic that originated in China. As long as the CCP can continue to outmaneuver the West in distributing a vaccine to countries in need, the potential for those countries to become subject to its political whims will continue if not increase. The looming threat of withholding a vaccine, meanwhile, even if less effective than its Western counterparts, will likely silence potential critics in countries that might otherwise find themselves farther down the list of recipients the next time a medical crisis from China or elsewhere emerges.

#### About the Author

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# COVID-19 in Central Asia: Responses, Results, and Regional Cooperation

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**Abstract:** We survey the ways in which the countries of Central Asia – Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan – responded to the challenges presented by the COVID-19 disease. We argue that the responses reflect the countries' specific political, economic, and social features. Central Asian countries, in broad comparative measures, were successful in mitigating the effects of the disease. In a 2020 article, we detailed how the governments responded to the medical emergency by swiftly putting into place life-saving measures and empowering law enforcement and medical authorities to implement a broad range of mitigation measures to protect public health. In addition, we described how cross-border travel restrictions, lockdowns, and sheltering-in-place restrictions were imposed, and how transborder transit was significantly curtailed and controlled. Initial governmental responses were reasonably successful in curtailing the early spread of COVID-19. In the present article, we turn our attention to a mid-term analysis. We focus on four categories: 1) agility in the initial process of transmission suppression; 2) resilience in responding to economic and social disruption; 3) repositioning with emphasis on vaccine distribution and cooperation; and 4) diplomacy in the geopolitical changes, including Great Power Competition. We draw conclusions regarding the overall effectiveness of government strategies, the effects of the pandemic on political legitimacy, and the implications of 24 months of COVID-19 for broad and enduring strategic relationships.

**Keywords:** Coronavirus, COVID-19, Central Asia, Regional Security, Belt and Road Initiative, BRI.

## Introduction

The purpose of this article is threefold: first, to generally assess the overall performance of the Central Asian countries in responding to a public health challenge of unprecedented proportions; second, to estimate the impact of the pandemic on the overall political resilience of the state structures; and third, to offer some preliminary observations regarding the ex-

tent to which the pandemic altered strategic relationships among the Central Asian states and with external partners. In analyses of Central Asia, it is conventional to include Turkmenistan. In this article, however, we do not cover the unique case of Turkmenistan, as the country denied the existence of COVID-19 on its territory. According to available reports, illnesses with COVID-19 symptoms were treated as cases of pneumonia. Accordingly, no external assistance could be provided by international health organizations.

At the beginning of the pandemic in 2019, no authoritatively accepted vaccine was available. Some promising virological research on the basis of the previous SARS and MERS pathogens had been conducted, but medical experts agreed in early 2020 that no reliable vaccine was readily available, nor was the time frame of the discovery and production of an effective vaccine known. The emergence of several effective vaccines, the first being the Russian-produced Sputnik V Mass vaccine, was the first major step in solving many national and international medical issues and raised questions regarding the impact of the pandemic on strategic relations. Would the production and distribution of vaccines become a fulcrum point around which hinged international cooperation, partnership, and even alliance relations?

### Agility, Resilience, and Repositioning

Turning a challenge into an opportunity requires the command of three factors: agility, resilience, and repositioning. Agility is the ability to modify the practices to adapt in a timely fashion to a new challenge. Resilience is the ability to withstand the negative effects of a challenge. Repositioning refers to the ability to take advantage of the situational features which have changed. Repositioning does not mean simply returning to the previous *status quo* but adopting a forward-directed policy posture. Repositioning means adapting to respond to the new set of conditions. In the case of COVID-19, agility refers to the ability to stem the spread of the virus. Resilience refers to the ability to take steps to address the immediate social and economic costs of the disruption. Repositioning refers to the steps to go beyond the pandemic.

In our 2020 article, we focused on the agility factor. We examined the Central Asian governments' efforts to suppress the transmission of COVID-

19.<sup>1</sup> We argued that the data suggested the Central Asian governments were initially quite successful, compared with other world regions, in the initial containment measures. We also argued that the governments faced a broad range of social and economic difficulties brought on by COVID-19. We stressed the impact of the sudden interruption of typical earnings and livelihoods for many people, the disruption of commercial supply chains, and the sudden drop in commodity prices.

Early in the pandemic, it became apparent that the global pandemic was likely to have consequences beyond the loss of life, the immediate incapacitation due to illness, and lockdown impact. However, it was not clear how long the pandemic effects would endure or how serious, on a societal level, the costs of disruption would be. Moreover, it did seem likely that even if the SARS-CoV-2 virus attenuated, either in waves or in a sudden disappearance, there would probably be enduring consequences of the disruption at a local, national, regional, and even global level.

At that early point in the pandemic, it was apparent that the disruption brought about would degrade the capacity of governments, firms, and individuals to protect themselves. However, it was not apparent if the same level of degradation would occur regarding the capacity of criminals, criminal groups, insurrectionists, or insurgencies. Would the degradation of capabilities be proportional, or would this process give an advantage to societal adversaries? Would the pandemic have the effect, from a comparative perspective, of empowering those who challenged national security interests?

Early in the pandemic, it was apparent that the disruption of supply chains for commodity exports and the import of consumer goods – both high priority issues for all the Central Asian countries – would be deeply affected by the interruption of trade and commerce. It turned out that the concern of political leaders regarding disruption was, in fact, quite accurate. Speaking in May 2021 as chairman of the meeting of the Group of Landlocked Developing Countries, Kassym-Jomart Tokayev drew the attention

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<sup>1</sup> Gregory Gleason and Kuralay Baizakova, "COVID-19 in the Central Asian Region: National Responses and Regional Implications," *Connections: The Quarterly Journal* 19, no. 2 (Spring 2020): 101-114.

of the world community to the fact that “the pandemic has threatened the development of all states, landlocked developing countries were among the most affected by cuts in external financing, trade, and investment.” President Tokayev noted the contribution of Kazakhstan to the implementation of the UN Global Humanitarian Response Plan and the assistance to a number of foreign countries to combat coronavirus.<sup>2</sup>

The economic changes taking place due to a new generation of transportation infrastructure had a particularly important role in Central Asia. Central Asia forms the core of a linking region connecting countries of the far East and South Asia with the Middle East and European countries. The Central Asian states have deep historical roots and are rich in natural resources and agricultural potential. But an important reason these relatively sparsely populated countries are of importance to the world is that they occupy territory situated in the position of a “land bridge” connecting the densely populated regions to their East and West, and their North and South. Supply chains connecting the primary commodities and the trade in goods and services across the land bridge are of great and growing importance in the ongoing globalization.

The effect of the coronavirus pandemic was to magnify the importance of the Central Asian land bridge. As global transportation hubs drew to a standstill, air, rail, road, and maritime connections throughout the Eurasian region either closed down or greatly reduced volumes. Governments in China, Russia, Iran, Pakistan, Afghanistan, the Central Asian, and the Caucasus states implemented emergency measures, imposing curfews in many urban areas and bringing law enforcement and even the military into the enforcement of strict lockdown measures. All these measures in all states can further magnify the interaction between political and economic challenges. State governments can withdraw to seek self-reliance for a limited amount of time. Eventually, economic and political relationships need to be restored for states to survive in today’s highly globalized, technological

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<sup>2</sup> “The President of Kazakhstan Took Part in a Meeting of the High Level Group, Financial Development in the COVID-19 Period and Beyond,” Official Site of the President of Kazakhstan, May 28, 2020, [https://www.akorda.kz/ru/events/akorda\\_news/meetings\\_and\\_sittings/prezident-kazahstana-prinyal-uchastie-v-meropriyatii-vysokogourovnya-finansirovanie-razvitiya-v-epohu-covid-19-i-v-posleduyushchii-period](https://www.akorda.kz/ru/events/akorda_news/meetings_and_sittings/prezident-kazahstana-prinyal-uchastie-v-meropriyatii-vysokogourovnya-finansirovanie-razvitiya-v-epohu-covid-19-i-v-posleduyushchii-period) – in Russian.

world. The only way to restart state-to-state interaction is through forms of multilateral cooperation.

The early stages of the pandemic raised questions regarding the utility of established international practices and policies. There were questions regarding whether the body of international law was well suited to the conditions of a global pandemic.<sup>3</sup> This was especially important with respect to global health governance. Would the nationalistic tendencies of some powerful states run counter to the smaller states, reinforcing the “weakest-link public goods” character of global health emergencies? Would the existing provisions of the global health governance require enforcement through new dispute resolution procedures?<sup>4</sup>

Also, early in the pandemic, it became clear that the pandemic created conditions that enhanced, rather than diminished, the role of states in general. As Marlene Laruelle and Madeline McCann noted that “the state’s ability to present itself as having effectively managed the crisis could have deep political impacts.”<sup>5</sup> At the same time, the rise in recent years of political and economic tensions among major world powers, the so-called “Great Powers,” was evident. These tensions among major world powers did not originate from the Central Asian region. Still, they did affect the region where the countries seek to pursue “multi-vector” foreign policy rather than attach to a single state or bloc of states. The principal foreign influencer in the region, the Russian Federation, exerted a major influence in the region through its “vaccine diplomacy.”<sup>6</sup> Early in the pandemic, there was a great deal of speculation regarding the large-scale strategic and presumably per-

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<sup>3</sup> Jonathan G. Odom, ed., *COVID-19 and the Law: A Compilation of Legal Resources* (Garmisch-Partenkirchen, Germany: George C. Marshall European Center for Security Studies, March 2021), [https://www.marshallcenter.org/sites/default/files/files/2021-03/Odom\\_20210311\\_COVID-19\\_AND\\_THE\\_LAW.pdf](https://www.marshallcenter.org/sites/default/files/files/2021-03/Odom_20210311_COVID-19_AND_THE_LAW.pdf).

<sup>4</sup> Leila N. Sadat, “Pandemic Nationalism, COVID-19, and International Law,” February 16, 2021, Washington University in St. Louis Legal Studies Research Paper No. 21-02-06, <https://ssrn.com/abstract=3796365>.

<sup>5</sup> Marlene Laruelle and Sara Huzar, “Post-Soviet State Responses to COVID-19: Making or Breaking Authoritarianism?” *PONARS Eurasia*, Policy memo 641, March 27, 2020, <http://www.ponarseurasia.org/memo/post-soviet-state-responses-covid-19-making-or-breaking-authoritarianism>.

<sup>6</sup> Pál Dunay, “Therapies and Implications: The Consequences of COVID-19 in the post-Soviet Space,” *Per Concordiam* 11, no. 2 (2021): 36-43, [https://perconcordiam.com/perCon\\_V11N2\\_ENG.pdf](https://perconcordiam.com/perCon_V11N2_ENG.pdf).

manent effects of the pandemic in terms of great power politics.<sup>7</sup> As David Ignatius summarized, COVID-19 challenges defense analysts to begin assessing how the global spread of this deadly disease is a catalyst in changing how we think about peace, prosperity, and warfare.<sup>8</sup> But even if the pandemic changed the “ways we think about peace and security,” would it fundamentally change the security terrain? Some skeptics, such as William Inboden, assert that the coronavirus inflicts a ghastly human toll and causes disastrous social and national dislocations. Inboden admitted the virus was sharpening the key rivalry of the 21st century, the US-China competition, and highlighting strains that were already disordering the world. But he claimed that “it is unlikely to cause a fundamental altering of the global system on par with what happened after World War II destroyed two leading great powers, Germany and Japan, catalyzed the collapse of the European colonial empires, and propelled the United States to international primacy.”<sup>9</sup> The past year has provided a great deal of experience regarding the Central Asian states’ capability for agility, resilience, and repositioning.

## Agility – Suppression of Disease Transmission

Epidemic disease is not new to Central Asia. Central Asians have long dealt with the problems of infection. Alexander the Great is said to have fallen victim to infection while in Central Asia. Central Asian thinkers have led the way in understanding pandemic diseases for more than a thousand years.<sup>10</sup> Over a thousand years ago, in what is today Uzbekistan, the polymath Ibn Sina articulated the metrics, measures, and meaning of disease transmission in his *Book of Medicine*.

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<sup>7</sup> See for example, Michael D. Swaine, “COVID-19 Pushes World to a Turning Point,” *The Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, April 13, 2020, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2020/04/13/covid-19-pushes-world-to-turning-point-pub-81557>.

<sup>8</sup> David Ignatius, “The Coronavirus is Already Reshaping Defense Strategies,” *The Washington Post*, April 9, 2020, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/how-the-coronavirus-is-changing-how-we-think-about-warfare/2020/04/09/7756d330-7a9f-11ea-a130-df573469f094\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/how-the-coronavirus-is-changing-how-we-think-about-warfare/2020/04/09/7756d330-7a9f-11ea-a130-df573469f094_story.html).

<sup>9</sup> William Inboden, “After COVID, What Should American Foreign Policy Do?” *Defense One*, January 4, 2021, <https://www.defenseone.com/ideas/2021/01/world-covid-made-what-should-american-foreign-policy-do/171162/>.

<sup>10</sup> S. Frederick Starr, *Lost Enlightenment: Central Asia’s Golden Age from the Arab Conquest to Tamerlane* (Princeton University Press, 2013).

Table 1. Covid-19 Cases in the Central Asian States as Reported to WHO (1 January – 21 March 2022).

Country	Date of first Covid-19	Total Cases	Deaths	Population (million)	Territory sq.km
Kazakhstan	15 March 2020	1,393,456	19,004	18.7	2,724,900
Kyrgyzstan	19 March 2020	200,818	2,980	6.6	199,951
Tajikistan	1 May 2020	17,786	125	9.4	143,100
Turkmenistan	None reported	0	0	6.0	491,210
Uzbekistan	16 March 2020	237,508	1,637	34.2	448,978

Source: Covid-19 figures are collected by national authorities and reported to WHO Dashboard.<sup>11</sup> Population figures are from the Population Reference Bureau, mid-2019 totals.<sup>12</sup> The reported Covid-19 infection figures differ substantially in some instances from the figures estimated by other sources. Compare, for instance, the figures listed by the COVID-19 Dashboard of the Center for Systems Science and Engineering (CSSE) at Johns Hopkins<sup>13</sup> or the figures reported in a widely used Russian-language reporting system, Yandex Karty.<sup>14</sup>

The measures for curbing infectious transmission involved distancing for 40 days – the term in the west adopted for “quartenary” isolation, what we know today as quarantine. Over the years, Central Asian epidemiologists

<sup>11</sup> The World Health Organization previously recorded epidemiological data on a daily basis in its WHO Situation Reports. These reports have been replaced by Weekly Operational Updates. See: <https://www.who.int/publications/m/item/weekly-operational-update-on-covid-19---10-may-2021>. Daily information is reported in the WHO Coronavirus (COVID-19) Dashboard, <https://covid19.who.int/>.

<sup>12</sup> Population Reference Bureau, <https://www.prb.org/>.

<sup>13</sup> Johns Hopkins University, “Corona Virus Map,” <https://coronavirus.jhu.edu/region>.

<sup>14</sup> “Map of the Distribution of Coronavirus in Russia and the World,” Yandex, <https://yandex.ru/web-maps/covid19>.

have carefully tracked infectious diseases. During the Soviet period, a large and unique network of facilities called the “anti-plague system” was developed in Central Asia to control deadly endemic diseases and prevent importing exotic pathogens from other countries.<sup>15</sup>

When COVID-19 burst onto the scene in early 2020, the governments in Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, and later Tajikistan swiftly responded, instituting emergency measures, empowering law enforcement and medical authorities to implement a broad range of counter-infection mitigation measures to protect public health. Cross-border travel restrictions were imposed. Lockdowns and sheltering-in-place restrictions were imposed in most major cities, and curfews were enforced. Routine commercial air flights were canceled or significantly reduced in international airports and many domestic airports. New levels of visa restrictions were implemented in all the Central Asian countries. Epidemiologists refer to these types of policies as the suppression of transmissibility to reduce the infectivity of a pandemic. The primary public policy approach medical specialists have urged for is social distancing, maintaining a physical distance between people.<sup>16</sup>

The Central Asian countries counted COVID-19 cases differently: some counted pneumonia cases, including deaths. Some did not count pneumonia. In Kyrgyzstan, healthcare workers and civil society specialists urged the Ministry of Health to count both pneumonia and COVID-19 cases. Starting from July 2020, the patients with pneumonia cases were considered COVID-19 cases by default. The spreading of deadly pneumonia in Tajikistan has been well known prior to the visit of WHO on April 30, 2020. Afterward, the authorities admitted the existence of COVID-19 cases in the country. Kazakh Ministry of Health announced that during the first half of 2020, there were three times more cases of pneumonia than in 2019 and twice more deaths. However, these cases were not included in official statistics. Upon a round of talks with WHO, the Kazakh Ministry of Health

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<sup>15</sup> Sonia Ben Ouagrham-Gormley, Alexander Melikishvili, and Raymond A. Zilinskas, “The Soviet Anti-Plague System: An Introduction,” *Critical Reviews in Microbiology* 32, no. 1 (2006): 15-17, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10408410500496789>.

<sup>16</sup> Aaron E. Carroll and Ashish K. Jha, “This Is How We Can Beat the Coronavirus: Mitigation Can Buy Us Time, but Only Suppression Can Get Us to Where We Need to Be,” *The Atlantic*, March 19, 2020, <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2020/03/how-we-beat-coronavirus/608389/>.

decided to combine such statistics from August 1, 2020. Kazakh officials were very concerned about the reliability of the statistics. In January 2021, President of Kazakhstan Kassym-Jomart Tokayev arranged to conduct extensive “statistically valid” research about the realities of COVID-19 cases in the country.<sup>17</sup> As illustrated by the data reported in Table 1, it is clear that the initial infection containment measures throughout the Central Asian states were largely successful in curtailing the early spread of COVID-19.

Andrei Kazantsev, director of the Center for Research on Central Asian and Afghan Problems at the MGIMO Institute for International Studies, believes that “Kazakhstan has built a fairly effective management system.” Kazantsev argues the system has “manifested itself in a collision with many different challenges – not only with diseases but also with various economic crises, with threats to state security.” Kazantsev concludes that the Kazakh government’s fight against COVID-19 should be assessed as working “accurately and effectively” because Kazakhstan’s population followed quarantine measures. Thus, in Kazakhstan, everything went according to a scenario that is more similar to the one in China and not the one in Italy. Kazantsev argues that “Kazakhstan was able to manage the virus, unlike those countries where it was allowed to go out of control.”<sup>18</sup>

## Resilience – Vaccines

One important measure of the resilience of systems is the ability to respond. At the beginning of the COVID-19 outbreak, the idea of a coronavirus vaccine was still very hypothetical. The rapid development of vaccines was unexpected, and now the rollout of the vaccines is a new test.

There are several currently produced and approved vaccines using several different platforms and principles. The vaccines now under production

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<sup>17</sup> “Reliable Statistical Research Is Important for the Further Development on Various Levels, Noted the President,” *Sputnik*, January 26, 2021, <https://ru.sputnik.kz/2021/01/26/Regiony-iz-strakha-nakazaniya-skryvayut-nastoyaschie-tsifry-po-koronavirusu---Tokayev-16130494.html> – in Russian.

<sup>18</sup> Andrei Kazantsev as cited in Andrey Beloborodov, “Systemic Character: Why Kazakhstan Has Handled COVID-19,” *Komsomolskaya Pravda*, April 29, 2020, <https://www.kp.ru/daily/27126/4208162/> – in Russian.

include two RNA vaccines (Pfizer-BioNTech and Moderna), five conventional inactivated vaccines (BBIBP-CorV, CoronaVac, Covaxin, WIBP-CorV, and CoviVac), five viral vector vaccines (Sputnik V Mass Light, Sputnik V Mass, Oxford-AstraZeneca, Convidecia, and Johnson & Johnson), and two protein subunit vaccines (EpiVacCorona and RBD-Dimer). As of May 1, 2021, only three vaccines – Moderna, Pfizer-BioNTech, and Johnson & Johnson-Janssen – are approved in the United States.<sup>19</sup>

Sputnik V Mass is a product of the Gamaleya Research Institute of Epidemiology and Microbiology and was developed under the sponsorship of the Russia Direct Investment Fund (RDIF), a Russian-state sponsored investment enterprise designed to spur innovative products and promote import-substitution.<sup>20</sup> On May 7, 2021, the World Health Organization included the Chinese COVID-19 vaccine produced by Sinopharm as acceptable for use and indicated that it would be soon made available through the COVAX program.<sup>21</sup> In January 2021, Tajikistan President Emomali Rahmon proclaimed a complete victory over the spread of coronavirus in the republic. According to him, currently, there are no COVID-19 cases in the country, and the causative agent of the disease itself has been “completely destroyed.”<sup>22</sup>

In the Central Asian states, the vaccine rollout started in early February 2021. The country that officially claimed the absence of official COVID-19 cases is undergoing vaccination. Turkmenistan registered both Russian vaccines and started the vaccination with the high-risk group. The rest of the population received vaccination in March.<sup>23</sup> Kazakhstan started vac-

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<sup>19</sup> Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, “Different Covid-19 Vaccines,” <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/vaccines/different-vaccines.html>.

<sup>20</sup> Sputnik V Mass is an adenoviral vector-based platform which was registered as of May 1, 2021 in more than 60 countries, <https://sputnikvaccine.com/>. The Russian Direct Investment Fund (RDIF) is Russia’s sovereign wealth fund established in 2011 by the Russian government to make investments in leading companies of high-growth sectors of the Russian economy, [https://rdif.ru/Eng\\_Index/](https://rdif.ru/Eng_Index/).

<sup>21</sup> “WHO Lists Additional COVID-19 Vaccine for Emergency Use and Issues Interim Policy Recommendations,” WHO, 7 May 2021, <https://www.who.int/news/item/07-05-2021-who-lists-additional-covid-19-vaccine-for-emergency-use-and-issues-interim-policy-recommendations>.

<sup>22</sup> “Tajikistan Announced Complete Victory over COVID-19,” *Lenta.Ru*, January 26, 2021, [https://lenta.ru/news/2021/01/26/rakhmon\\_tad/](https://lenta.ru/news/2021/01/26/rakhmon_tad/).

<sup>23</sup> <https://asiaplustj.info/ru/news/centralasia/20210222/v-turkmenistane-nachalas->

ination from February 1, 2021, using Sputnik V Mass produced in Russia. Later Sputnik V Mass was joined by Gam-Covid-Vac made by Karaganda Pharmaceutical Complex. Vaccination is taking place stage by stage due to availability. First to be vaccinated are the most vulnerable populations. Those included medical, healthcare, and sanitary-epidemiological service workers. The second stage would include teachers of primary and secondary schools, colleges and universities, and other medical services who did not get listed in the first stage. The third stage would cover teachers of boarding schools, orphanages, kindergartens, students, and people with chronic diseases.<sup>24</sup> Kazakhstan introduced electronic vaccination passports. It displays information in three languages: what drugs a person received, in what doses, and on what dates.

Starting from the 2<sup>nd</sup> quarter of 2021, locally produced QazCovid-In, which is currently undergoing the 3<sup>rd</sup> stage of clinical trials, would join the vaccination process. Kyrgyzstan commenced the vaccination of its population against COVID-19 at the end of March with the first vaccine to enter the republic – the Chinese “Sinopharm.” Currently, the population is being vaccinated by Russian Sputnik V Mass. In Uzbekistan, the population’s vaccination started on April 1, 2021. First, residents of the largest cities in the country received the vaccine. They had two vaccines to choose from: one from AstraZeneca, obtained through the COVAX mechanism of the World Health Organization, and a jointly developed vaccine with one of the Chinese manufacturers. In addition to the AstraZeneca and ZF-UZ-VAC2001, the authorities also plan to purchase the Russian Sputnik V Mass.

The first batch of coronavirus vaccines arrived in Tajikistan in the first half of 2021 under the COVAX mechanism. As a low-income country, Tajikistan is entitled to receive the COVAX vaccine at no cost. Vaccinations under this program would cover 20 % of Tajikistan’s population. The remaining 80 % of the population most probably would be getting different vaccines. Tajikistan is currently negotiating the supply of the Russian Sputnik V Mass.

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vaktsinatsiya-ot-covid-19-smi-soobtshayut-cto-ona-platnaya.

<sup>24</sup> “Mass Coronavirus Vaccination in Kazakhstan,” *zakon.kz*, January 21, 2021, <https://www.zakon.kz/5055462-vse-o-massovoy-vaktsinatsii-v.html> – in Russian.

The algorithm for conducting a vaccination campaign in Central Asian countries is similar. The first to receive the vaccination are those who, due to work or duty, are in daily contact with a large number of people. This group includes doctors, teachers, military personnel at border checkpoints, and law enforcement officers. The elderly are also among the first to be vaccinated. In Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan, vaccination is free and voluntary.

At the end of March 2021, it was clear that British and South African strains of the coronavirus had been identified in Almaty, Kazakhstan. WHO assisted in introducing a new method of fast PCR screening to determine new COVID-19 strains. Results of the conducted research highlighted the fact that all but four regions of Kazakhstan had experienced the COVID cases with “British,” “South African,” and “Brazilian” strains.<sup>25</sup> There has been no news of COVID cases involving these strains in other Central Asian republics.

Vaccine politics has become a sensitive issue in Central Asia. On December 8, 2020, RIA Novosti announced that Sputnik V Mass was the first officially approved COVID-19 vaccine.<sup>26</sup> The announcement of the first “officially approved” vaccine was met with some skepticism in medical circles. But an article in the respected British medical journal, *The Lancet*, asserted that “The trial results show a consistent strong protective effect across all participant age groups.”<sup>27</sup> Vladimir Putin has repeatedly stated that Sputnik V Mass is continuing to expand its influence worldwide and that regardless of what he refers to as audacious attempts by westerners “to discredit our vaccine,” it continues to be demanded around the world.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Aygerim Ahmetullina, “Mutated Strains of KVI Identified in 13 Regions of Kazakhstan,” *Turan Times*, March 30, 2021, <https://turantimes.kz/obschestvo/25078-v-13-regionah-vyyavleny-mutirovavshie-shtammy-kvi-coy.html>.

<sup>26</sup> See “Sputnik V: The First Registered COVID-19 Vaccine,” *RIA Novosti*, August 12, 2020, <https://ria.ru/20200812/1575689573.html> – in Russian. The Russian language is not the main official language in any of the Central Asian countries today but many of the health sector specialists rely upon Russian language sources and specialized media such as RIA Novosti for their scientific information.

<sup>27</sup> Ian Jones and Polly Roy, “Sputnik V COVID-19 Vaccine Candidate Appears Safe and Effective,” *The Lancet* 397, no. 10275 (February 2, 2021): 642-643, [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736\(21\)00191-4](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736(21)00191-4).

<sup>28</sup> “Putin Explained about the Interest for the Russian Vaccine in Other Countries,”

The Czech Republic and Slovakia have turned to the Sputnik V Mass vaccine, despite not being approved by the European Medicines Agency.<sup>29</sup>

The international responsibilities of stemming the spread of COVID-19 and any other successors are illustrated by the COVAX motto: in the case of a global pandemic, “no one is safe unless everyone is safe.” Global equitable access to a vaccine, particularly protecting health care workers and those most at risk, is the only way to mitigate the pandemic’s public health and economic impact. The ACT Accelerator is a ground-breaking global collaboration to accelerate the development, production, and equitable access to COVID-19 tests, treatments, and vaccines. COVAX is co-led by Gavi, the Coalition for Epidemic Preparedness Innovations (CEPI), and WHO. It aims to accelerate the development and manufacturing of COVID-19 vaccines and guarantee fair and equitable access for every country in the world.

Some argue that affirmative steps need to be taken globally to ensure that the roadblocks to the distribution of vaccines are overcome. Some medical specialists urge removing the intellectual property protections that allow vaccine developers to hold exclusive rights to control who can make and sell them while at the same time supporting mechanisms for sharing intellectual property, such as the WHO’s COVID-19 Technology Access Pool (C-TAP).<sup>30</sup> Other specialists argue that waiving intellectual property rights would disincentivize pharmaceutical producers and lead to what is at best a temporary solution. Mechanisms such as a “compulsory license” can be used in health emergencies to enable a government to allow other producers to make the vaccine for a reasonable payment to the original patent owner.<sup>31</sup>

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Izvestiya, March 22, 2021, <https://iz.ru/1140517/2021-03-22/putin-rasskazal-ob-interese-k-rossiiskim-vaktcinam-so-storony-drugikh-stran> – in Russian.

<sup>29</sup> Ed Holt, “Countries Split from EU on COVID-19 Vaccines,” *The Lancet* 397, no. 10278 (March 13, 2021): 958, [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736\(21\)00620-6](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736(21)00620-6).

<sup>30</sup> Deborah Gleeson, “The Best Hope for Fairly Distributing COVID-19 Vaccines Globally Is at Risk of Failing. Here’s How to Save It,” *The Conversation*, April 12, 2021, <https://theconversation.com/the-best-hope-for-fairly-distributing-covid-19-vaccines-globally-is-at-risk-of-failing-heres-how-to-save-it-158779>.

<sup>31</sup> Dalindyabo Shabalala, “How to Get COVID-19 Vaccines to Poor Countries – and Still Keep Patent Benefits for Drugmakers,” *The Conversation*, April 14, 2021, <https://theconversation.com/how-to-get-covid-19-vaccines-to-poor-countries-and->

Catherine Putz noted the vaccine situation in Central Asia is that “countries take what they can get fastest. China’s provision of free doses to Kyrgyzstan is certainly interesting in light of its NDA with Uzbekistan over the price of vaccines sold to Tashkent. Furthermore, each country in Central Asia will have to source vaccines from multiple suppliers, even in the best-case scenario, to cover their entire population. Uzbekistan’s challenge is the greatest in this regard; with the region’s largest population – over 33.6 million – it will need every avenue for vaccines it can open.” But Putz argued that “supply is just a logistical issue. The largest hurdles will be the social barriers – hesitancy due to distrust or the belief that prior infection is good enough protection.”<sup>32</sup>

### Resilience – Economic Recovery

The Central Asian governments, in the first two months of the pandemic, took swift and effective measures to stem the further spread of the Covid-19 infection. However, the collapse in commodity prices, the disruption of commercial supply chains, the sudden shift in migrant labor and remittances, the cessation of typical earnings and livelihoods, and the collateral effects of the pandemic have created social and economic effects in Central Asia. Social and economic upheaval at this level unavoidably entails political consequences. Therefore, the speed and breadth of economic recovery is an important measure of resilience. The Kyrgyz economy faced extremely difficult financial issues in recent years, with the national budget deficit reaching over 20 billion Kyrgyz soms (roughly \$ 235 million). Accordingly, the republic cannot fully restore trade and economic ties with other states due to the ongoing coronavirus pandemic.<sup>33</sup>

The measures taken to support the economy and population in each country in the region have been consistent with their economic capabilities. For example, the anti-crisis fund for countering the pandemic in Uzbekistan amounted to more than 1 billion USD. The Anti-Crisis Fund of Kazakh-

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still-keep-patent-benefits-for-drugmakers-158384.

<sup>32</sup> Catherine Putz, “Kyrgyzstan Begins COVID-19 Vaccination Campaign With Free Chinese Doses,” *The Diplomat*, March 31, 2021, <https://thediplomat.com/2021/04/kyrgyzstan-begins-covid-19-vaccination-campaign-with-free-chinese-doses/>.

<sup>33</sup> “The President of Kyrgyzstan Described the Difficult Economic Crisis,” *Kommersant*, May 5, 2021, <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/4801226> – in Russian.

stan equaled roughly 10 billion USD. The aid package included tax incentives, a decline in SME state inspections, and measures to boost employment opportunities. The Kyrgyz government's anti-crisis plan was offered at the end of March and included deferrals for taxes, social payments, and property rentals. Moreover, the deadlines for submitting fiscal reports were postponed, and the moratorium on business verification and the deadline for submitting declarations were extended.

In Tajikistan, many labor migrants working in Russia lost their income due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The expected decline in remittances to Tajikistan took place. Due to inflation and a decrease in the volume of remittances, there was an increase in prices for imported goods and food, which became a tangible blow to the population of Tajikistan, given that the republic imports 60 % of its food. Over the next two years, Tajikistan will probably face serious social and economic challenges. Such pessimistic forecasts are confirmed by the address of the President of Tajikistan Emomali Rahmon to the Head of IMF in April 2020. IMF responded positively to Tajikistan's request allocating 89.5 million USD to the republic to support the economy. Such borrowings, however, aim to cover the urgent needs for financing the balance of payments and the budget.<sup>34</sup>

The coronavirus pandemic, among other things, demonstrated different levels of digital capabilities of each country in the region. The most prepared at the time of the outbreak turned out to be the Kazakh e-government, with 80 % of all public services provided online. Once quarantine had been announced, most of the educational facilities in Kazakhstan switched to distance learning, including via TV, radio, and other broadcasting channels. In Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan, such services proved to be less accessible, with distance learning for schoolchildren available via television channels. In addition, in both republics, students were provided distance learning online.

Tajikistan emerged the least prepared to provide online services for its citizens. During the early period of the pandemic, due to failures in providing

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<sup>34</sup> *Tajikistan 2020: Risk and Threat Mainstreaming, Development Scenarios* (Kazan: Publishing House of the Kazan University, 2020); A. A. Toshpulotov, "Socio-economic Development of Eurasian and Other Foreign Countries," *Problemy Sovremennoi Ekonomiki* 4, no. 76 (2020), <http://www.m-economy.ru/art.php?nArtId=7020>.

distance learning, schools had to close for an extended vacation period until Mid-August 2020. Currently, the spread of COVID-19 can affect the range of internal challenges that increase the level of radicalization of the population. First of all, we are talking about the global consequences of the pandemic on the world economy, national economies, and health systems. The coronavirus has turned the whole world and individual countries, in particular, into a testing ground for developing new methods and mechanisms for managing the state and society. This can cause serious criticism from the liberal part of the population (vivid examples are Beijing's pressure on Hong Kong, the situation in Chile, Venezuela, and other countries). The socio-economic impact of the COVID-19 pandemic could spark a strong public demand for change. Strict quarantine, accompanied by an income drop of the population and the state, the inability of the Ministry of Health to respond to the needs of society adequately gave rise to various volunteer movements.<sup>35</sup>

## Resilience – Political Adaptation

The question of government effectiveness in meeting the pandemic's challenges can be reversed. What is the effect of the pandemic on the governments themselves? Did the pandemic strengthen or weaken the governments' capacity to govern effectively, fairly, and in the interest of future generations? Has the pandemic led to greater or reduced political legitimacy? These key questions must await large-scale public opinion research, but indications from public policy research are available.

If we compare the actions of the leadership of the Central Asian countries, then taking into account the opinion of Central Asian experts, we can draw several conclusions. Kazakhstan pursued the most ambitious and timely policy in containing the coronavirus infection. These efforts were highly appreciated by the United States, despite criticism of the harsh measures of the Kazakh authorities from international human rights bodies. WHO highly appreciated Kazakhstan's efforts, as stated by WHO Director-General Tedros Adanom Ghebreyesus. Also, WHO is ready to consider the inclusion of the Kazakhstan vaccine against coronavirus QazVac in the

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<sup>35</sup> Kuralay Baizakova et al., *Dissemination of Religious Radicalism among the Youth of Central Asia: New Trends and International Practice* (Almaty, 2020).

list of drugs recommended for use in emergencies.<sup>36</sup> At the onset of the pandemic, Kazakh President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev strengthened his position. Along with the introduction of the state of emergency, the decree of March 16, 2020, assigned “the President of the Republic of Kazakhstan ... the right to adopt acts or give instructions to state bodies”.<sup>37</sup> Similarly, the political authorities of Uzbekistan adequately assessed the situation with the coronavirus, and also chose a strict model of combating the spread of the virus. Despite the most significant morbidity in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, “these countries, due to accumulated internal reserves, redistribution of budget lines and foreign loans, managed to deploy an effective fight against the epidemic, including the purchase of artificial lung ventilation devices (IVL) abroad,” and other necessary measures.<sup>38</sup> The Kyrgyz authorities also acted effectively, but there were some serious miscalculations in the country’s social and economic development.

In Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan, the countries’ leadership in the fight against infection has included elements of working with civil society. Measures to combat the pandemic in Turkmenistan and Tajikistan were characterized by inconsistency and a lack of a policy of informing the population about the incidence. These responses indicate the weakness of the socio-economic sector, which significantly narrowed the range of measures to combat coronavirus. A survey of experts from Central Asia indicates that in 2021 the fight against the pandemic will remain and will be a key factor in the domestic political and economic life of these countries. In Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and Kyrgyzstan, political reforms continue with varying degrees of effectiveness. The alarming economic situation and the generally unpredictable spread of COVID-19 remain a significant challenge for legitimacy in Kyrgyzstan. Despite the pandemic, all CA countries are preparing to celebrate the 30th anniversary of their independence.

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<sup>36</sup> See “WHO Appreciates Kazakhstan’s Efforts in the Fight against Coronavirus,” *Big Asia*, May 29, 2021, <https://bigasia.ru/content/news/society/voz-tsenit-usiliya-kazakhstana-v-borbe-s-koronavirusom/> – in Russian.

<sup>37</sup> Decree of the President of the Republic of Kazakhstan “On Measures to Ensure Social and Economic Stability,” [https://online.zakon.kz/Document/?doc\\_id=35552361#pos=4](https://online.zakon.kz/Document/?doc_id=35552361#pos=4) – in Russian.

<sup>38</sup> Azat M. Akhunov, “The COVID-19 Pandemic as a Challenge for Post-Soviet Central Asia Countries,” *Journal of International Analytics* 11, no. 1 (September 2020): 114-128, <https://doi.org/10.46272/2587-8476-2020-11-1-114-128>.

## Corona Diplomacy

The coronavirus pandemic has exerted a decidedly negative influence on the situation in the Central Asian region in general and Kazakhstan in particular. Financial and economic problems and further exacerbation of trade wars between the United States and China may aggravate the existing geopolitical contradictions around Central Asia. Many business leaders fear that time is running out on the sovereign debts of Central Asian countries to China. In the medium term, China may strengthen its economic and political positions in the region. China is the only country emerging from the pandemic with record economic growth.

Eurasian “integrationists” have argued that the pandemic has tied the region more closely together, and the successes of Sputnik V Mass are a vivid illustration. Russian Prime Minister Mikhail Mishustin has long maintained that the “mechanisms of the Eurasian Economic Union have already proven their effectiveness.”<sup>39</sup> But skeptics of the Moscow-inspired “integration” policies view the Kremlin’s efforts as a challenge to national sovereignty in addition to being an assault on European traditional liberal values. Some critics argue that recent Russian foreign policies take place in an ongoing competition for beliefs and emotions among the public. A recent Chatham House analytical study states that “myths presented here have become embedded in Western policy discourse as a direct result of deliberate Russian lobbying and disinformation,” designed to encourage “Western governments and institutions to reassess their assumptions about Russia in order to develop more effective responses to the increasing challenges the country presents.”<sup>40</sup>

If the current trends of Great Power competition persist, this can be expected to exert a continuing influence in Central Asia. A question of first priority concerns the effects of the pandemic on major and enduring rela-

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<sup>39</sup> “The Mechanisms of the EAEU Demonstrate their Effectiveness – Mishustin on the Struggle with COVID,” *Sputnik*, April 10, 2020, <https://ru.sputnik.kg/politics/2020/04/10/1047808934/mishustin-eaehs-mekhanizmy-kachestvo.html> – in Russian.

<sup>40</sup> Duncan Allan et al., “Myths and Misconceptions in the Debate on Russia: How They Affect Western Policy, and What Can Be Done,” Chatham House Report, May 13, 2021, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2021/05/myths-and-misconceptions-debate-russia>.

tions among countries. Does the pandemic have strategic implications for the relations of the Central Asian countries with external powers? Relations between the Russian Federation and Central Asian countries are closely linked to Russia's historical role in the region. The Russian Empire and, later, the Soviet Union had a dominant role in the Central Asian region. The break-up of the USSR changed Russia's dominant position. Still, Russia has continued to exert a direct influence in the region primarily through the Collective Security Treaty Organization for political-military means and the Eurasian Economic Union for commercial and cultural means.

China's role in Central Asian affairs differs substantially. China played a very limited role in the Soviet and the immediate post-Soviet periods. Its influence in the region grew substantially only in the past decade. China's economic-political expansion plan, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), has become one of the major drivers of influence. The BRI potentially signifies reducing maritime transport supremacy over land transport. China's BRI would tie the economies of Europe, Russia, and Africa to China as part of China's larger effort to form a single Eurasian supply-chain network. While the BRI is primarily an economic project, it has strategic implications. It leads many strategic thinkers, for example, Andrew Michta, to think of "infrastructural changes as an element in Great Power Competition."<sup>41</sup>

But despite the growing influence of Beijing, it is clear that the China BRI project is facing many challenges at the local level due to the COVID-19 pandemic. There are concerns that China could use the debt obligations caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. For example, Uzbekistan currently owes China roughly 16 % of its GDP. China holds an estimated 45 % of Kyrgyzstan's foreign loans.<sup>42</sup> The economic factors of the pandemic give certain advantages to the PRC, but Russia is an important partner in integration projects and collective security programs in Central Asia. However, in this regard, one can agree with some experts from Central Asia that during the coronavirus pandemic, "integration partnerships in the post-Soviet

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<sup>41</sup> Andrew A. Michta, "China's Long Game," *The American Interest*, May 27, 2019, <https://www.the-american-interest.com/2019/05/27/chinas-long-game/>.

<sup>42</sup> Dmitri Plotnikov, "Shadow of the Dragon," *Lenta.ru*, May 11, 2021, [https://lenta.ru/articles/2021/05/11/china\\_exp/](https://lenta.ru/articles/2021/05/11/china_exp/).

space have shown their inefficiency and inability to respond quickly to such non-traditional challenges.”<sup>43</sup>

The tone of geostrategic relations involving Central Asian countries is set primarily by the two large countries of the region – Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan. The past 24 months of pandemic effects have been exceptionally trying for the region, and many changes have occurred. Still, it is clear that Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan’s fundamental foreign policy positions have not been changed in their essential features. Both Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan are deeply committed to protecting national sovereignty and the pursuit of productive relations with their neighbors. From the point of view of Nur-sultan and Tashkent, foreign policy postures are essentially unchanged by the pandemic. Given this fundamental continuity and looking forward, it is clear that all of Central Asia will be attentive to the military-political situation in Afghanistan and the geopolitical rivalry of the leading actors. In 2019 the EU adopted a new Strategy for Cooperation with Central Asian countries. In 2020, the United States announced a new Strategy for Central Asia. Recent trends emerged according to the “5 + 1” formula on the part of Russia and China. It is possible that the competition among global powers in the context of the “5 + 1” model may intensify somewhat. Still, increased competition is likely to be primarily felt in the information space. The countries of Central Asia have a long history of balancing among major powers and coordinating their interests with China, Russia, the United States, the EU, and other powers. As a new geostrategic reality emerges and Central Asia plays an increasingly important pivotal role in geostrategic relationships, maintaining the same balance may become increasingly challenging for diplomats.

#### Acknowledgment

*Connections: The Quarterly Journal*, Vol. 20, 2021 is supported by the United States government.

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<sup>43</sup> Alina Iskanderovaya, “COVID-2019: Lessons for Central Asia and the Influence of Foreign Policy on the Regional Countries,” *Central Asia Institute*, April 6, 2020, <https://central-asia.institute/covid-2019-uroki-dlya-czentralnoj-azii-i-vliyanie-navneshnyuyu-politiku-regionalnyh-stran/>.

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# Resilience Against Financial Disturbances, Malign Investors – The Impact of COVID on OECD Member States' Economy

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**Abstract:** This article addresses the overall economic impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the global economy, focusing on its consequences for the financial sector. Examples taken from the banking and insurance sector serve to highlight repercussions, which, due to inflation trends, will bring about changes in investor behavior on a global scale. These changes accelerate due to the current expansionary monetary and low interest-rate policy adopted by the European Central Bank and the Federal Reserve in an attempt to prevent economic collapse during the COVID-19 pandemic. Persistently low interest rates permit heavily indebted countries with poor creditworthiness to achieve liquidity through low-interest credits and loans. The article also identifies players in financial markets who could make billions by speculating on market crashes caused by the pandemic. It concludes by stating that in the future sustainable resilience against economic crises in general and malicious investors in particular can only be achieved through the transatlantic link between the United States and the European Union and, consequently, through uniform standards for the financial sector in the wake of globalization.

**Keywords:** COVID-19, economic impact, labor market, financial market, resilience

## Economic Implications

Fighting COVID-19 still constitutes an unprecedented challenge for the whole world. Curfews and harsh lockdowns have become the new normal in many places. Suddenly, scenes from the past, such as border controls in the EU or shutdowns of public infrastructure, have become a reality again. States are implementing various measures to limit the spread of the virus and control the damage suffered due to the outbreak. The way the pandemic currently evolves has a devastating effect on the global economy and has caused periods of severe recession. In many regions, aggregate supply and demand were plummeting. Compared to 2020, Germany's gross do-

mestic product has decreased by 5 percent.<sup>1</sup> The U.S. registered the biggest decline of its gross domestic product since 1946, which means that the world's largest economy has shrunk by 3.5 percent.<sup>2</sup> In comparison with other countries, OECD members were hit much harder, with Spain, Portugal, France, Italy, and Great Britain suffering the worst economic slumps.<sup>3</sup> In Asian countries, such as Taiwan and South Korea, which implemented effective measures and managed to get the coronavirus under control rather quickly, the economic downturn had a much smaller impact.

While the long-term consequences of the crisis will make themselves felt in the scientific world, politics, and public life, the media often focus on economic implications. It is too early to assess the damage to the global economy caused by the virus. Yet, numerous leading research institutes are already drawing hasty conclusions, claiming that the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic are more devastating and harder to overcome than those of the 2008/2009 financial crisis, which originated in the financial market and hit manufacturers the hardest. The coronavirus crisis is less specific and affects nearly all sectors of the economy to varying degrees. For economic growth to pick up again, value chains need to be reactivated or newly implemented, cross-border trade facilitated in all areas, consumer confidence regained, and the pandemic contained in all economic hubs. If these goals cannot be achieved and more time has to be spent trying to contain high infection rates, further downward spirals are to be expected. This will be an unprecedented scenario, which would shake the foundations of our economic welfare. Historic declines in prosperity are already on the horizon. Sustainable V-shaped recovery is not likely to happen. On the contrary, the longer the crisis persists, the more social and economic networks are eroded, and their potential to compensate for losses is destroyed. The mutually reinforcing consequences of this erosion and its impact on private life could affect all economic activities.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Bundesfinanzministerium, "Konjunkturentwicklung aus finanzpolitischer Sicht," Aktuelle Wirtschafts- und Finanzlage – Monatsbericht des BMF Januar 2021, pp. 82-88.

<sup>2</sup> Jason Furman and Wilson Powell III, "What the US GDP Data Tell Us about 2020," *Peterson Institute for International Economics*, January 28, 2021, <https://www.piie.com/blogs/realtime-economic-issues-watch/what-us-gdp-data-tell-us-about-2020>.

<sup>3</sup> European Central Bank, EZB, *Wirtschaftsbericht*, Ausgabe 6/2020, [www.bundesbank.de/resource/blob/845108/4b490e8f5cc55beba8ad91cd877af6ce/mL/2020-06-ezb-wb-data.pdf](http://www.bundesbank.de/resource/blob/845108/4b490e8f5cc55beba8ad91cd877af6ce/mL/2020-06-ezb-wb-data.pdf).

<sup>4</sup> Michael Bardt and Michael Hüther, "Corona stoppt die Volkswirtschaft von allen

In monetary terms, the demand for transfer payments to households or subsidies for companies would continue to grow. The instruments chosen by states to mitigate the crisis are mostly limited to providing liquidity through guarantees, low-interest loans, refunds of tax prepayments, or deferred payments of social security contributions, which tend to leave companies with high debt levels in their balance sheets. Planning for expansion becomes more complex, and important investments cannot be made. This is why, in addition to short-term measures to secure liquidity, non-refundable financial aid will become necessary, especially since – due to prevailing low interest rates – EU member states and the US could raise sufficient funds in the capital markets on very favorable terms.

### Winners and Losers in the Crisis

In addition to the brief assessment of the macroeconomic situation as stated above, this article looks at corporate developments to find out which companies have fared better than others. In 2020, a majority of companies in Germany reported losses due to the coronavirus crisis. According to the ifo Institut – Leibniz-Institut für Wirtschaftsforschung an der Universität München (*Institute for Economic Research*), the negative impact of the pandemic was perceived as moderately severe or severe.<sup>5</sup> Eighty percent of manufacturers reported adverse conditions, 8 percent were not affected by the crisis, and 12 percent even registered a positive impact.<sup>6</sup> As a result, it was possible to identify business areas and industries that have benefitted from consumer behavior changes and social distancing during the lockdown. Standard “stay-at-home-stocks,” such as the video conference system providers Zoom and Microsoft Teams, media companies such as Netflix, or the instant messaging provider Slack Technologies, came out as winners because they were able to vastly increase their profits during the pandemic.

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Seiten,” Institut der deutschen Wirtschaft, March 26, 2020, IW-Kurzbericht Nr. 31, 2020, [https://www.iwkoeln.de/fileadmin/user\\_upload/Studien/Kurzberichte/PDF/2020/IW-Kurzbericht\\_2020\\_Corona\\_stopp\\_VWL.pdf](https://www.iwkoeln.de/fileadmin/user_upload/Studien/Kurzberichte/PDF/2020/IW-Kurzbericht_2020_Corona_stopp_VWL.pdf).

<sup>5</sup> Florian Dorn et al., “Die volkswirtschaftlichen Kosten des Corona-Shutdown für Deutschland: Eine Szenarienrechnung,” *ifo Schnelldienst* 73, no. 4 (2020): 29-35, [www.ifo.de/publikationen/2020/aufsatz-zeitschrift/die-volkswirtschaftlichen-kosten-des-corona-shutdown](http://www.ifo.de/publikationen/2020/aufsatz-zeitschrift/die-volkswirtschaftlichen-kosten-des-corona-shutdown).

<sup>6</sup> Katrin Demmelhuber et al., “Die Auswirkungen der Coronakrise auf die deutsche Wirtschaft: Erste Ergebnisse einer Umfrage unter Managern im April,” *ifo Schnelldienst Digital* 1, no. 7 (2020), <http://hdl.handle.net/10419/223323>.

In the fourth quarter of 2020, e-commerce provider Amazon registered the greatest increase in quarterly sales in corporate history. Compared to the fourth quarter of the year before, sales soared from \$ 87.44 bn to \$ 125.56 bn, representing a 30.36 percent increase.<sup>7</sup> Another winner in the coronavirus crisis is, surprisingly, the luxury travel sector. Obviously, staying at home in times of closed borders and canceled flights is not an option for wealthy clients. Other beneficiaries include pharmaceutical companies, delivery services, and fintechs, while standard tour operators, airlines, hotel chains, and mechanical engineering companies incurred heavy losses due to the pandemic. Even long-established retailers were not able to compete in the increasingly fierce price war and either had to file for bankruptcy or were on the verge of it.<sup>8</sup> Oligopolistic structures have emerged where high demand meets limited supply, with suppliers dictating prices. The resulting wage disputes have led to tremendous competitive pressure, which may cause considerable psychological distress to employees and negatively affect their quality of life. Many companies expect sales to shrink further in 2022. Losses of sales and profit due to the pandemic prevent them from making necessary investments. And fewer investments slow down the modernization of production facilities, productivity growth, and the creation of new jobs.

### The Impact on Labor Market Policies

During the 2009 global financial crisis, nearly 56,000 companies with 1.44 million employees used the economic tool of short-time work. They reduced their employees' working hours, with the government providing a partial income replacement for hours not worked. During the COVID-19 crisis, the number of companies resorting to short-time work has greatly increased to 313,268 between January 2020 and July 2021.<sup>9</sup> According to

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<sup>7</sup> "Amazon.com Announces Financial Results and CEO Transition," *Amazon*, February 2, 2021, <https://press.aboutamazon.com/news-releases/news-release-details/amazon-com-announces-financial-results-and-ceo-transition>. Founder and CEO Jeff Bezos will transition to the role of Executive Chair in Q3, Andy Jassy to become Chief Executive Officer of Amazon at that time.

<sup>8</sup> Klaus-Heiner Röhl and Gerit Vogt, "Unternehmensinsolvenzen: Corona-Krise verstört [Corporate insolvencies: Corona crisis disruptions]," *Wirtschaftsdienst* 100 (2020): 384–386, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10273-020-2660-0>.

<sup>9</sup> Bundesagentur für Arbeit, February 5, 2022: Realisierte Kurzarbeit (hochgerechnet) (Monatszahlen). Deutschland, Länder, Regionaldirektionen, Agenturen für Arbeit und Kreise. Tabelle 1: Kurzarbeiter, kurzarbeitende Betriebe und Kurzarbeiterquote –

the Federal Employment Agency, the number of short-time workers had risen to 6 million in April 2020, far surpassing the previous record set in 2009. The long-term effect of these costly measures for both the private sector and the government is difficult to assess; it depends on how the crisis progresses and on vaccine effectiveness. But one thing is clear – the financial damage will be enormous, and mass redundancies are to be expected.<sup>10</sup> Key economic indicators also reflect the impact of lockdown measures. At the beginning of the crisis in April 2020, the ifo business climate index was at an all-time low. Never before had such a drastic decline been registered. In the following months, however, the economy recovered, and the index went up again.

The European Union labor market is very heterogeneous. An average of 7.3 percent of EU citizens are registered as unemployed.<sup>11</sup> At an approximate 8.1 percent, the unemployment rate in Eurozone countries is slightly higher. While unemployment remains high in the countries most affected by the European debt crisis, several EU states prove to be particularly resilient. In January 2021, the 16 percent unemployment rate of both Greece and Spain was the highest in the EU and one of the highest in the world. By contrast, the seasonally adjusted unemployment rate in Germany in January 2021 was 4.6 percent. At 3.1 percent, almost the equivalent to full employment, the unemployment rate in Poland is the lowest in the EU. In theory, full employment is a situation where the number of job vacancies is higher than the number of job seekers. However, in practical terms, an unemployment rate of 0 percent is unrealistic because job seekers tend to be “between jobs” for a certain period. This is why an unemployment rate of 2 to 4 percent counts as full employment.<sup>12</sup>

At the beginning of the coronavirus crisis, unemployment in the US rose to higher levels than in Europe. Still, with the onset of the economic recovery, it went down again more quickly. In January 2021, unemployment in the

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Deutschland – (Konjunkturelles Kurzarbeitergeld).

<sup>10</sup> Röhl and Vogt, “Unternehmensinsolvenzen: Corona-Krise verstört.”

<sup>11</sup> Deutsches Statistisches Bundesamt, “Deutschland mit fünftniedrigster Erwerbslosenquote der EU-27. Erwerbslosigkeit der EU bei 7.3 %,” Berlin, accessed February 21, 2021, <https://www.destatis.de/Europa/DE/Thema/Bevoelkerung-Arbeit-Soziales/Arbeitsmarkt/EUArbeitsmarktKrise.html>.

<sup>12</sup> Deutsches Statistisches Bundesamt, “Deutschland mit fünftniedrigster Erwerbslosenquote.”

US rose to 6.8 percent in unadjusted terms and went down to 6.3 percent in seasonally adjusted terms.<sup>13</sup> Relaxations in many US states led to a renewed increase in employment rates. Compared to December 2020, the number of unemployed persons in the US decreased by 0.6 million compared to the previous month. Labor markets in the US and Europe have evolved much differently over the course of the pandemic. Observers consider the robust employment rates in Europe at the beginning of the crisis to be the result of limited labor market flexibility. Tighter rules for hiring and firing, often seen as a disadvantage for companies, could turn out to be beneficial in times of crisis. While the US tried to mitigate the crisis by boosting unemployment benefits, Europe tried to maintain employment by granting short-time work benefits as described above.

While the US approach of supporting people who have lost their jobs is in line with a free-market economy, the European attempt to prevent job losses through subsidizing jobs is directed against market forces. Which approach works better? A look at unemployment figures suggests that the European approach is more effective. But with the increasing duration of the crisis, its effects become less tangible. So a direct comparison is difficult to make. In the US, many people who lost their jobs count on being able to return to their former workplace. According to recent studies, employee expectations are a good indicator of actual re-employment. Europe's short-time work programs, by contrast, are very cost-intensive.<sup>14</sup> Therefore, several countries are already considering reducing this type of support in the further course of the crisis. This could impact the long-term success of this approach.

## The Role of Central Banks in the Crisis

In the spring of 2020, stock markets in the largest economies plunged twice due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Still, they were able to recover again, not least due to the central banks' expansive monetary policy. In the meantime,

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<sup>13</sup> U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, "State Employment and Unemployment Summary," March 15, 2021, accessed March 20, 2021, [www.bls.gov/news.release/laus.nr0.htm](http://www.bls.gov/news.release/laus.nr0.htm).

<sup>14</sup> Regina Konle-Seidl, "Short-time Work in Europe: Rescue in the Current COVID-19 Crisis?" *IAB-Forschungsbericht* (Results from the project work of IAB), no. 4 (2020), Institute for Employment Research, accessed March 27, 2021, [http://doku.iab.de/forschungsbericht/2020/fb0420\\_en.pdf](http://doku.iab.de/forschungsbericht/2020/fb0420_en.pdf).

some have even reached new all-time highs. The German stock index DAX closed at more than 15,100 points in January 2022, the Dow-Jones at slightly below 35,100 US dollars, and the NASDAQ-100 at 14,700 points. Central banks have a significant influence on these developments. Usually, the public interest is focused on central bank interest rates and monetary policy, which significantly impact economic activity. Traditional monetary policy – the stabilization of aggregate demand – has played a minor role during the coronavirus crisis. By taking appropriate measures, however, central banks are able to prevent a spillover of the crisis from the real economy to the financial system.

Central banks are also required to draw up balance sheets. In the second quarter of 2021, the European Central Bank increased its balance sheet total to about 59 percent of the Eurozone's gross domestic product, representing an increase of 24.72 percent or 11.64 percentage points. In the first half of 2020, its US counterpart, the Federal Reserve (FED), has actually increased its total by almost 88.56 percent or 16.96 percentage points to 36.11 percent of the overall U.S. GDP, an amount expected to exceed \$ 10 trillion by the end of 2022.<sup>15</sup> So, compared to Europe, the increase in the US balance sheet total was more than twice as high. In view of persistently high unemployment and the impact of COVID-19 on the economy, the FED warned against a dampening of US economic recovery. The US Federal Reserve has kept its benchmark rate unchanged at a historical low, ranging between 0.0 and 0.25 percent due to a tight labor market and relatively low inflation.<sup>16</sup> The FED and the European Central Bank (ECB) will have to pursue their low-interest rate policies over the next few years to stabilize the economy in the long term. The Federal Reserve also expects the number of security purchases in the US – currently amounting to \$ 120 billion per month – to remain high and support domestic economic activity.<sup>17</sup> One of the most important tasks of a central bank is to manage

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<sup>15</sup> Board of Governors of the Federal Reserve System (US), "Credit and Liquidity Programs and the Balance Sheet. Recent Balance Sheet Trends," Washington D.C., March 16, 2021, accessed March 24, 2021, [https://www.federalreserve.gov/monetarypolicy/bst\\_recenttrends.htm](https://www.federalreserve.gov/monetarypolicy/bst_recenttrends.htm).

<sup>16</sup> Board of Governors of the Federal Reserve System (US), "Selected Interest Rates. Percent, Not Seasonally Adjusted," March 21, 2021, accessed March 26, 2021, <https://fred.stlouisfed.org/series/FEDFUNDS>.

<sup>17</sup> Matthew Boesler and Steve Matthews, "Powell Says No Bond Taper for 'Some Time' as Recovery Moderates," *Bloomberg*, January 27, 2021, accessed March 25, 2021,

and control the money supply to keep the currency stable and counteract inflationary or deflationary tendencies at an early stage. Money supply control is essential for the smooth functioning of all economic processes in a national economy. The supply of money and the supply of goods have to be well balanced. A drastic increase in the money supply may trigger inflation, while a shortage of money may lead to deflation. The speed at which the money supply currently increases in the US has never been greater since World War II. The M2 money supply comprises demand deposits of non-banks and total currency in circulation – in short, the M1 money supply – as well as short-term time and savings deposits in the currency area. The following chart shows the rapid increase in the M2 money supply in the US over the past 25 years.

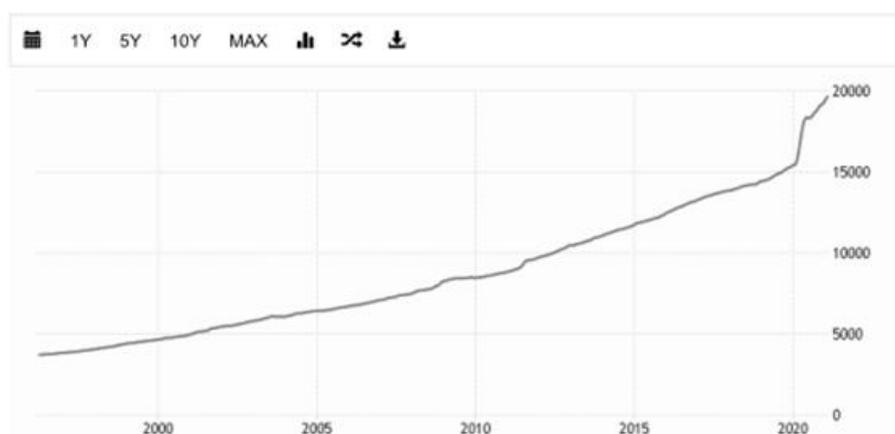


Figure 1: Money Supply M2 in the United States Increased to 19669.80 USD Billion in February from 19395.30 USD Billion in January of 2021.<sup>18</sup>

The ECB is stemming the coronavirus crisis through emergency purchases of the EU member states' de facto budget deficits for 2020 and 2021. The Pandemic Emergency Purchase Program (PEPP), launched in March 2020, is meant to guarantee price stability and an effective monetary policy within the Eurozone during the pandemic<sup>19</sup> and reduce bank liquidity to prevent

<https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2021-01-27/fed-maintains-monetary-stimulus-cites-moderating-recovery>.

<sup>18</sup> Board of Governors of the Federal Reserve System (US), "Money Stock Measures – H.6 Release," March 23, 2021, <https://www.federalreserve.gov/releases/h6/current>.

<sup>19</sup> Ulrike Neyer, "Die geldpolitischen Maßnahmen des Eurosystems in der Corona-

malfunctions in certain financial market segments.<sup>20</sup> In June 2020, the ECB almost doubled the volume of the program from € 750 billion to € 1.35 trillion to keep market interest rates low for governments and the private sector. The ECB's benchmark rate remains at its all-time low of 0 percent. Many experts even expect negative interest rates to remain in place for a long time. In December 2020, PEPP was topped up by another € 500 billion to a total of € 1.85 trillion.<sup>21</sup> The purchase of government bonds by the ECB protects states from the harshest impact of market forces. Central bank financing of the public sector or the issuing of joint liability Eurobonds is, however, prohibited by the Maastricht Treaty and by article 125 of the EU Treaty. Changes to this "no-bailout clause" are not to be expected. But since market participants are now aware that they may resell government bonds to the ECB, the demand for these bonds has been increasing. It means that the interest rates states have to pay to borrow money through issuing bonds are going down. This, however, leads to market distortions. States could now access vast liquidity reserves through borrowing at favorable conditions, with the ECB financing them indirectly. For highly indebted countries such as Italy or Greece, this would be much more profitable than issuing their own bonds on which they would have to pay higher interest rates due to their low ratings. Financially sound states such as Germany, on the other hand, would have to pay higher interest rates on bonds sold to the ECB than on bonds issued by their own central bank. Critics of this development consider it a first step in the direction of a transfer union, which, due to the coronavirus crisis and increasing public debt, could eventually become a reality.

## The Impact of the Coronavirus Crisis on the Financial Sector

The impact of the pandemic on the real economy will definitely be felt for years. The financial system, already under a lot of pressure, will have to

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Krise," *Perspektiven der Wirtschaftspolitik* 21, no. 3 (2020): 273-279. <https://doi.org/10.1515/pwp-2020-0022>.

<sup>20</sup> European Central Bank, EZB, *Wirtschaftsbericht*, Ausgabe 6.

<sup>21</sup> Jan Mallien and Frank Wiebe, "EZB im Kaufrausch – Lagarde erhöht Anleihekäufe um 500 Milliarden Euro. Die Notenbank stockt ihr Notfallprogramm um ein Drittel auf – und verlängert die Anleihekäufe bis Ende März 2022. Die Märkte reagieren verhalten und der Euro steigt," *Handelsblatt*, December 10, 2020, accessed March 4, 2021, <https://www.handelsblatt.com/finanzen/geldpolitik/coronahilfen-ezb-im-kaufrausch-lagarde-erhoeht-anleihekaeufe-um-500-milliarden-euro/26705700.html>.

cope with the additional burden of the coronavirus crisis.<sup>22</sup> Banks and other financial institutions play a decisive role in the current situation. They stabilize the real economy and guarantee the survival of many companies and private households. However, their business model, which has evolved over decades, will be called into question by persistently low interest rates, declining profit margins, excessive regulations, and an increasing number of digitalization and compliance rules. Against this background, the risks which a prolonged low interest rate policy entails are becoming more and more apparent. In combination with very detailed regulations, they complicate maturity transformation.<sup>23</sup> Even transactions such as issuing securities and proprietary trading generate lower yields. With yields fairly low, it is difficult for credit institutes to increase their equity base. In the medium term, this may further limit the financial institutions' scope for action in corporate finance. To make things worse, consumer and corporate creditworthiness are deteriorating due to the pandemic, and more and more alternative providers of capital are swamping the market. As a result, the volume of credits issued by banks will continue to shrink. In times of the COVID-19 pandemic, however, credits must be granted quickly, and finance solutions must be sustainable. Otherwise, they cannot provide the basis for economic recovery and sustainable economic growth.

Central banks will maintain their historically low interest rates for the foreseeable future to avoid endangering the economic recovery process. It seems likely that the current negative interest rate policy will be implemented and extended over a long period of time to absorb the enormous cost of the coronavirus crisis – with disastrous consequences for the global financial services sector. While at the beginning of 2021, yields of US bonds with a ten-year maturity were adjusted upward to almost 1.5 percent, the yield of ten-year German government bonds dropped from minus 0.187 percent to currently minus 0.53 percent.<sup>24</sup> For a long time, private and institutional

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<sup>22</sup> PricewaterhouseCoopers GmbH, "Securing Your Tomorrow, Today. The Future of Financial Services," accessed March 9, 2021, <https://www.pwc.com/gx/en/financial-services/pdf/pwc-the-future-of-financial-services.pdf>.

<sup>23</sup> Maturity transformation is a financial market instrument which harmonizes the interests of debtors (private households, companies, governments) and creditors (savers) by making use of different asset and liability maturities.

<sup>24</sup> Bloomberg and Bourse de Luxembourg for data relating to Luxembourg, "Entwicklung der Rendite zehnjähriger Staatsanleihen Deutschlands von Januar 2020 bis Januar 2021," accessed March 24, 2021, <http://bcl.lu>.

investors rated German government bonds as high-yield and low-risk. Now investors have to pay for the privilege of lending money to Germany due to its high credit rating. And this is by no means an exception – Japanese bonds have come with negative interest rates for years. But who wants to buy government bonds that have nothing to offer but a negative yield over a ten-year period without even taking into account inflation? The answer may come as a surprise. The main buyers are insurance companies and pension funds which are required by law to invest part of their assets in gilt-edged government bonds. In the end, however, negative interest rates are passed on to the public. At the moment, classical savings accounts and current account assets in Germany amount to € 2.6 trillion, although interest rates are close to zero. The value of those savings, however, is likely to go down quite drastically due to ‘cold’ progressive taxation, which does not factor in price and wage growth.<sup>25</sup> Insurance company revenues are coming under increasing pressure because low interest rates make retirement savings increasingly unattractive, resulting in private households investing their money elsewhere.

The stock market, not particularly popular with savers over the last decades, is turning into a place of choice for retirement income provision. Whether investments are made into individual stocks or diversified Exchange Traded Funds (ETFs), there seems to be no getting around the capital market for positive returns on investment. This trend, reinforced by the pandemic, will trigger a run for tangible assets. Real estate, gold, silver, diamonds, vintage cars, and art objects promise higher yields than savings accounts. In metropolitan areas, plots of land and homes are bought for investment purposes, real estate prices in urban areas have been soaring for years.<sup>26</sup> Those who still invest in life insurance or building loan contracts are most likely to receive no more than a fraction of the amount promised when they signed the contract. Over the last twenty years, the guaranteed interest rate on life or pension insurances in Germany has dropped from 4 percent to currently 0.25 percent.

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<sup>25</sup> Deutsche Bundesbank, “Private Haushalte haben Geldvermögen in Höhe von 6.3 Billionen Euro,” January 17, 2020, accessed March 28, 2021, <https://www.bundesbank.de/de/aufgaben/themen/private-haushalte-haben-geldvermoegen-in-hoehe-von-6-3-billionen-euro-822388>.

<sup>26</sup> Markus Oberndörfer, *Effizientes Schrumpfen: Fehlanreize und Handlungsstrategien* (Wiesbaden: Springer Gabler, 2014), 94-95.

Cryptocurrencies are gaining ground all over the world. Cryptocurrencies are digital means of payment based on blockchain technology and digital signatures. They are supposed to be an independent, unregulated and safe system of payment. Bitcoin, Ethereum, and other cryptocurrency prices have surged over the last few months, and some experts even expect Bitcoin to rise to the six-digit price range, despite high volatility. In December 2021, Bitcoin market capitalization went above \$ 1 trillion. Multinational corporations such as Tesla Inc. or MicroStrategy have invested billions of dollars into Bitcoin. For traditional regulated financial institutions, these investments and the outflow of capital they provoke have a negative impact on their balance sheets. So they have no choice but to find alternative ways of participating in the value chain. If they do not succeed, the banking breakdown will continue.

Over the last ten years, non-bank financial institutions have been growing much faster than traditional financial institutions. Private debt is increasingly important because more and more companies have to resort to more than one funding source. Private debt credit funds operate outside the capital market and provide companies with external funding. Even before the pandemic, this asset class had been gaining ground, registering an annual increase of 11 percent in the last decade. In 2019, the aggregate sum of the credit volume issued in the US by non-banks reached \$ 41 trillion as opposed to the \$ 38 trillion issued by traditional banks.<sup>27</sup> Unlike banks, alternative capital providers are expected to increase their share in the market significantly. While traditional credit institutes still play a dominant role in Germany and have issued credits amounting to € 2.7 trillion to the private sector, non-banks register significantly higher growth.<sup>28</sup> Although they lent out a mere € 1.2 billion, their growth rates stabilize at around 5.6 percent, which is 3.3 percent above the banking sector growth rate.<sup>29</sup> Among the factors that accelerate this trend are regulatory capital floors and the Basel IV standards that require banks to raise more capital in order to minimize risks. This means that banks will have to cooperate more often with non-

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<sup>27</sup> PricewaterhouseCoopers GmbH, "Zukunft der Finanzwirtschaft: COVID-19 beschleunigt Bedeutungsverlust klassischer Institute," October 7, 2020, accessed March 24, 2021, <https://www.pwc.de/de/pressemitteilungen/2020/zukunft-der-finanzwirtschaft-covid-19-beschleunigt-bedeutungsverlust-klassischer-institute.html>.

<sup>28</sup> PricewaterhouseCoopers GmbH, "Securing Your Tomorrow, Today."

<sup>29</sup> PricewaterhouseCoopers GmbH, "Zukunft der Finanzwirtschaft."

banks providing services in alternative credit segments. In the long run, market structures that have formed over decades will break up, and the coronavirus crisis will accelerate global change in the finance sector. In its "Global Banking Annual Review 2020," the consulting firm McKinsey & Company estimates that, as a result of COVID-19, global economic upheavals will affect banks with a time lag of three years, causing losses amounting to \$ 3.7 trillion.<sup>30</sup>

## Dubious Financial Transactions

Other than banks and insurance companies, a number of other financial market actors could make a lot of profit from the pandemic development. Such as investors who profit from pandemic-related slumps in stocks: when hedge funds speculate on falling stock prices, they start short selling. Short selling means betting that stock prices will drop. It involves the sale of assets – particularly stocks considered overvalued – which hedge funds do not own but borrow from owners for a fee. They resell those stocks before actually buying them. If stock prices drop, they are able to repurchase the stocks at a lower price. The difference between the high sales price and the low repurchase price minus the fee equals the profit investors make. If transaction volumes are high, profits increase accordingly.<sup>31</sup>

Short selling was already standard practice at the beginning of the global financial crisis in 2008 and, according to various critics, largely to blame for market disruptions. The argument runs that short selling accelerated the speed at which many stock prices dropped. Anyway, it can be assumed that financial products speculating on falling prices in order to generate high returns intend to inflict damage on financial markets. Hedge funds are also criticized for ruthless and unethical trading due to the fact that they are purely profit-oriented. The COVID-19 pandemic put the global economy and financial markets under enormous pressure. As a result, the short selling of companies by hedge funds increased. In 2020, the Bank of England

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<sup>30</sup> McKinsey & Company, "Corona: Banken droht weltweit 3,7 Billionen US-Dollar Einnahmeverlust," December 10, 2020, accessed March 19, 2021, [www.mckinsey.de/~ / media/McKinsey/Locations/Europe%20and%20Middle%20East/Deutschland/ News/Presse/2020/2020-12-10%20GBAR%202020/20201210\\_GBAR\\_PM\\_vfinal.pdf](http://www.mckinsey.de/~ / media/McKinsey/Locations/Europe%20and%20Middle%20East/Deutschland/ News/Presse/2020/2020-12-10%20GBAR%202020/20201210_GBAR_PM_vfinal.pdf).

<sup>31</sup> John Hull, Wolfgang Mader, and Marc Wagner, *Optionen, Futures und andere Derivate* (Hallbergmoos: Pearson, 2019), 152-154.

demanded that short selling be stopped altogether. As a response, a number of nations implemented temporary bans on short selling. In some countries, short selling can be restricted temporarily or prohibited. In Germany, the Federal Financial Supervisory Authority may prohibit the short-selling of domestic shares if the market disruption risk is high, such as, obviously, in the coronavirus crisis.

Given the interconnectedness of international financial markets, domestic challenges rapidly turn into global issues. When Lehmann Brothers, a US investment bank, filed for bankruptcy in September 2008, and the FED had to come to the rescue of American International Group (AIG) by administering an \$85 billion financial injection, many experts called for tighter regulations to restrict short selling. The 2008 global financial crisis revealed fundamental gaps in the regulation of the interconnected global financial market. In order to close those gaps effectively, regulations at a supranational level are required. A common transatlantic regulation, however, has not yet been implemented. As a reaction to the impact of the financial crisis, many European states adopted regulations on short selling. At the EU level, the regulation on short selling in effect since November 1, 2012, has banned uncovered short sales of shares, bonds, and credit default swaps and introduced disclosure requirements for short selling. In the US, a special regulation on “naked short selling” was adopted in 2005 and made more restrictive in 2008.<sup>32</sup> Short selling for purely speculative purposes in the currently highly volatile global market involves huge risks. In view of the US and European governments’ different approaches to the problem, regulations on short-selling require further discussion. So, one can only hope for a transatlantic solution in the future.

## Conclusion

The coronavirus, with its mutations, is keeping global trade and the financial world in suspense. The measures taken by states to close themselves off and restrict freedom of movement have had a massive impact on almost all sectors of the economy. The scale of this impact is still difficult to

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<sup>32</sup> U.S. Securities and Exchange Commission, “SEC Enhances Investor Protections Against Naked Short Selling,” July 15, 2008, <https://www.sec.gov/news/press/2008/2008-143.htm>.

gauge. As the pandemic evolves, uncertainty about the effects on people's health and prosperity is increasing. The coronavirus crisis is quite likely to cause further destabilization and social unrest in many countries. It represents a global challenge that, in the age of globalization, requires a global answer. The economy was hit hard by the pandemic. Stabilizing financial markets and restoring investor confidence in their smooth functioning takes absolute priority in these difficult times. This calls for regulations that prevent inflation and enable people to continue to build wealth. The coronavirus crisis should also be seen as an opportunity to enrich the excellent transatlantic relations through cooperation in the financial sector. A transatlantic agenda for global cooperation based on our shared values, common interests, and global influence would depend on the joint implementation of uniform financial regulations and the re-opening of our national economies and our societies. Shared values such as individual rights, human dignity, and democratic principles, as well as the challenges that we are facing, make the EU and the US partners in many sectors of the economy.

#### About the Author

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# A Conceptual Framework to Understand the Impact of COVID-19 on Transnational Organized Crime

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**Abstract:** This study intends to provide a conceptual framework and analysis of the changing environment of transnational organized crime (TOC). Putting the data at the center, this study presents a policy approach for state security institutions to adjust to the changing environment due to COVID-19. Transnational organized criminal groups adapt to changes in their environment faster than state institutions for several reasons. Their emerging structure of loose networks, rather than following a strict hierarchy, having the money at the center of their operation and not being constrained by any rules that states and international structures impose, make them effective in meeting market needs using illicit methods and products. In addition to market failures, transnational organized groups also respond to government failures. TOC groups fill the gap by providing services that governments fail to deliver and increase their legitimacy in front of the public. During the pandemic, states had to revise their priorities of services, which affected the security institutions, including law enforcement and the military.

**Keywords:** COVID-19, criminal markets, illicit services, organized crime.

## Introduction

Uncertainty is not a desirable condition for functioning systems. Although uncertainty creates opportunities for innovation, most systems at the individual, social, and international levels prefer a predictive environment to function and establish uncertainty reduction strategies. One of the core elements of the modern state is reducing uncertainties for people and societies, creating predictable systems, and intervening when necessary to reduce uncertainties through financial, technical, and policy capabilities. According to the World Uncertainty Index (WUI), at the global level, economic, political, security, and public health-related crises increased the level of uncertainties<sup>1</sup> impacting the operations of transnational systems (i.e.,

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<sup>1</sup> WUI is a measurement tool constructed by the IMF to evaluate the uncertainty level of the global markets using the data from 143 countries (all countries in the world with the population of at least 2 million) and covers the data starting from 1959. For more

global economy, trade, transportation, international regimes, etc.) and creating long term changes of the structures of these systems.<sup>2</sup>

Pandemics are considered an important source of unpredictability at the global level, and COVID-19 created a record level of uncertainty since the beginning of 2020. The most recent WUI estimates indicate current pandemic created uncertainty three times higher than the SARS (between 2002-2003) and twenty times than the Ebola outbreak between 2014 and 2016. Public health-related crises and diseases create more uncertainties in developed and emerging markets, and lower-level uncertainties are observed in low-income countries.<sup>3</sup> The current measurable economic impact of the pandemic is devastating, with some emerging and expected consequences. According to IMF estimates, the global economy declined 3 % during the pandemic.<sup>4</sup> Certain economic sectors such as hospitality,<sup>5</sup> transportation, and entertainment were deeply affected during the early COVID-19 measures.<sup>6</sup> On the positive side, some economic sectors had the advantage of growing during the pandemic, such as e-commerce, digital communications, delivery services, e-learning, pharmaceutical, and medical

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information on the WUI and its methodology see: Hites Ahir, Nicholas Bloom, and Davide Furceri, "60 Years of Uncertainty: Our New Index Provides Novel Insights into an Amorphous Concept," *Finance and Development* 57, no. 1 (2020), [www.imf.org/external/pubs/ft/fandd/2020/03/imf-launches-world-uncertainty-index-wui-furceri.htm](http://www.imf.org/external/pubs/ft/fandd/2020/03/imf-launches-world-uncertainty-index-wui-furceri.htm).

- <sup>2</sup> Hites Ahir, Nicholas Bloom, and Davide Furceri, "Global Uncertainty Is Rising and That Is Not a Bad Omen for Growth," *VOX EU and CEPR*, November 29, 2018, <https://voxeu.org/article/global-uncertainty-rising-and-bad-omen-growth>.
- <sup>3</sup> Hites Ahir, Nicholas Bloom, and Davide Furceri, "Global Uncertainty Related to Coronavirus at Record High," *IMF Blog*, April 4, 2020, <https://blogs.imf.org/2020/04/04/global-uncertainty-related-to-coronavirus-at-record-high>.
- <sup>4</sup> International Monetary Fund, "Policy Support and Vaccines Expected to Lift Activity," *World Economic Outlook Update*, January 2021, accessed March 16, 2021, <https://www.imf.org/en/Publications/WEO/Issues/2021/01/26/2021-world-economic-outlook-update>.
- <sup>5</sup> Lindsay M. Monte, "Historical Look at Unemployment, Sectors Shows Magnitude of COVID-19 Impact on Economy," *United States Census Bureau*, March 15, 2021, accessed April 9, 2021, [www.census.gov/library/stories/2021/03/putting-economic-impact-of-pandemic-in-context.html](http://www.census.gov/library/stories/2021/03/putting-economic-impact-of-pandemic-in-context.html).
- <sup>6</sup> International Labor Organizations (ILO) provides updated analyses of sectoral impact of COVID-19. For more information on how different sectors effected during the pandemic, visit, "Sectoral Impact, Responses and Recommendations," [www.ilo.org/global/topics/coronavirus/sectoral/lang--en/index.htm](http://www.ilo.org/global/topics/coronavirus/sectoral/lang--en/index.htm).

devices.<sup>7</sup> The World Bank Global Economic Prospects Report<sup>8</sup> predicts a 5.2 % decline in the global GDP, defined as the deepest global recession in decades. In the meantime, the same report estimates a 4 % expansion in global economies with the assumption that the COVID-19 vaccine would be widespread throughout the year. Direction and the magnitude of the long-term effects, as well as new opportunities created by the pandemic, will be on the global agenda for the foreseeable future.

Pandemics produce complex and challenging policy problems to conceptualize for governments, and existing institutional structures cannot easily cope with the emerging challenges and often fail to provide adequate responses. Although they have essential roles to step in and fix the market failures during the pandemic, the principle of limited government most of the time contradicts these roles.<sup>9</sup> Using their experiences of previous pandemics and institutional preparedness combined with political support to take pre-determined response measures, states had initial success in controlling the negative impact of COVID-19. Other factors helping shape policy responses to the pandemic were the “nature of national leadership, the organization of government and civil society, and blind spots towards the vulnerabilities of certain population segments.”<sup>10</sup>

Historically, pandemic outbreaks have caused detrimental effects on societies, economies, and the security of nations and global communities.<sup>11</sup> From the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, researchers started to examine its impact on illicit markets and transnational crimes. Earlier studies suffered from the lack of data and used limited resources to conceptualize the problem, but significant data collection attempts emerged to fill the gap in understanding the changing nature of the illicit operational environ-

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<sup>7</sup> Sushma Sharma, “Industries Thriving During the Pandemic,” *Forbes*, December 18, 2020, accessed April 9, 2021, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/forbestechcouncil/2020/12/18/industries-thriving-during-the-pandemic/?sh=30b8ed547a03>.

<sup>8</sup> World Bank, *Global Economic Prospects* (Washington, D.C.: World Bank, January 2021), <https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/handle/10986/34710>.

<sup>9</sup> Thomas A. Firey, “Government in a Pandemic,” *Cato Institute*, Policy Analysis no. 902, November 17, 2020, <https://www.cato.org/policy-analysis/government-pandemic>.

<sup>10</sup> Giliberto Capano et al., “Mobilizing Policy (In)Capacity to Fight COVID-19: Understanding Variations in State Responses,” *Policy and Society* 39, no. 3 (2020): 285-308, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14494035.2020.1787628>.

<sup>11</sup> W. Qiu et al., “The Pandemic and its Impacts,” *Health, Culture and Society* 9-10 (2016-2017): 1-11, <https://doi.org/10.5195/hcs.2017.221>.

ment of transnational criminal organizations (TCOs). Having the profit at the center of their main operational objective, TOC groups change their structure and operational practices as soon as they find alternative ways of making financial gains. Responding to the emerging needs during the early stages of the pandemic with their already established networks and resources, TCOs found a more advantageous position compared to government agencies in many countries. According to news reports, for example, as soon as the Italian government announced the distribution of shopping vouchers, Italian mafia groups started distributing food<sup>12</sup> in the areas with poor families, which increased the social consensus and recruitment opportunities in these areas.<sup>13</sup> Similar examples in the later parts of this article show how TOCs' adaptability helps them respond quickly to the new environment during the most recent pandemic.

COVID-19 presents a unique opportunity for researchers to understand the adaptation mechanism of TOC groups to new environments. The pandemic changed the illicit markets in which transnational criminal organizations operate. Therefore, TOC research needs new models to understand the change and produce new explanations for criminal behavior in unpredictable times. Researchers see pandemics as the largest criminological experiment in history. COVID-19 provides an excellent opportunity to understand criminal behavior in extraordinary times and different places (temporal and local).<sup>14</sup> Most of the pre-pandemic research based its findings and policy proposals assuming normality of the context. However, the pandemic broke the normality and created unpredictability for states, societies, and economic markets. This requires a new look at the criminal markets and the operation of criminal groups at the global level.

After briefly looking at the changing structure of the criminal markets, this study will examine how TCOs adapted to change in their operations. The

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<sup>12</sup> "COVID-19: Mafia Buying Food for Italy's Poor to Exert More Control," *France 24*, April 11, 2020, accessed March 25, 2021, <https://www.france24.com/en/video/20200411-covid-19-mafia-buying-food-for-italy-s-poor-to-exert-more-control>.

<sup>13</sup> "Faced with the COVID-19 Crisis, the Italian Mafia Sees Business Opportunities," *France 24*, May 2, 2020, accessed March 25, 2021, <https://www.france24.com/en/20200502-faced-with-the-COVID-19-crisis-the-italian-mafia-sees-business-opportunities>.

<sup>14</sup> Ben Stickle and Marcus Felson, "Crime Rates in a Pandemic: The Largest Criminological Experiment in History," *American Journal of Criminal Justice* 45 (2020): 525-536, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12103-020-09546-0>.

final section presents a model for government institutions to understand the changing criminal market structure and how to provide institutional adaptation policies to counter transnational organized criminal organizations. Understanding the dynamics of changing environment and adaptation mechanism is critical for security organizations to develop effective prevention and countering strategies.

## Pandemic and Transnational Organized Crime

### *Crime during the Pandemic: Domestic Changes*

Restrictions of cross-border mobility and national level lockdowns became the most preferred measures of governments to control the spread of the virus. Restrictions of mobilization at the local and global levels led to a reduction in national and international criminal activities. Studies at the national level found a significant decline in local crime rates, specifically at the early stages of the lockdowns. For example, a study based on the data from 25 large cities in the US found that all crimes types, other than homicides and shootings, dropped significantly, and burglaries shifted to locations with fewer people due to lockdowns.<sup>15</sup> In a similar study measuring the crime reduction in the UK during the pandemic, researchers concluded that crime rates dropped due to restrictions in mobility associating crime and mobility closely.<sup>16</sup> In a more recent study, Namli<sup>17</sup> summarized research findings from different US cities (Los Angeles,<sup>18</sup> Indianapolis,<sup>19</sup> Chicago<sup>20</sup>)

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<sup>15</sup> David S. Abrams, "COVID and Crime: An Early Empirical Look," *Journal of Public Economics* 194 (2021), <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jpubeco.2020.104344>.

<sup>16</sup> Eric Halford et al., "Crime and Coronavirus: Social Distancing, Lockdown, and the Mobility Elasticity of Crime," *Crime Science* 9, Article 11 (2020). <https://doi.org/10.1186/s40163-020-00121-w>.

<sup>17</sup> Umit Namli, "Behavioral Changes among Street Level Drug Trafficking Organizations and the Fluctuation in Drug Prices Before and During the COVID-19 Pandemic," *American Journal of Qualitative Research* 5, no. 1 (2021): 1-22, <https://doi.org/10.29333/ajqr/9691>.

<sup>18</sup> Gian Maria Campedelli, Alberto Aziani, and Serena Favarin, "Exploring the Immediate Effects of COVID-19 Containment Policies on Crime: an Empirical Analysis of the Short-Term Aftermath in Los Angeles," *American Journal of Criminal Justice* (2020): 1-40, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12103-020-09578-6>.

<sup>19</sup> George Mohler et al., "Impact of Social Distancing During COVID-19 Pandemic on Crime in Los Angeles and Indianapolis," *Journal of Criminal Justice* 68 (May-June 2020), <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jcrimjus.2020.101692>.

<sup>20</sup> Lindsey Rose Bullinger, Jillian B. Carr, and Analisa Packham, "COVID-19 and Crime:

during the pandemic. He concluded that property crimes such as robbery, burglary, and shoplifting decreased comparing the data obtained before COVID-19 measures, while no significant change was observed in violent crimes and crimes against persons, except that domestic violence increased subsequently.

By analyzing Mexico City Attorney General's Office reported crime data, Miyar and co-workers (2021)<sup>21</sup> found that conventional crime (domestic violence, burglary, and vehicle theft) dropped significantly. Still, no effects were observed on the robbery, kidnapping, and homicides in the city – a trend similar to other parts of the world. According to their analysis, organized crime remained steady, and findings showed growing support for OC groups providing social services and food to build trust in their communities. Due to the economic impact of the pandemic and unemployment, organized crime recruiting young people is at an all-time high. The authors conclude that “under this adverse economic scenario, once a vaccine becomes available, we expect conventional crime to resume and organized crime to increase even more.”

### *Transnational Organized Crime during the Pandemic*

Researchers and international organizations conducted studies to measure the impact of pandemics on crime at the transnational level. The Global Initiative against Transnational Organized Crime (GI-TOC), a Geneva-based civil society organization, published one of the earliest reports aiming to promote an evidence-based understanding of organized crime at the global level. In their March 2020 report *Crime and Contagion*,<sup>22</sup> GI identified emerging challenges and social and institutional vulnerabilities that TCOs

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Effects of Stay-at-Home Orders on Domestic Violence,” NBER Working Papers 27667, (Cambridge, MA: National Bureau of Economic Research, 2020).

<sup>21</sup> Jose Roberto Balmori de la Miyara, Lauren Hoehn-Velasco, and Adan Silverio-Murillo, “Druglords Don’t Stay at Home: COVID-19 Pandemic and Crime Patterns in Mexico City,” *Journal of Criminal Justice* 72, Article 101745 (January-February 2021), <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jcrimjus.2020.101745>.

<sup>22</sup> Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime, “Crime and Contagion: The Impact of a Pandemic on Organized Crime,” Policy Brief (Geneva: Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime, March 2020), accessed April 4, 2021, <https://globalinitiative.net/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/GI-TOC-Crime-and-Contagion-The-impact-of-a-pandemic-on-organized-crime-1.pdf>.

could exploit. Their earlier analysis about the nature of illicit markets during the early stages of the pandemic found out that lockdowns and closing borders had an impact on some criminal activities by slowing or stopping them, while TCOs “exploited the confusion and uncertainty to take advantage of new demand for illicit goods and services.”<sup>23</sup>

The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) published several reports aiming to measure the effect of COVID-19 on different criminal markets, starting from drugs to human trafficking and smuggling as well as specific areas such as trafficking of medical products. In one of its early research briefs analyzing the impact of the pandemic on organized crime, UNODC found out that the high demand for medical devices, pharmaceutical products, e-commerce, food retail, cleaning, and funeral services opened opportunities for organized crime groups. These groups developed new cooperation with similar groups in other countries supplying these goods or were directly involved in the legal economies by investing in distressed sectors.<sup>24</sup> UNODC reported the seizures of falsified COVID-19 medical products in countries such as Spain, Italy, Ukraine, Iran, and Azerbaijan even at the early stages of the pandemic. Similarly, in March 2020, Interpol coordinated Operation Pangea XIII, specifically targeting to counter the online sale of counterfeit and illicit medicines and medical devices, indicating growing numbers of fake medical products related to the COVID-19 pandemic.<sup>25</sup> In a later report (July 2020),<sup>26</sup> UNODC focused specifically on the COVID-19 related illicit market of the medical products and identified face masks, hand sanitizers, test kits, thermometers, and medical O<sub>2</sub> as the most circulated medical products starting from the early stages of the pandemic. The research brief also indicated evidence of organized crime groups getting involved in cyber activities and fraudulent con-

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<sup>23</sup> Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime, “Crime and Contagion,” 2.

<sup>24</sup> United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), “The Impact of COVID-19 on Organized Crime,” Research Brief, July 13, 2020, accessed April 4, 2021, [www.unodc.org/unodc/en/frontpage/2020/July/organized-crime-groups-are-infiltrating-the-legal-economy-following-covid-19-crisis--says-latest-unodc-research-brief.html](http://www.unodc.org/unodc/en/frontpage/2020/July/organized-crime-groups-are-infiltrating-the-legal-economy-following-covid-19-crisis--says-latest-unodc-research-brief.html).

<sup>25</sup> Interpol, “Pharmaceutical Crime Operations,” [www.interpol.int/en/Crimes/Illicit-goods/Pharmaceutical-crime-operations](http://www.interpol.int/en/Crimes/Illicit-goods/Pharmaceutical-crime-operations).

<sup>26</sup> United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), “COVID-19 Related Trafficking of Medical Products as a Threat to Public Health, Research Brief,” Research Brief, July 2020, [www.unodc.org/documents/data-and-analysis/covid/COVID-19\\_research\\_brief\\_trafficking\\_medical\\_products.pdf](http://www.unodc.org/documents/data-and-analysis/covid/COVID-19_research_brief_trafficking_medical_products.pdf).

tracts over the internet. According to UNODC findings, in March 2020, the German Health authorities contracted to procure 15 million Euros worth of face masks through a cloned website of a legitimate company in Spain. Other similar examples show that criminal groups are active in providing falsified products to the market and use the cyber domain for fraudulent procurements, scams, and even cyberattacks on critical health infrastructure.

Earlier findings correspond with three essential aspects of the TOC groups during the pandemic: network structure, mobility, and adaptability. Their loose network structure allowed TOCs to act fast and cooperate with similar organizations in other parts of the world. Their ability to use licit transportation channels for their illicit activities and their skills to adapt to the new market structures helped them quickly respond to the emerging needs of the pandemic. Mobility and moving goods and services across the border is a key feature of TOC groups. Although COVID-19 restrictions created limitations for the general public, early reports indicate that TOC groups quickly adapted to the restrictions using lawful business and trade movement.

### *Analyzing the Trend*

In order to examine the studies conducted on TOC and COVID-19, this study used Bibliometric Analysis<sup>27</sup> and looked at the network structure and the distribution of published research in 2020 and 2021. Data for this analysis was extracted from Google Scholar using open-source software (Publish or Perish<sup>28</sup>) and visualized with VOSviewer<sup>29</sup>, an open-source software constructing bibliometric networks.<sup>29</sup> Data was extracted using the

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<sup>27</sup> Bibliometric Analysis (BA) provides quantitative information on how the research on a particular field is shaped and connected to various disciplines. Using BA will allow us to see how two key terms of this study “transnational organized crime” and “COVID-19” is connected with other type of organized crime-related topics in the literature. For details on the BA see: Ole Ellegaard and Johan A. Wallin, “The Bibliometric Analysis of Scholarly Production: How Great Is the Impact?” *Scientometrics* 105 (2015): 1809-1831, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11192-015-1645-z>.

<sup>28</sup> This software called Publish or Perish is available by Prof. Anne-Wil Harzing at <https://harzing.com/resources/publish-or-perish>. It allows to analyze academic citations using variety of sources.

<sup>29</sup> VOSviewer was developed by Leiden University. More information about the software is available at <https://www.vosviewer.com>.



200 studies came out (N = 200), and the same software was used for visualization. Figure 2 presents the analysis result. The term “organized crime” rather than “transnational organized crime” appeared at the center of the research stored in this database. In this analysis, organized crime has strong connections to corruption and financial crimes indicating earlier research mostly covered issues related to organized crime, corruption, and financial crimes. This finding is similar to that of the previous analysis with the Google Scholar data. Both results showed that (transnational) organized crime studies relate to corruption, money laundering, and other financial crimes. Unlike the data obtained from Google Scholar, CrossRef data shows that researchers are also interested in the institutional aspect of criminal organizations.

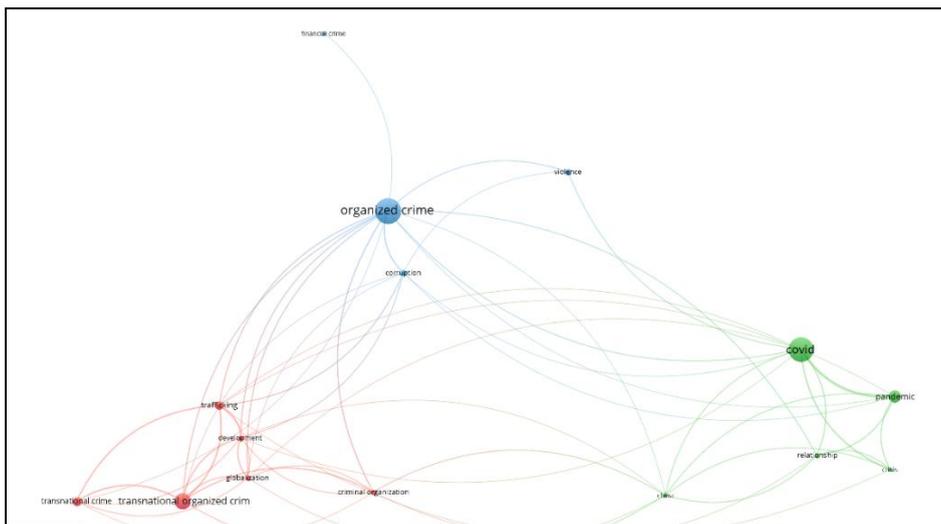


Figure 2: Transnational Organized Crime and COVID-19 Research in 2020-2021 – CrossRef Data (Source: Author’s analysis using CrossRef, <https://www.crossref.org>).

The findings from two different databases suggest a connection between organized crime studies and the opportunity created by the pandemic measures. Further data and analysis are required to look at the interaction and understand the causal or correlational mechanisms between organized crime and corruption, money laundering, and other types of financial crime. Nevertheless, this brief analysis demonstrates a trend in academic studies, i.e., during the pandemic, the organized crime literature is mostly

focused on corruption and financial crimes.<sup>31</sup> The results of this brief analysis must be treated with caution because the data only shows the published academic research products and is limited to keywords and titles. It provides insight only on how the academic community approached transnational organized crime in the pandemic era. Its reflection of the field depends on the data covered, results, and findings of these studies and requires further analysis. The significance of these results is in showing the direction of early research structure on the impact of the pandemic. More data will reveal the mechanism of organized crime groups' involvement in different types of crime.

### Criminal Markets and Operations of Organized Crime Groups

This section will present a model for analysis of the involvement of TOC groups in different types of crimes during the pandemic. Understanding the interaction of the transnational criminal organizations in local and global environments requires working with complex models and measuring the interaction among each component of these models. Complex systems research (or complexity science, CS)<sup>32</sup> provides a conceptual framework and tools to study the interaction of criminal markets and organized crime groups at different levels (i.e., individual or group level, temporal or space level, etc.) When many system elements interact independently, these interactions cannot be explained within a traditional approach to TOC research. The traditional approach of studying transnational organized crime focuses on each part of the model independently and examines particular types of crime. Complexity science approach to transnational organized crime re-

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<sup>31</sup> The Financial Crimes Enforcement Network (FINCEN) published a warning on how the pandemic creates opportunities for financial crimes and increase the possibility of corruption. See details at <https://www.fincen.gov/coronavirus>. Earlier studies also find evidence of TOC involvement in financial crimes and new opportunities. For details see: Liana W. Rosen, "COVID-19 and Emerging Global Patterns of Financial Crime," Congressional Research Service: Insight, September 4, 2020, <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/IN/IN11496>; Andrés Martínez-Fernández and Julia Yansura, "Money Laundering Could Stifle Latin America's Response to COVID-19," *World Politics Review*, June 11, 2020, 1-5, <https://www.worldpoliticsreview.com/articles/28833/in-latin-america-corruption-and-money-laundering-are-stifling-responses-to-covid-19>.

<sup>32</sup> Also known as Complexity Science (CS) studies systems using theories and methods from various disciplines. For more information on CS see: <https://complexityexplained.github.io>.

quires looking at the components of the system but most importantly, looking at the interaction between components that creates a whole system, which provides a holistic view on ongoing changes.

Data limitations in studying complex relationships of transnational organized activities restrict conducting comprehensive studies detecting TOC groups' adaptation to the environment created by the pandemic. Nevertheless, this study uses a model to assess the early research related to the effect of COVID-19 on transnational crime and provide a framework for future studies. Table 1 presents a matrix to examine the adaptation of organized groups to illicit markets at different levels to analyze their adaptive behavior during the pandemic. This model uses three major types of criminal markets exploited by organized crime groups that provide *illicit goods*, *illicit services*, and *infiltration of business or government*.<sup>33</sup>

Illicit goods and services are activities related to crimes such as drug trafficking, human smuggling and trafficking, and fraud, in which criminals provide a good or service otherwise considered illegal. Business or government infiltration consists of money laundering using legal financial and trade systems, corruption, and similar tools allowing to participate in government and lawful business activities. According to an assessment, most of the underlying nature of organized crime activities remain the same over time; nevertheless, organized crime groups modify how they involve specific crime types based on the advancements in technology, communications, transportation, or digital economies.<sup>34</sup> Thus, pandemic provides an excellent opportunity for researchers to understand the changing nature of organized crime behavior in extraordinary times.

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<sup>33</sup> Jay S. Albanese, "Deciphering the Linkages between Organized Crime and Transnational Crime," *Journal of International Affairs* 66, no. 1 (Fall/Winter 2012): 1-16, accessed April 11, 2021, <https://jia.sipa.columbia.edu/deciphering-linkages-between-organized-crime-and-transnational-crime>.

<sup>34</sup> Jay S. Albanese, *Organized Crime: From the Mob to Transnational Organized Crime* (London and New York: Routledge, 2015).

Table 1. Illicit Market Operations and TOC Activities/Structures.

		TOC Activities	TOC Structures
Illicit Market Operations	Illicit Goods	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Short term drug supply shortages</li> <li>• Temporary involvement in the trafficking of other goods</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Temporary disruption of drug transportation</li> <li>• New routes and new ways of transportation identified</li> </ul>
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• More involvement in COVID-19 related medical supplies</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Illicit medical supply network established</li> </ul>
	Illicit Services	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Vulnerability of certain social groups increased, creating opportunities for TOC groups</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Structural adaptation to online activities of TOC groups</li> </ul>
	Infiltration of Business and Government	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Money laundering activities through vulnerable economic sectors</li> <li>• Investing in/ buying companies in need</li> <li>• Use of corruption to obtain benefits</li> <li>• Social services to the public to gain trust</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Closer relations with decision-makers and government officials</li> <li>• Establishing new contacts with licit businesses and government agents</li> <li>• Need for new people as intermediaries</li> </ul>

Source: Author's own elaboration. The classification of illicit market operations was obtained from Albanese (2015).<sup>35</sup>

<sup>35</sup> Albanese, *Organized Crime*.

### *Providing Illicit Goods*

Using the data from member states, open online sources, and their field offices, UNODC presented its research findings on the impact of the pandemic on drug markets.<sup>36</sup> Their data indicates shortages of numerous drug types, surges in retail prices, reduction in purity, and, in countries where the measures are less strict, fewer disruptions of drug markets. The same report also identified some drug trafficking groups turning into different types of activities such as cybercrime and trafficking in falsified medicines.

The European Monitoring Center for Drugs and Drug Addiction (EMCDDA) and Europol issued a joint report on the impact of COVID-19 on drug markets.<sup>37</sup> According to the report, organized crime groups adapt rapidly to new transportation models and trafficking routes during the pandemic. The report also noted the increase in drug prices, local shortages, and the reduced purity of some drugs. Related to change in drug prices on the retail level, Namli<sup>38</sup> conducted a qualitative study interviewing drug users and found shortages in the supply of drugs to end-users. Drug distribution methods changed slightly, but the demand for the internet drug market did not increase significantly.

### *Providing Illicit Services*

The 2020 Global Report on Trafficking in Persons, produced by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), presented data from previous years and therefore did not include a data-driven conclusion of how the pandemic affects human trafficking. Nevertheless, based on data from court cases, the report indicates economic needs as a pre-recruitment

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<sup>36</sup> United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), "COVID-19 and the Drug Supply Chain: From Production and Trafficking to Use," *Research Brief*, July 5, 2020, <https://www.unodc.org/documents/data-and-analysis/covid/Covid-19-and-drug-supply-chain-Mai2020.pdf>.

<sup>37</sup> European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction (EMCDDA) and Europol, *EU Drug Markets: Impact of COVID-19* (Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union, 2020), accessed April 4, 2021, [https://www.emcdda.europa.eu/system/files/publications/13097/EU-Drug-Markets\\_Covid19-impact\\_final.pdf](https://www.emcdda.europa.eu/system/files/publications/13097/EU-Drug-Markets_Covid19-impact_final.pdf).

<sup>38</sup> Umit Namli, "Behavioral Changes among Street Level Drug Trafficking Organizations and the Fluctuation in Drug Prices Before and During the COVID-19 Pandemic," *American Journal of Qualitative Research* 5, no. 1 (2021): 1-22, <https://doi.org/10.29333/ajqr/9691>.

condition, creating vulnerability for many people that human traffickers can abuse through financial control and debt bondage.<sup>39</sup> Farley argues that pandemic increased the vulnerability of women in the sex trade and created additional challenges in facing violence, shortages of food, shelter, and health care.<sup>40</sup> More importantly, they are also excluded from government relief and protection programs as well as health services.<sup>41</sup> Organized crime groups take advantage of these vulnerable women by forcing them to participate in online prostitution websites and even recruit and entrap more women to put them on online sex websites.<sup>42</sup> Due to limited restrictions, the increased amount of internet use provided traffickers advantages in reaching vulnerable groups and recruiting them.

Europol recently warned law enforcement agencies of illicit sales of negative COVID-19 test certificates as countries started to request test results from passengers entering their countries.<sup>43</sup> According to the same report, several cases in Europe indicated organized crime groups using mobile applications to produce false test results. Earlier in October 2020, the World Health Organization announced that falsified vaccines have been detected, showing how criminal organizations use the opportunities and adapt themselves rapidly.<sup>44</sup> On the same topic, Europol warns the law enforcement organizations that when vaccines become available more widely,

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<sup>39</sup> UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), *Global Report on Trafficking in Persons* (2014), accessed April 15, 2021, <https://www.refworld.org/docid/5492a3d94.html>.

<sup>40</sup> Melissa Farley, "Prostitution, the Sex Trade, and the COVID-19 Pandemic," *Logos: A Journal of Modern Society & Culture*, 2020, <http://logosjournal.com/2020/prostitution-the-sex-trade-and-the-covid-19-pandemic>.

<sup>41</sup> Elene Lam, "Pandemic Sex Workers' Resilience: COVID-19 Crisis Met with Rapid Responses by Sex Worker Communities," *International Social Work* 63, no. 6 (November 2020): 777-781, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0020872820962202>.

<sup>42</sup> Vanda Felbab-Brown, "What Coronavirus Means for Online Fraud, Forced Sex, Drug Smuggling, and Wildlife Trafficking," *Brookings*, April 3, 2020, [www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2020/04/03/what-coronavirus-means-for-online-fraud-forced-sex-drug-smuggling-and-wildlife-trafficking](http://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2020/04/03/what-coronavirus-means-for-online-fraud-forced-sex-drug-smuggling-and-wildlife-trafficking).

<sup>43</sup> Europol, "Early Warning Notification – The Illicit Sales of False Negative COVID-19 Test Certificates," *Europol*, February 1, 2021, <https://www.europol.europa.eu/early-warning-notification-illicit-sales-of-false-negative-covid-19-test-certificates>.

<sup>44</sup> World Health Organization, "Medical Product Alert N°6/2020: Falsified Fluzone® Quadrivalent Influenza Vaccine Identified in WHO Region of the Americas," October 29, 2020, accessed April 15, 2021, [www.who.int/docs/default-source/substandard-and-falsified/n6-2020falsifiedfluzone-en.pdf](http://www.who.int/docs/default-source/substandard-and-falsified/n6-2020falsifiedfluzone-en.pdf).

organized crime groups use the opportunity to circulate counterfeit vaccines around the globe.<sup>45</sup>

### *Infiltration of Business and Government*

Siggia<sup>46</sup> reported several cases throughout Europe when organized crime groups used the opportunity to increase their presence in European countries' social and economic life, challenging at the same time government institutions. According to his analysis, in Europe, organized crime groups prefer to operate in states with weak or missing anti-mafia legislation. These groups can easily infiltrate into legal businesses and operate behind small companies such as restaurants, pizzerias, etc. However, the biggest problem lies in the long-term dependence of some legal businesses on organized crime money. Siggia claims, "With the COVID-19 pandemic still far from over, and the percentage of poverty increasing each month, the Mafia will continue to find opportunities to expand their operations." Europol also warned countries against organized crime groups benefiting from economic recovery packages to prevent the bankruptcy of local businesses.<sup>47</sup> There are examples of companies created for money laundering that also benefited from the aid packages, and governments increased efforts to identify these companies and take additional measures to prevent such abuses.<sup>48</sup>

As mentioned earlier, Miyar and co-workers<sup>49</sup> found evidence of OC groups getting into activities helping them establish support from certain parts of society. They argue that organized crime recruiting young people becomes more likely due to the pandemic's economic impact and rising

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<sup>45</sup> Europol, "Early Warning Notification."

<sup>46</sup> Stefano Siggia, "The Mafi'a Jackpot: How Criminal Organizations are Profiting from COVID-19," *Corporate Compliance Insights*, January 22, 2021, accessed February 9, 2021, <https://www.corporatecomplianceinsights.com/mafias-jackpot-covid-19-aml>.

<sup>47</sup> "The Recovery Fund Is in Their Sights': Europol Warns of Italian Mafia Profiting from Crisis across EU," *The Local Italy*, September 15, 2020, accessed April 15, 2021, <https://www.thelocal.it/20200915/the-recovery-fund-is-in-their-sights-europol-warns-eu-countries-of-mafia-profiting-from-covid-19-crisis>.

<sup>48</sup> Janna Brancolini, "Italy Seeks to Keep COVID-19 Recovery Money out of Mafia Hands," *Los Angeles Times*, July 24, 2020, <https://www.latimes.com/world-nation/story/2020-07-24/italy-seeks-to-keep-covid-19-recovery-money-out-of-mafia-hands>.

<sup>49</sup> Miyara, Hoehn-Velascob, and Silverio-Murillo, "Druglords Don't Stay at Home."

unemployment. Blattman and co-workers<sup>50</sup> conducted their study in Medellin, Colombia, and argued that it is “a city with one of the highest concentrations of organized criminals in the world. If gangs respond the COVID-19 anywhere, it should be Medellin.” They collected systematic data on gang activities and state governance before and during the pandemic. They found out that “despite the headlines, gang involvement in pandemic response is exceptional and mostly idiosyncratic.” According to their findings, most of the welfare support to civilians in Medellin came from state authorities and not from the gangs, and state authorities played a more significant role in enforcing quarantine rules.

### Developing Effective Institutional Responses to Changing Criminal Markets

To develop better strategies to counter emerging issues created by the pandemic, governments need to establish mechanisms to detect and understand the changes in the criminal markets during and after the COVID-19 environment. At the same time, states (law enforcement and security communities) should develop additional capacities to counter the changing activities and structures of TOC groups at the national and global levels. These capacities and tools should be balanced and in line with international values to prevent political abuse of measures to gain more power and limit individual and social rights. This point is important because when the government acquires more power without transparency and having no value system, TOC groups will have more opportunities to infiltrate governments. Keeping this balance in mind, this study concludes by suggesting a model for developing an effective response mechanism to counter TOC activities.

There are indications that some organized crime groups will be more likely to grow after the pandemic due to their activities during the pandemic, which created an advantage for them by early entry into the illicit market or quickly adapting to the changing environment. Therefore, it is essential to understand the change and develop policy responses to post-pandemic

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<sup>50</sup> Christopher Blattman et al., “Crime in the Time of COVID-19: How Colombian Gangs Responded to the Pandemic,” *Innovations for Poverty Action* (Economic Development & Institutions, August 2020), [www.poverty-action.org/sites/default/files/2020-10-27-COVID-19-Survey-report.pdf](http://www.poverty-action.org/sites/default/files/2020-10-27-COVID-19-Survey-report.pdf).

criminal markets with new and advanced tools. Criminal groups benefit from the uncertainties created by the pandemic at different levels. Through social services, they become legitimate in front of the people, and it becomes easier to recruit new people to work for them. Organized crime groups change their recruitment methods, and it is essential to understand their new operations.

Understanding the changing environment and developing effective policies starts with good data. Better data will allow understanding and addressing emerging issues in the illicit markets. The first step to developing effective counter TOC policies during and after the pandemic is to make a data-driven assessment of the nature of changes in the criminal market. The second essential step is to produce tactical, policy, and strategic level decisions based on the collected and analyzed data and using existing tools and capacities. Thirdly, agencies should also develop measures to update institutional and tactical responses to the changes on the ground and reconsider their policy-making and data-producing systems and update them as needed.

This article puts the data at the center of understanding the change in the criminal markets. It suggests three main steps for policy-makers to collect, analyze, and interpret the data. One of the reasons to consider the data as the center of understanding the changing environment is its ability to reduce uncertainty. Systematic collection, analysis, and presentation of data play an essential role in addressing uncertainty associated with developing strategies to counter crime.<sup>51</sup> Reducing unknowns in the decision-making process will lead to better decisions. Reducing uncertainty requires collecting and processing information which costs time, effort, and other resources but might be a worthwhile investment in the long run.<sup>52</sup>

## Discussions and Conclusion

Most organized crime activities target profit. The structure of the organized crime groups shifted from highly hierarchical to network-style groups interacting with each other as they need to operate. The type of network

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<sup>51</sup> Robyn G. Attewell, "Can Statistics Help?" in *Dealing with Uncertainties in Policing Serious Crime*, ed. Gabriele Bammer (Canberra: ANU Press, 2010), 51, <https://citeseerx.ist.psu.edu/viewdoc/download?doi=10.1.1.472.6627&rep=rep1&type=pdf>.

<sup>52</sup> Michael Smithson, "Understanding Uncertainty," in *Dealing with Uncertainties in Policing Serious Crime*, ed. Gabriele Bammer (Canberra: ANU Press, 2010), 27-48.

structures of interaction depends on the types of activities crime groups conduct.<sup>53</sup> Selecting criminal markets, organized crime groups look at the opportunities to make profits by involvement in new activities, using new techniques, and acting like entrepreneurs in the criminal market. COVID-19 limited some of the activities of the TOC groups (due, for example, to the reduction of drug supplies). However, because of the high demands in pharmaceuticals and health-related goods and services, some of these groups changed their activities and partly also their structures. Initial data and expert observations indicate that TOC groups reacted to changes in the licit markets by providing goods and services of demand. Earlier studies examined how TOC groups adapted to the new environment during the pandemic and found out that these groups have not been deeply affected by mobility restrictions and adjusted to market needs immediately. Researchers studied mostly (transnational) organized crime and its connection to corruption and financial crimes at the early stages of the pandemic.

Although there is evidence of early involvement of TOC groups in legitimate businesses and governments, the major impact of such infiltration will be seen in the long run. As the effects of the pandemic raise the pressure on economies, opportunities for TOC groups to involve in licit businesses are also likely to increase. TOC groups' infiltration into governments may depend on how governments produce counter policies, strength of economy, institutional and social structures. At the social level, their engagement in social services and providing aid to society may allow them to recruit new people. These assessments are based on limited data and early findings of the available research results. Therefore more data and research examining the potential impact of the pandemic on illicit markets will be essential to produce better policy options for governments to counter transnational organized crime activities.

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<sup>53</sup> For the details of network structures that OC groups conduct their activities, see: Jana Arsovska, "Conceptualizing and Studying Organized Crime in a Global Context: Possible? Indispensable? Superfluous?" in *Routledge Handbook of International Criminology*, ed. Cindy J. Smith, Sheldon X. Zhang, and Rosemary Barberet (London: Routledge, 2011), 211, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203864708>; Gerben Bruinsma and Wim Bernasco, "Criminal Groups and Transnational Illegal Markets," *Crime, Law and Social Change* 41 (2004): 79-94, <https://doi.org/10.1023/B:CRIS.0000015283.13923.aa>.

### About the Author

Dr. Cüneyt Gürer is a professor of Transnational Security Studies at the George C. Marshall European Center for Security Studies. His research interests and areas of expertise comprise transnational security issues, regional security dynamics, human displacement, and non-state actors in contemporary conflicts. He is affiliated with the Countering Transnational Organized Crime (CTOC) program at the Marshall Center.

# Salafi-Jihadi Terrorism in the Shadow of COVID-19: A Shifting Threat?

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**Abstract:** At the beginning of the pandemic, experts were concerned that the diversion of resources and the global lockdowns would increase opportunities for Salafi-Jihadi extremists to exploit. More than a year later, it is clear that terrorists were just as affected by the virus as everyone else. Global lockdowns reduced their ability to recruit and network face-to-face, and the global travel ban stemmed the flow of foreign fighters to and from Salafi-Jihadi strongholds. But does the overall decline in terrorism reflect what happened during the past year? This article argues that while the numbers of Salafi-Jihadi terrorist attacks have declined since the start of the pandemic, Salafi-Jihadi groups have exploited the situation to adapt their central strategy and ideological narrative. First, ISIS has gone “underground” in Iraq and Syria and is now operating smaller cells that harass the local Sunni population, especially in ungoverned areas. If the underlying political and socio-economic problems in these societies are not addressed and exacerbate under the impact of COVID-19, these groups are likely to bounce back and may become a larger threat in the future. Second, both ISIS and Al-Qaeda have shifted their focus from their strongholds in the Levant to global affiliates, attempting to strengthen their brand and influence across the Muslim world and exploit sectarianism in conflict regions where Muslims are substantial minorities. Third, the pandemic has exacerbated the drivers and motivators for political violence in societies that are already vulnerable due to prior conflict. With increased political insecurity and economic instability, there will be heightened opportunities for violent extremism and radicalization to thrive.

**Keywords:** religious terrorism, radicalization drivers, ISIS, Al-Qaeda, COVID-19.

## Introduction

As the gravity of the Coronavirus pandemic became apparent during early spring 2020, Western security experts began to worry about the impact it might have on transnational terrorism and Salafi-Jihadi groups and the global efforts to fight them. There was concern that governments would draw extensively on security and police forces to organize the fight against the pandemic, diverting their focus from counterterrorism activities. This, it

was believed, could leave grave security gaps and vulnerabilities that Salafi-Jihadi terrorist groups could exploit.<sup>1</sup> Others, to the contrary, argued that restrictions required by the virus might provide opportunities for counter-terrorism authorities, as global travel bans would curb terrorist travel, and lockdowns would facilitate locating and eradicating active terror cells.

Early statements from ISIS and Al-Qaeda in February 2020 made it clear that both groups recognized the pandemic as an opportunity, as they called on their followers to strike the “infidels” in their home societies with whatever means available while they were weak.<sup>2</sup> The terrorist attacks in France and Austria and a number of disrupted plots elsewhere during Spring 2020 were likely directly inspired by some of these messages.<sup>3</sup> However, at the time, few imagined – last of all the terrorist groups themselves – the extent to which COVID-related restrictions would overcome the world, as well as the effects this would have. With lockdowns in place and travel curtailed, recruitment and networking by Salafi-Jihadi groups in the West became more difficult.

The evidence shows no rise in global terrorism numbers in 2020 and that the downward trend that began after the 2014 peak continued.<sup>4</sup> In the five

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<sup>1</sup> James K. Wither, “The COVID-19 Pandemic: A Preliminary Assessment of the Impact on Terrorism in Western States,” *Occasional Papers* 33 (Garmisch-Partenkirchen, Germany: The George C. Marshall European Center for Security Studies, April 2020), <http://www.marshallcenter.org/en/publications/occasional-papers/covid-19-pandemic-preliminary-assessment-impact-terrorism-western-states>.

<sup>2</sup> Tova C. Norlen, “The Impact of COVID-19 on Salafi-Jihadi Terrorism,” *Connections: The Quarterly Journal* 19, no. 2 (2020): 11-23, <https://doi.org/10.11610/Connections.19.2.01>.

<sup>3</sup> Katrin Bennhold et al., “Vienna Terrorist Attack: What We Know,” *The New York Times*, November 3, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/11/03/world/europe/vienna-shooting.html>; Johannes Saal and Felix Lippe, “The Network of the November 2020 Vienna Attacker and the Jihadi Threat to Austria,” *CTC Sentinel* 14, no. 2 (2021): 33-43, <https://ctc.usma.edu/the-network-of-the-november-2020-vienna-attacker-and-the-jihadi-threat-to-austria>; Nodirbek Soliev, “The April 2020 Islamic State Terror Plot Against U.S. and NATO Military Bases in Germany: The Tajik Connection,” *CTC Sentinel* 14, no. 1 (2021): 30-38, <https://ctc.usma.edu/the-april-2020-islamic-state-terror-plot-against-u-s-and-nato-military-bases-in-germany-the-tajik-connection>; Kate Connolly, “Police Investigate If Vienna Attacker Was Part of Wider Network,” *The Guardian*, November 4, 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/nov/04/police-investigate-if-vienna-attacker-was-part-of-wider-network>.

<sup>4</sup> Alastair Reed and Kateira Aryaeinejad, “2020 Trends in Terrorism: From ISIS Fragmentation to Lone-Actor Attacks,” *United States Institute of Peace*, January 8, 2021, ac-

years prior to the pandemic, the *Global Terrorism Index* reported a drop in terrorism-related deaths by 59 % (from 33,438 deaths in 2014 to 13,826 deaths in 2019), largely attributed to the improved conditions in Iraq and Syria.<sup>5</sup> However, statistics give us only a partial picture, and the reality is more complex. The decline in terrorist activities has not been uniform across the world and continues to correlate with the presence of political violence and high levels of political fragility.<sup>6</sup> Thus, even if positive developments before the pandemic predicted a decline in Salafi-Jihadi terrorism, the future threat scenario depends on a number of dynamics, including the pandemic impact on rising levels of political fragility and instability, which in turn creates environments where terrorist tactics are increasingly nurtured. While COVID-19 has exacerbated and accelerated some of these dynamics, the future of Salafi-Jihadi terrorism also has to be understood against the backdrop of the larger context of religious violence in which it occurs. Research on conflict and violence shows that religion is increasingly used to justify and/or sanctify violence. While such practices are not exclusive to Islam, Salafi-Jihadi ideology remains (for now) the religious ideology most commonly connected to terrorism and most easily instrumentalized for that purpose. The presence and attractiveness of Salafi-Jihadi doctrine during a time of rising political insecurities and grievances may therefore make Muslim communities especially vulnerable to terrorist radicalization and recruitment.

This article argues that even if an increased terrorist threat to the West resulting from COVID-19 failed to materialize, Salafi-Jihadi-inspired terrorism remains a persistent challenge in a post-pandemic global security environment, especially in the Muslim world.<sup>7</sup> Three larger global trends com-

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cessed April 5, 2021, <https://www.usip.org/publications/2021/01/2020-trends-terrorism-isis-fragmentation-lone-actor-attacks>.

<sup>5</sup> Institute for Economics and Peace (IEP), *Global Terrorism Index 2020: Measuring the Impact of Terrorism* (Sydney: IEP, 2020), <https://www.visionofhumanity.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/GTI-2020-web-2.pdf>.

<sup>6</sup> Global Terrorism Database, <https://www.start.umd.edu/gtd>.

<sup>7</sup> Monica Duffy Toft, "Getting Religion? The Puzzling Case of Islam and Civil War," *International Security* 31, no. 4 (Spring 2007): 97-131, <https://doi.org/10.1162/isec.2007.31.4.97>; Monica Duffy Toft, "Getting Religion Right in Civil Wars," *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, March 23, 2021, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022002721997895>; James A. Piazza, "Incubators of Terror: Do Failed and Failing States Promote Transnational Terrorism?" *International Studies Quarterly* 52, no. 3 (September 2008): 469-88; Hector Avalos, *Fighting Words: The Origins of Religious Violence* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus

pound this challenge: First, the pre-pandemic global increase in political fragility and authoritarian governance has been accelerated in the aftermath of COVID-19, increasing some of the known risk factors for terrorism, including political and economic inequality. Second, COVID-19 has had a disproportionate impact on the underdeveloped regions of the world where religious and sectarian tensions were already rising before the pandemic. Most Muslim-majority countries that struggle with Salafi-Jihadi terrorism find themselves in this category. Third, the apocalyptic and redemptionist spiritual doctrine and ideological constructs that make Salafi-Jihadi doctrine irresistible to Western counterterrorism strategies and tactics are timeless and adaptable and traditionally feed on societal grievances. Hence, while the pandemic may not directly have created the conditions for increased Salafi-Jihadi terrorism, it has exacerbated and accelerated the pre-existing risk factors. This argument strengthens and confirms earlier research by this author that pointed to the likelihood that that Salafi-Jihadi groups would focus on adapting their doctrinal interpretations and narrative to fit with current constraints while also investing in their global networks and affiliates.<sup>8</sup>

The article begins by briefly sketching the most recent trends in Salafi-Jihadi terrorism over the past five years to explain where it fits conceptually within the scholarship on religiously inspired violence. By identifying Salafi-Jihadi-inspired violence as a subset in this typology, we can explore some of the constructs that make Salafi-Jihadi doctrine particularly powerful for the purpose of recruitment and radicalization by terrorist groups. Most likely, the conditions that lead to increased Salafi-Jihadi terrorism in Muslim societies may also lead to a similar rise in religiously-inspired violence elsewhere. The discussion then moves to analyze how Salafi-Jihadi ideology has fared after the fall of the ISIS Caliphate and in response to COVID-19, first locally, in and around the traditional strongholds of ISIS and Al-Qaeda in the Levant, and then globally, by exploring evidence that Salafi-Jihadi groups are re-branding and shifting their ideology to adapt to post-pandemic constraints. Finally, we discuss how the consequences of COVID 19 might provide fertile ground for Salafi-Jihadi terrorist ideology to return, especially to the MENA region. The evidence (although much is still pre-

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Books, 2005), [https://lib.dr.iastate.edu/phlrs\\_books/3](https://lib.dr.iastate.edu/phlrs_books/3).

<sup>8</sup> Norlen, "The Impact of COVID-19 on Salafi-Jihadi Terrorism."

liminary) paints a picture of an adaptive ideology that remains central, albeit to a small minority of Muslims, and that manages to adjust and reframe its goals regardless of the struggle to which it is applied.

## Religious Terrorism and the Drivers for Violence in the MENA Region

Despite the global decline in terrorism incidents in the wake of the pandemic, pockets of intense Salafi-Jihadi activity remained across the MENA region, both in the Levant (“*ash-Sham*”) and in trouble spots and/or conflict regions, including the Sinai, Libya, and Yemen. Salafi-Jihadi groups had also strengthened in other regions, especially in Sub-Saharan Africa and South and Central Asia, which saw increased and persistent levels of terrorism, respectively.<sup>9</sup> Together, those two regions accounted for more than 80 % of all terrorist activities in 2019.<sup>10</sup> Increased Salafi-Jihadi terrorist activities in Sri Lanka, Malaysia, and Indonesia weighed down temporary improvements in Afghanistan. The deterioration in the security situation under the Taliban and the strengthening of ISIS in the Khorasan Province has already led to a new spike in terror attacks in the region. ISIS and Al-Qaeda affiliates have also strengthened in Sub-Saharan Africa, threatening the Sahel and several regions in East Africa.<sup>11</sup>

These patterns reflect the fact that terrorism is not an identity but a tactic.<sup>12</sup> As such, it is often referred to as a “weapon of the weak” because it is frequently employed by a variety of actors in asymmetric conflicts – including

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<sup>9</sup> Nur Aziemah Azman, “The Islamic State (IS): Maintaining Resilience in a Post-Caliphate, Pandemic Environment,” *Counter Terrorist Trends and Analyses* 13, no. 1 (January 2021): 106-111, <https://www.rsis.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/CTTA-January-2021.pdf>.

<sup>10</sup> Institute for Economics and Peace, “Global Terrorism Index 2019,” *Vision of Humanity*, 2019, <https://www.visionofhumanity.org/maps/global-terrorism-index/#/>.

<sup>11</sup> Institute for Economics and Peace, “Global Terrorism Index 2019;” Nolan Quinn, “From Separatism to Salafism: Militancy on the Swahili Coast,” *Council on Foreign Relations*, January 13, 2021, <https://www.cfr.org/blog/separatism-salafism-militancy-swahili-coast>; Paul Brown and Mina Al-Lami, “Analysis: Islamic State Tilts to Africa after Loss of ‘Caliphate’ Bases,” *BBC Monitoring*, March 23, 2021, accessed April 7, 2021, <https://monitoring.bbc.co.uk/product/c202gc3v>; Mike Ives and Isabella Kwai, “1,300 Prisoners Escape From Congo Jail After an Attack Claimed by ISIS,” *The New York Times*, October 20, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/10/20/world/africa/congo-jail-attack-prisoners-freed.html>.

<sup>12</sup> Institute for Economics and Peace, “Global Terrorism Index 2020.”

individuals, groups, and organizations – against a stronger foe.<sup>13</sup> In fact, 94 % of all global terrorist attacks occur within the context of a contemporary conflict and/or civil war.<sup>14</sup> There is also a clear correlation between domestic political instability – including authoritarian and repressive politics, state failure, and the exclusion of minorities – and the likelihood that a country both hosts and suffers from transnational terrorism.<sup>15</sup> Thus, the considerable strain that COVID-19 adds to countries already suffering from conflict conditions will also likely increase their burden from terrorism in the near term.<sup>16</sup>

At the start of the pandemic, the Middle East had become the least peaceful region of the world with a disproportionate share of the world's armed conflicts.<sup>17</sup> The region also suffered disproportionately from religious civil wars.<sup>18</sup> Religiously-inspired conflicts, which have nearly tripled since 2001,<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Virginia Page Fortna, "Do Terrorists Win? Rebels' Use of Terrorism and Civil War Outcomes," *International Organization* 69, no. 3 (Summer 2015): 519–56, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020818315000089>; Leonard Weinberg, Ami Pedazhur, and Sivan Hirsch-Hoefler, "The Challenges of Conceptualizing Terrorism," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 16, no. 4 (2004): 777–94, <https://doi.org/10.1080/095465590899768>.

<sup>14</sup> Institute for Economics and Peace, "Global Terrorism Index 2020."

<sup>15</sup> Nauro F. Campos and Martin Gassebner, "International Terrorism, Domestic Political Instability, and the Escalation Effect," *Economics & Politics* 25, no. 1 (March 2013): 27–47, <https://doi.org/10.1111/ecpo.12002>; Michael J. Schumacher and Peter J. Schraeder, "Does Domestic Political Instability Foster Terrorism? Global Evidence from the Arab Spring Era (2011–14)," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 44, no. 3 (March 2021): 198–222, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1057610X.2018.1538124>; Piazza, "Incubators of Terror: Do Failed and Failing States Promote Transnational Terrorism?"; Justin Conrad and Daniel Milton, "Unpacking the Connection Between Terror and Islam," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 36, no. 4 (April 2013): 315–36, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1057610X.2013.763600>; Emily Estelle, *Vicious Cycles: How Disruptive States and Extremist Movements Fill Power Vacuums and Fuel Each Other* (American Enterprise Institute, August 2020), [www.aei.org/research-products/report/vicious-cycles-how-disruptive-states-and-extremist-movements-fill-power-vacuums-and-fuel-each-other](http://www.aei.org/research-products/report/vicious-cycles-how-disruptive-states-and-extremist-movements-fill-power-vacuums-and-fuel-each-other).

<sup>16</sup> Paul B. Stares, "Preventive Priorities Survey 2021" (Council on Foreign Relations, Center for Preventive Action, 2021), [https://cdn.cfr.org/sites/default/files/report\\_pdf/pps\\_2021\\_01.14.2021\\_onlineversion.pdf](https://cdn.cfr.org/sites/default/files/report_pdf/pps_2021_01.14.2021_onlineversion.pdf).

<sup>17</sup> This resulted from a drop in some of its most significant markers for safety and security, political stability, and potential for political terror, including an increased likelihood in violent demonstrations, a rise of authoritarianism, and increased militarization. See Institute for Economics and Peace, "Global Peace Index 2020: Measuring Peace in a Complex World" (Sydney, June 2020), [https://visionofhumanity.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/GPI\\_2020\\_web.pdf](https://visionofhumanity.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/GPI_2020_web.pdf).

<sup>18</sup> A Religious Civil War is a type of conflict in which religion plays either a central or peripheral role. See Toft, "Getting Religion Right in Civil Wars."

tend to be more difficult to resolve, experience a higher level of intensity, and result in more casualties than other types of wars.<sup>20</sup> Religious ideologies are often more effective for recruitment and radicalization than secular ideologies because they concern absolute, sacred, or transcendental values. In addition, scriptural passages can often be interpreted to support violence as a “sacramental duty” to obtain divine favor, salvation, or redemption.<sup>21</sup> Because religious actors expect spiritual rewards in the afterlife for their sacrifices, they are often less inhibited in their use of violence and less concerned about popular support.<sup>22</sup> Contemporary religious wars are concentrated in the MENA region and primarily engage Muslim combatants who are driven by Salafi-Jihadi ideology.<sup>23</sup> Islamic groups committed 94 % of all terrorist attacks by religiously-oriented groups between 1968 and 2005.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Toft, “Getting Religion Right in Civil Wars.”

<sup>20</sup> Isak Svensson and Emily Harding, “How Holy Wars End: Exploring the Termination Patterns of Conflicts With Religious Dimensions in Asia,” *Terrorism and Political Violence* 23, no. 2 (March 2011): 133-49, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09546553.2010.516210>; James A. Piazza, “Draining the Swamp: Democracy Promotion, State Failure, and Terrorism in 19 Middle Eastern Countries,” *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 30, no. 6 (May 2007): 521–39, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10576100701329576>; Toft, “Getting Religion? The Puzzling Case of Islam and Civil War;” Toft, “Getting Religion Right in Civil Wars.”

<sup>21</sup> Tova C. Norlén, “Sacred Stones and Religious Nuts: Negotiating Territorial Absolutes,” PhD Dissertation (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University, School of Advanced International Studies, 2010); Mark Juergensmeyer, “Terror Mandated by God,” *Terrorism and Political Violence* 9, no. 2 (June 1997): 16-23, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09546559708427400>; Mark Juergensmeyer, *Terror in the Mind of God: The Global Rise of Religious Violence*, Fourth Edition (University of California Press, March 2017); Nafees Hamid et al., “Neuroimaging ‘Will to Fight’ for Sacred Values: An Empirical Case Study with Supporters of an Al Qaeda Associate,” *Royal Society Open Science* 6, no. 6 (June 2019), <https://doi.org/10.1098/rsos.181585>; Ron E. Hassner, *War on Sacred Grounds*, 1st ed. (Cornell University Press, 2009).

<sup>22</sup> Weinberg, Pedazhur, and Hirsch-Hoefler, “The Challenges of Conceptualizing Terrorism;” Hoffman 1999; Hector Avalos, *Fighting Words: The Origins of Religious Violence* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 2005); Piazza, “Incubators of Terror: Do Failed and Failing States Promote Transnational Terrorism?;” Assaf Moghadam, “The Salafi-Jihad as a Religious Ideology,” *CTC Sentinel* 1, no. 3 (2008), <https://ctc.usma.edu/the-salafi-jihad-as-a-religious-ideology>.

<sup>23</sup> Toft, “Getting Religion Right in Civil Wars.”

<sup>24</sup> Most likely this statistic has changed with the increase of right-wing violence. James A. Piazza, “Is Islamist Terrorism More Dangerous? An Empirical Study of Group Ideology, Organization, and Goal Structure,” *Terrorism and Political Violence* 21, no. 1 (January 2009): 62-88, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09546550802544698>; Bruce Hoffman, “‘Holy Terror’: The Implications of Terrorism Motivated by a Religious Imperative,” *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 18, no. 4 (January 1995): 271-84, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10576109508435985>.

Salafi-Jihadi doctrine is the result of a combination of two currents in Islam, the *Salafi tradition*, the belief that Islam needs to return to its early, pious, and authentic roots, and *Jihadi*, the belief that Muslims are obligated to fight against those who are enemies to their faith, either internal or external to the Muslim community.<sup>25</sup> While ISIS and Al-Qaeda are the most prominent examples of contemporary Salafi-Jihadi groups, it is important to note that the doctrine is not branded to any of those groups. It is easily applicable to anyone who shares similar sacred values or trying to recruit those who do. This explains why the Salafi-Jihadi doctrine remains attractive and why the Salafi-Jihadi threat from terrorism has not waned with the decline of Al-Qaeda or the ISIS Caliphate. As grievances in Islamic and Arab societies rise due to the pandemic, Salafi-Jihadi ideologies could regain their attraction.

Although there is evidence that some religions or ideologies may be more efficient than others in justifying cruel violence and in recruiting “soldiers” for such violence,<sup>26</sup> drawing a link between a particular religion and violence would be far too simplistic. Research shows that it is not a specific creed, but rather the *objectives* that terrorist groups have and the centrality of religion to their cause that determine how violence is instrumentalized.<sup>27</sup> While traditional terrorist groups often have ethnic/separatist, leftist, right-wing, or other goals, religious terrorist groups have either strategic objectives (using religious doctrine to mobilize followers in pursuit of non-religious goals) or abstract/universal objectives (the pursuit of absolute, apocalyptic, or redemptionist goals).<sup>28</sup> Limited strategic goals are often more amenable to compromise. By its nature, Salafi-Jihadi violence belongs to the second category and is thus more lethal than some other types of

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<sup>25</sup> Mohamed-Ali Adraoui, “Salafism, Jihadism and Radicalisation: Between a Common Doctrinal Heritage and the Logics of Empowerment,” in *Militant Jihadism: Today and Tomorrow*, Volume 6, ed. Serafettin Pektas and Johan Leman (Leuven University Press, 2019), 19-40, 20, <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctvq2vzmt.5>.

<sup>26</sup> In some ways this is similar to the US gun-right activist slogan that “guns don’t kill, only people kill.” See Jessica Stern, *Terror in the Name of God: Why Religious Militants Kill* (New York: Ecco, August 2004); Juergensmeyer, *Terror in the Mind of God*, 137.

<sup>27</sup> Piazza, “Is Islamist Terrorism More Dangerous?” 65; Juergensmeyer, *Terror in the Mind of God*.

<sup>28</sup> Piazza, “Is Islamist Terrorism More Dangerous?” 65; Bruce Hoffman, *Inside Terrorism*, 3rd edition (Columbia University Press, September 2017); Norlen, “Sacred Stones and Religious Nuts.”

religiously-inspired terrorism.<sup>29</sup> Therefore, as a doctrine, it is both cost-effective and powerful for non-state actors with limited means.

However, this does not explain the prevalence of terrorism in the Muslim world and Arab Islamic culture in particular. In order to understand why the MENA region suffers disproportionately from Salafi-Jihadi violence compared to other regions, we have to “unpack” the political, historical, doctrinal, and structural issues that might make Muslim societies more prone to violence.<sup>30</sup> Political and structural factors, like government repression or exclusion, have been found to drive the emergence of Salafi-Jihadi-related grievances and incentivize radicalization.<sup>31</sup> These factors often interact with sacred values that entice individuals to kill and die in defense of a cause.<sup>32</sup> The fact that Islam does not separate between the religious and political spheres invites Salafi-Jihadi groups to challenge the state’s legitimacy while also forcing the government to engage in ethnic outbidding (i.e., trying to “outdo” the other in demonstrating extremism).<sup>33</sup> Similar

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<sup>29</sup> Mia Bloom, *Dying to Kill: The Allure of Suicide Terror* (Columbia University Press, 2005); Walter Enders and Todd Sandler, *The Political Economy of Terrorism* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

<sup>30</sup> Conrad and Milton, “Unpacking the Connection Between Terror and Islam;” See also Stern, *Terror in the Name of God*; Hoffman, *Inside Terrorism*; Juergensmeyer, *Terror in the Mind of God*; Mary Ann Tétreault and Robert Allen Denemark, *Gods, Guns, and Globalization: Religious Radicalism and International Political Economy* (Boulder, Colo.: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2004); Ehud Sprinzak, “From Messianic Pioneering to Vigilante Terrorism: The Case of the Gush Emunim Underground,” in *Inside Terrorist Organizations*, ed. David C. Rapoport, Cass Series on Political Violence 10 (London: Frank Cass, 2001), 194-216.

<sup>31</sup> Conrad and Milton, “Unpacking the Connection Between Terror and Islam;” Djallil Lounnas, “La mouvance Djihadiste et le Hirak en Algérie,” *Securite globale* 22, no. 2 (July 2020): 25-38.

<sup>32</sup> Studies in neuropsychology have shown that ethnic exclusion or repression increases an individual’s willingness to fight and die for deeply-held sacred values, while it also appears to de-activate the deliberative part of the brain that would normally inhibit such actions. Hamid et al., “Neuroimaging ‘Will to Fight’ for Sacred Values.”

<sup>33</sup> See Donald L. Horowitz, *Ethnic Groups in Conflict* (Berkeley; Los Angeles; London: University of California Press, 1985); Stephen M. Saideman, “Is Pandora’s Box Half-Empty or Half-Full? The Limited Virulence of Secessionism and the Domestic Sources of Disintegration,” in *The International Spread of Ethnic Conflict: Fear, Diffusion, and Escalation*, ed. David A. Lake and Donald Rothchild (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1998), 127-50, <https://doi.org/10.1515/9780691219752-010>; Christina Isabel Zuber and Edina Szöcsik, “Ethnic Outbidding and Nested Competition: Explaining the Extremism of Ethnonational Minority Parties in Europe,” *European Journal of Political Research* 54, no. 4 (November 2015): 784-801, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1475-6765.12105>; Manuel Vogt, Kristian Skrede Gleditsch,

conditions are rising in other cultures where religion is central for political nationalism, such as ethnic supremacist doctrines in Russia and India.<sup>34</sup>

Historical conditions are also often blamed for Salafi-Jihadi grievances.<sup>35</sup> Colonialism, great power competition, and regional tensions – including backlash from US-led counterterrorism operations since 9/11 – continue to be used by Salafi-Jihadi groups to radicalize and recruit. Additionally, the region lies at the crossroads of three continents and features prominently throughout history as a geostrategic hotspot. It is also the location of the sacred sites of the three Monotheistic faiths, which has contributed significantly to conflict since the time of the Crusades and continues to do so today.<sup>36</sup>

Finally, the Salafi-Jihadi doctrine, which has developed partially in response to some of these historical and structural conditions, has to a certain extent become normalized in Islamic political discourse, even when not generally accepted. Its strengths lie in its ability to justify harsh violence, sanctify sacrifice, and glorify their objectives, as well as to “re-narrate” historical and contemporary conditions to fit with those objectives. While western CT efforts are often hampered by a number of mundane and bureaucratic conditions, such as political election cycles, military deployment lags, fiscal year closeouts, and duty-tour limitations, the Salafi-Jihadi apocalyptic un-

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and Lars-Erik Cederman, “From Claims to Violence: Signaling, Outbidding, and Escalation in Ethnic Conflict,” *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 65, no. 7-8 (2021), <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022002721996436>; Neil DeVotta, “From Ethnic Outbidding to Ethnic Conflict: The Institutional Bases for Sri Lanka’s Separatist War,” *Nations and Nationalism* 11, no. 1 (2005): 141-59, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1354-5078.2005.00196.x>; Toft, “Getting Religion? The Puzzling Case of Islam and Civil War;” Toft, “Getting Religion Right in Civil Wars;” Nader Hashemi, “Political Islam: A 40 Year Retrospective,” *Religions* 12, no. 2 (February 2021): 130, <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel12020130>.

<sup>34</sup> Jessica Stern, “How America Created a Terrorist Haven,” *New York Times*, August 20, 2003, <https://www.nytimes.com/2003/08/20/opinion/how-america-created-a-terrorist-haven.html>; Hoffman, “‘Holy Terror’: The Implications of Terrorism.”

<sup>35</sup> Stern, “How America Created a Terrorist Haven;” Bruce Hoffman, “The War on Terror 20 Years On: Crossroads or Cul-De-Sac?” *Commentary*, Tony Blair Institute for Global Change, March 18, 2021, <https://institute.global/policy/war-terror-20-years-crossroads-or-cul-de-sac>.

<sup>36</sup> See Toft, “Getting Religion? The Puzzling Case of Islam and Civil War;” Toft, “Getting Religion Right in Civil Wars;” Hashemi, “Political Islam.”

derstanding of time spans over centuries rather than months, and political events, foreign invasions, and military defeats become quite insignificant.<sup>37</sup>

Military setbacks for Salafi-Jihadi groups do not defeat a group's objective but simply "re-adjusts" the timeline by which they expect to see the next phase of the redemptive process take shape and their role in it.<sup>38</sup> This type of thinking is common to apocalyptic groups and helps fuel and reinforce martyrdom.<sup>39</sup> In addition, a "cyclical," rather than a linear, understanding of time allows groups to draw on sacred texts to recall the perceived utopia of a previous glorious time and to use violence to re-enact and connect the past with the present through prophecy.<sup>40</sup> Through the clever use of historic and Koranic-style imagery, symbols, and prose, ISIS gave meaning and authenticity to the present while also normalizing the notion of a "man-made" Caliphate to be available for others to resurrect.<sup>41</sup>

Thus, it is important to ask whether COVID-19 has weakened the capacity of already established Salafi-Jihadi terrorist groups to undertake continued operations and whether the pandemic's socio-economic and political impacts will produce new opportunities for Salafi-Jihadi groups. The following section looks at the immediate implications of COVID-19 on the strength of Salafi-Jihadi groups in its former strongholds in the MENA region, their adaptive strategies, and how the pandemic might increase vul-

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<sup>37</sup> Robert Hassan, "Sources of Resilience in Political Islam: Sacred Time, Earthly Pragmatism, and Digital Media," *Arab Media & Society*, no. 25 (Winter/Spring 2018): 36, <https://www.arabmediasociety.com/sources-of-resilience-in-political-islam-sacred-time-earthly-pragmatism-and-digital-media>.

<sup>38</sup> Shahzad Bashir, "Islam and the Politics of Temporality: The Case of ISIS," *E-International Relations* (blog), July 28, 2016, <https://www.e-ir.info/2016/07/28/islam-and-the-politics-of-temporality-the-case-of-isis>.

<sup>39</sup> It is also found in Christianity and Judaism. See Norlen, "Sacred Stones and Religious Nuts"; Stern, *Terror in the Name of God*; Ehud Sprinzak, *Brother Against Brother: Violence and Extremism in Israeli Politics from Altalena to the Rabin Assassination* (New York: Free Press, 1999).

<sup>40</sup> Michael Feige, *Settling in the Hearts: Jewish Fundamentalism in the Occupied Territories*, Raphael Patai Series in Jewish Folklore and Anthropology (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2009); Sprinzak, *Brother against Brother*; Oren Yiftachel, "Territory as the Kernel of the Nation: Space, Time and Nationalism in Israel/Palestine," *Geopolitics* 7, no. 2 (September 2002): 215-48, <https://doi.org/10.1080/714000930>.

<sup>41</sup> As seen in the ISIS flag, fighters on horsemen, period-inspired clothing, etc. See Bashir, "Islam and the Politics of Temporality"; William F. McCants, *The ISIS Apocalypse: The History, Strategy, and Doomsday Vision of the Islamic State* (New York: Picador, 2016).

nerabilities to Salafi-Jihadi ideologies in the future. The analysis then turns to Salafi-Jihadi terrorist activities in regions beyond MENA, including the Sahel, Eastern Africa, and Asia. The last section discusses how COVID-19 has exacerbated already existing vulnerabilities that Salafi-Jihadi groups could exploit.

## Post-Pandemic Middle East and the Appeal of Salafi-Jihadi Ideology

On April 4, 2021, in the midst of the Coronavirus pandemic, Egypt put on a display for the ages that was literally “out of this world.” A made-for-TV lavish ceremony celebrated the move of 22 Royal mummies to a new home.<sup>42</sup> At first glance, it appeared that the parade was animated, so well were the lights and cameras set up to show Egypt’s Pharaonic heritage in all its glory. As the boat-shaped golden sarcophagi of King Ramses II and Queen Hatshepsut rolled across the screen and half-clad dancers saluted the sun, one could only wonder about the effects on Salafi-Jihadi groups in the country. Here was a golden spectacle of polytheism with President Abdel Fatah al-Sisi appearing like the modern Pharaoh as a silhouette in a shining archway, and not a single mention of the apparent contradiction between the country’s Islamic identity and its ancient civilization.

While Egypt might have been hoping to attract its first post-pandemic tourists, the captive audience of the show was not the world but Egyptians. At a time when the public’s trust in the government is slipping across the region,<sup>43</sup> it is not surprising to see elites reach to a country’s glorious past to reignite nationalism. A decade after the Arab Spring, Egyptians are apathetic about politics but also frustrated by the lack of opportunities for anyone who does not belong to a shrinking elite.<sup>44</sup> Economic inequality has risen to

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<sup>42</sup> “Egypt Puts on a Show as It Moves Royal Mummies to New Home,” *Al Jazeera*, April 3, 2021, [www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/4/3/egypt-parades-royal-mummies-in-show-of-pharaonic-heritage](http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/4/3/egypt-parades-royal-mummies-in-show-of-pharaonic-heritage).

<sup>43</sup> Michael Robbins, “What Arab Publics Think: Findings from the Fifth Wave of Arab Barometer,” *The Arab Barometer* (blog), January 28, 2020, <https://www.arabbarometer.org/publication/what-arab-publics-think-findings-from-the-fifth-wave-of-arab-barometer>.

<sup>44</sup> Kali Robinson, “The Arab Spring at Ten Years: What’s the Legacy of the Uprisings?” *Council on Foreign Relations*, December 3, 2020, <https://www.cfr.org/article/arab-spring-ten-years-whats-legacy-uprisings>; *A Voice for Change: A White Paper on the Findings of the 12th Annual ASDA/BCW Arab Youth Survey 2020*, Arab Youth Survey, 12th Annual Edition (ASDA/BCW, 2020), <https://www.arabyouthsurvey.com/pdf/download>

unprecedented levels, and large parts of the population have limited access to basic services, including healthcare and education.<sup>45</sup> COVID-19 has worsened these inequalities while also effectively closing off avenues for political dissent, including important civil liberties like freedom of assembly and speech. While citizens across the Arab world are largely tolerant of government COVID-related restrictions, measures introduced in Egypt were passed as emergency regulations, which raises the fear among political opponents that they could be used indefinitely by the current or future governments to crack down on independent media and academic freedom.<sup>46</sup>

The political apathy in Egypt is also part of a more significant trend in the region. Dreams of democracy that cumulated in the Arab spring were crushed by a combination of authoritarian backlash, religious extremism, and devastating civil wars. While this exposed the vulnerability of democratic transitions, it also turned people against political Islam.<sup>47</sup> The devastating effect that ISIS had on civilians under its control and for the millions of people caught in its cross-hairs made it more difficult for other Salafi-Jihadi groups to operate and recruit.<sup>48</sup> Ironically, early doctrinal disagreement between Al-Qaeda and ISIS was, in part, Ayman Al-Zawahiri's opini-

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whitepaper/AYS%202020-WP\_ENG\_0510\_Single-Final.pdf; "2017-2018 Arab Opinion Index: Executive Summary," *Arab Center Washington DC*, July 10, 2018, <http://arabcenterdc.org/survey/2017-2018-arab-opinion-index-executive-summary>.

<sup>45</sup> Adel Abdellatif et al., "Governance in the Arab Region: Experts Discuss Public Responses to COVID-19," *Brookings*, September 3, 2020, <https://www.brookings.edu/opinions/governance-in-the-arab-region-experts-discuss-public-responses-to-covid-19/>; "Poverty and Food Insecurity in the Arab Region," *E/ESCWA*, Mitigating the Impact of COVID-19, Policy Brief 2, September 3, 2020, [https://www.unescwa.org/sites/www.unescwa.org/files/en\\_20-00119\\_covid-19\\_poverty.pdf](https://www.unescwa.org/sites/www.unescwa.org/files/en_20-00119_covid-19_poverty.pdf).

<sup>46</sup> Samy Magdy, "Egypt's President Expands Powers, Citing Virus Outbreak," *AP News*, May 9, 2020, <https://apnews.com/article/63abe33c947e857505ef351f3558a744>; Daniella Raz, "Is COVID-19 Compelling Arab Citizens to Surrender Freedoms to Their Governments?" *Arab Barometer* (blog), May 24, 2021, <https://www.arabbarometer.org/2021/05/is-covid-19-compelling-arab-citizens-to-surrender-freedoms-to-their-governments>.

<sup>47</sup> Zaynab Khojji, "Trust in Islamist Parties Plummets since Arab Spring," *Arab News*, June 23, 2019, <https://www.arabnews.com/node/1515091/middle-east>; "The Arab World in Seven Charts: Are Arabs Turning Their Backs on Religion?" *BBC News*, June 24, 2019, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-48703377>.

<sup>48</sup> Lounnas, "La mouvance Djihadiste et le Hirak en Algérie," 44.

on that ISIS was too extreme in their targeting of other Muslims, whether Shi'a or Sunni non-ISIS sympathizers.<sup>49</sup>

While ISIS and Al-Qaeda may have lost strength, both groups continue to be active and maintain safe havens under the radar in fragile security climates and ungoverned spaces, particularly in Egypt, Libya, Syria, Iraq, and Yemen. Al-Qaeda has remained resilient in the Idlib Province in Northwest Syria, where the al-Qaeda affiliated group Hayat Tahrir ash-Sham and its Salvation Government hold on. Out of the estimated 40,000 ISIS fighters active at the height of the Caliphate, many were either killed or captured, but some went into hiding and continue to operate small cells in rural regions of both Syria and Iraq.<sup>50</sup> While ISIS attacks declined in Iraq in 2020, four provinces – Anbar, Ninewa, Kirkuk, and Diyala – experienced an increase.<sup>51</sup> The number of remaining ISIS fighters fell further between January and December 2020 (to an estimated 8,000 to 16,000 fighters); yet, there is some evidence that the COVID-19 lockdowns and mandatory quartering of security forces have allowed these cells to entrench themselves further in local communities and that the economic impacts of COVID will make recruitment drives easier.<sup>52</sup> This is especially true in Iraq, where small cells exploit a largely ungoverned area between Kurdish Peshmerga forces and Iraqi security forces and carry out ambush-style attacks, arson, extortion of local villagers, and assassinations of security personnel.<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> The concept comes from the writings of French philosopher Mallet du Pan about the French revolution. The original is "L'exemple Saturn, les revolutions devores ses enfats." M. (Jacques) Mallet du Pan, *Considérations Sur La Nature de La Révolution de France et Sur Les Causes Qui En Prolongent La Durée* (Londres: [s.n.], 1793), <http://archive.org/details/considrationsur0000mall>.

<sup>50</sup> "Lead Inspector General for Operation Inherent Resolve Quarterly Report to the United States Congress," Department of Defense Office of Inspector General, February 5, 2021, <https://www.dodig.mil/reports.html/Article/2497904/lead-inspector-general-for-operation-inherent-resolve-quarterly-report-to-the-u>.

<sup>51</sup> "Lead Inspector General for Operation Inherent Resolve Quarterly Report."

<sup>52</sup> Callum MacLean, "Middle East – The Resurgence of the Islamic State in Syria and Iraq," *Global Risk Insights*, February 13, 2021, <https://globalriskinsights.com/2021/02/middle-east-the-resurgence-of-the-islamic-state-in-syria-and-iraq>; Elizabeth Dent, "US Policy and the Resurgence of ISIS in Iraq and Syria," Policy Paper (Middle East Institute, October 2020), <https://www.mei.edu/sites/default/files/2020-10/US%20Policy%20and%20the%20Resurgence%20of%20ISIS%20in%20Iraq%20and%20Syria%20%20.pdf>; Mark Tarallo, "After Setbacks, ISIS Ramps Up Attacks," *Security Management*, August 1, 2020, <http://www.asisonline.org/security-management-magazine/articles/2020/08/after-setbacks-isis-ramps-up-attacks>.

<sup>53</sup> Interview with Kurdish military liaison officer; Bureau of Counterterrorism, *Country*

While the loss of territory severed the group's access to its major sources of revenue (including oil and taxation), some fear that ISIS still has access to cash, given that the costs of maintaining the physical Caliphate are gone.<sup>54</sup>

Rhetorically, ISIS has emphasized efforts to exploit the weaknesses in the security environment in Iraq and Syria, especially by calling for the breakout of ISIS prisoners and the release of women and children from detention camps.<sup>55</sup> There are an estimated 10-20,000 former ISIS fighters in prisons in Iraq and Syria, of whom around 2,000 are foreign fighters.<sup>56</sup> A majority (about 9,000) are in the Kurdish-controlled areas in Syria, with one facility operated by the US-supported Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) holding around 5,000 fighters.<sup>57</sup> Meanwhile, families of former ISIS fighters are languishing in several large refugee camps, including the infamous al-Houl camp in North-East Syria, housing an estimated 70,000 people. At least 8,000 of these are the wives and children of foreign fighters.<sup>58</sup>

The January 2022 ISIS attack on a prison in the Hasaka province in North-eastern Syria is evidence that the group's rhetoric has paid off, and that it

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*Reports on Terrorism* (Department of State, June 2020), <https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/Country-Reports-on-Terrorism-2019-2.pdf>; Tarallo, "After Setbacks, ISIS Ramps Up Attacks."

- <sup>54</sup> David Kenner, "All ISIS Has Left Is Money. Lots of It," *The Atlantic*, March 24, 2019, <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2019/03/isis-caliphate-money-territory/584911>; Joseph Haboush, "Iraqi Security Forces Uncover \$1.5 Mln Stash of Cash by ISIS in Mosul," *Al Arabiya English*, April 15, 2021, <https://english.alarabiya.net/News/middle-east/2021/04/16/Iraqi-security-forces-uncover-1-5-mln-stash-of-cash-by-ISIS-in-Mosul>.
- <sup>55</sup> United Nations Security Council, "Twenty-Fifth Report of the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team," n.d.; Al-Naba' Editorial #226, March 19, 2020.
- <sup>56</sup> Frank Gardner, "IS Prisoner Issue a Ticking Timebomb for the West," *BBC News*, July 24, 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-53428928>; Liz Sly and Louisa Loveluck, "Kurdish-Led Forces Put down Revolt by ISIS Detainees at Prison in Syria," *The Washington Post*, March 30, 2020, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle\\_east/islamic-state-detainees-mutiny-at-prison-in-syria/2020/03/30/8fc4a0dc-7252-11ea-ad9b-254ec99993bc\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle_east/islamic-state-detainees-mutiny-at-prison-in-syria/2020/03/30/8fc4a0dc-7252-11ea-ad9b-254ec99993bc_story.html); James F. Jeffrey, "Four-Part ISIS Series: Its Fighters, Prisoners and Future," *Wilson Center*, December 22, 2020, [www.wilsoncenter.org/collection/four-part-isis-series-its-fighters-prisoners-and-future](http://www.wilsoncenter.org/collection/four-part-isis-series-its-fighters-prisoners-and-future).
- <sup>57</sup> Katie Bo Williams, "Coalition Plans to Expand Giant ISIS Prison in Syria," *Defense One*, February 24, 2021, accessed April 17, 2021, <https://www.defenseone.com/policy/2021/02/coalition-plans-expand-giant-isis-prison-syria/172270>.
- <sup>58</sup> Eric Oehlerich, Mick Mulroy, and Liam McHugh, "Jannah or Jahannam: Options for Dealing with ISIS Detainees," Policy Paper (Middle East Institute, October 2020), <https://www.mei.edu/sites/default/files/2020-10/Jannah%20or%20Jahannam%20-%20Options%20for%20Dealing%20with%20ISIS%20Detainees.pdf>.

has strengthened significantly during the past two years.<sup>59</sup> The escaped prisoners – who may have undergone further radicalization while detained – threaten to breathe new life into the ISIS ground operation in the region. Additionally, an alarm has been raised about the continued militancy among the wives and children of ISIS fighters, especially in al-Houl, where squalid conditions and overcrowding constitute a humanitarian crisis.<sup>60</sup> There are reports that children are being smuggled out of the camp to be trained as ISIS cubs, feeding fears that the next generation of hardened Salafi-Jihadi fighters have been nurtured from the trauma.<sup>61</sup> It is reported that COVID-19 has exacerbated these conditions as many within these massive tent cities have been left to fend for themselves when foreign aid workers have been withdrawn, local staff quarantined, and clinics and other resources shuttered.<sup>62</sup>

There are also signs that some Salafi-Jihadi groups may be re-conceptualizing their struggle and reframing their narrative to convince their followers that their time is not yet ripe. ISIS had a motto that says that they will “endure and expand,” which points to their understanding of the relevance of time and resilience as their major asset in their jihad against the West.<sup>63</sup>

This is worrying because the chaos that followed and the plight of ISIS refugees under US-funded forces has created an ideal opportunity for ISIS to re-narrate the experience of the Caliphate for the next generation. Schol-

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<sup>59</sup> Louisa Loveluck and Sarah Cahlan, “Prison Break: ISIS Fighters Launched a Brazen Attack to Free Their Comrades,” *The Washington Post*, February 3, 2020, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2022/02/03/syria-hasakah-isis-prison-attack/>.

<sup>60</sup> PTSS 2021 COI, Panel on the MENA region, Garmisch-Partenkirchen, Germany, n.d.; “COVID Sparks Resurgence of ISIL Terrorists, Threatening International Peace and Security, Security Council Hears,” *UN News*, February 10, 2021, <https://news.un.org/en/story/2021/02/1084362>; “Dozens of ISIS Family Members Arrested in Syria’s al-Hol Camp: Monitor,” *Al Arabiya English*, March 28, 2021, <https://english.alarabiya.net/News/middle-east/2021/03/28/Dozens-of-ISIS-family-members-arrested-in-Syria-s-al-Hol-Camp-Monitor>.

<sup>61</sup> Williams, “Coalition Plans to Expand Giant ISIS Prison in Syria”; Gardner, “IS Prisoner Issue a Ticking Timebomb for the West.”

<sup>62</sup> Gardner, “IS Prisoner Issue a Ticking Timebomb for the West.”

<sup>63</sup> Hassan Abu Haneyeh, “How COVID-19 Facilitated the Rebirth of Global Jihadism,” *Pulitzer Center*, June 5, 2020, <https://pulitzercenter.org/stories/how-covid-19-facilitated-rebirth-global-jihadism>.

ars of religious violence have found that the religious centrality of conflict tends to be strengthened over time in conflict zones with recurring violence.<sup>64</sup> According to most Islamic scholars, the idea of the Caliphate, which was at first something completely unthinkable, has now been “normalized” and theologically accepted after having been dormant and untouchable for generations.<sup>65</sup> ISIS – as well as other Salafi-Jihadi groups – are now able to look back at the ISIS time as an idyllic time, juxtaposing it with the current chaos caused by the US and its allies.<sup>66</sup>

The adaptability of the Salafi-Jihadi doctrine is evident in the ISIS rhetoric. As ISIS began to lose its territorial stronghold, its rhetoric became increasingly esoteric about the immediacy of the end of times and its ordained role in it. Proclamations about the Coronavirus went quiet, as it was clear that the pandemic did not fit into the spiritual narrative.<sup>67</sup> Instead, there was an emphasis to de-territorialize the Caliphate by calling for lone-actor attacks globally and for members to recognize that they are “divine lieutenants” of the Caliph wherever they are.<sup>68</sup> Further, this rhetoric was paralleled with an increase in propaganda directed towards ISIS-affiliated groups across the globe.<sup>69</sup>

While it is rare, some Salafi-Jihadi groups may choose to “self-moderate” as a result of constraining circumstances and events, a possibility that was noted in previous research by this author.<sup>70</sup> Research in conflict and violence suggests that changing rhetoric from a violent or extremist group can

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<sup>64</sup> Toft, “Getting Religion Right in Civil Wars.”

<sup>65</sup> Haneyeh, “How COVID-19 Facilitated the Rebirth of Global Jihadism.”

<sup>66</sup> Richard C. Baffa, Nathan Vest, Wing Yi Chan, and Abby Fanlo, “Defining and Understanding the Next Generation of Salafi-Jihadis,” *Perspectives*, PE-341-ODNI (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, August 2019), <https://doi.org/10.7249/PE341>.

<sup>67</sup> Pierre Bousset, “COVID-19, Jihadism and the Challenge of a Pandemic,” Note de La FRS (Foundation for Strategic Research, July 2020), <https://www.frstrategie.org/en/publications/notes/covid-19-jihadism-and-challenge-pandemic-2020>.

<sup>68</sup> Bousset, “COVID-19, Jihadism and the Challenge of a Pandemic;” Norlen, “The Impact of COVID-19 on Salafi-Jihadi Terrorism.”

<sup>69</sup> Sumit Kumar Singh, “Terrorist Groups Using COVID-19 to Reinforce Power and Influence, Says Interpol,” *IANS English*, December 23, 2020, [www.siasat.com/terrorist-groups-using-covid-19-to-reinforce-power-and-influence-says-interpol-2051313](http://www.siasat.com/terrorist-groups-using-covid-19-to-reinforce-power-and-influence-says-interpol-2051313); “Pro-IS Magazine Calls for Attacks in India,” *BBC Monitoring*, March 18, 2021, accessed April 7, 2021, <https://monitoring.bbc.co.uk/product/c202fzrp>.

<sup>70</sup> Norlen, “The Impact of COVID-19 on Salafi-Jihadi Terrorism.”

indicate that the group is looking for a “way out” and might be open to dialogue and negotiation.<sup>71</sup> Recently, the leader of al-Qaeda affiliated Hayat Tahrir ash-Sham, Abu Mohammed al-Golani, surprised the Salafi-Jihadi world by meeting with the American journalist Chris Martin. He explained his intention to establish a political party that will have a role in the future of Syria and that his efforts deserve international respect.<sup>72</sup> According to one Idlib activist:

“[Golani] broke all stereotypes about the leaders of jihadi organizations, and he wants to show openness to the world. At this stage of the Syrian revolution, a military solution to the Syrian crisis has become unlikely, as neither the regime nor the factions is capable of resolving it militarily, meaning a political solution is inevitable.”<sup>73</sup>

In essence, al-Golani is reframing the group’s goals from apocalyptic to “strategic,” claiming that HTS differs from other Salafi-Jihadi groups because of their strength, popular support, and willingness to engage the West. Most likely a calculated step, it again demonstrates the adaptability of

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<sup>71</sup> I William Zartman, “‘Ripeness’: The Importance of Timing in Negotiation and Conflict Resolution,” *E-International Relations* (blog), December 20, 2008, <https://www.e-ir.info/2008/12/20/ripeness-the-importance-of-timing-in-negotiation-and-conflict-resolution>.

<sup>72</sup> Sultan al-Kanj, “HTS Leader Shocks Popular Base after Interview with Western Journalist,” *Al Monitor: The Pulse of the Middle East*, February 5, 2021, [www.al-monitor.com/originals/2021/02/syria-hts-leader-picture-suit-western-media-opposition.html](http://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2021/02/syria-hts-leader-picture-suit-western-media-opposition.html); “That’s Why Al-Julani Was Interviewed by Western Journalists,” *Jusoor for Studies*, February 8, 2021, <https://jusoor.co/details/That%27s%20why%20Al-Julani%20was%20interviewed%20by%20Western%20journalists/841/en>; Rami Jameel, “HTS Leader Al-Julani’s New Strategy in Northwestern Syria,” *The Jamestown Foundation*, October 13, 2020, <https://jamestown.org/program/hts-leader-al-julanis-new-strategy-in-northwestern-syria>; Priyanka Boghani, “Syrian Militant and Former Al Qaeda Leader Seeks Wider Acceptance in First Interview With U.S. Journalist,” *Frontline*, April 2, 2021, [www.pbs.org/wgbh/frontline/article/abu-mohammad-al-jolani-interview-hayat-tahrir-al-sham-syria-al-qaeda](http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/frontline/article/abu-mohammad-al-jolani-interview-hayat-tahrir-al-sham-syria-al-qaeda); “Hay’at Tahrir Al-Sham Comments on Julani, Smith Picture,” *The Syrian Observer* (blog), February 5, 2021, <https://syrianobserver.com/news/63599/hayat-tahrir-al-sham-comments-on-julani-smith-picture.html>; “In an Issue Headlined by Its Deadly Operation in Salahuddin, IS Focuses Naba 275 Editorial on Dire Situation Faced by Iraqi Government,” *SITE Intelligence Group*, February 26, 2021, <https://ent.siteintelgroup.com/Statements/in-an-issue-headlined-by-its-deadly-operation-in-salahuddin-is-focuses-naba-275-editorial-on-dire-situation-faced-by-iraqi-government.html>.

<sup>73</sup> al-Kanj, “HTS Leader Shocks Popular Base after Interview with Western Journalist”; Jerome Drevon and Patrick Haenni, “How Global Jihad Relocalises and Where It Leads. The Case of HTS, the Former AQ Franchise in Syria,” Robert Schuman Centre for Advanced Studies Research Paper No. RSCAS 2021/08, January 2021, <https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.3796931>.

the Salafi-Jihadi interpretation of jihad and its flexibility.<sup>74</sup> Even apocalyptic ideology can be re-interpreted when circumstances change and when political options are constrained.<sup>75</sup>

## Geographic Shift

The spread of the Salafi-Jihadi doctrine globally has always been a central strategy for both al-Qaeda and ISIS and picked up significantly as the groups lost their foothold in Iraq and Syria.<sup>76</sup> COVID-19 further shifted both group's strategies heavily in favor of strengthening their network of global affiliates, as fear and uncertainty during the early months of the pandemic and the closing of borders led to intensified militant nationalism along pre-existing sectarian lines in many multi-ethnic states. Grievances of Muslim minorities in regions where the Salafi-Jihadi groups had little traction in the past now presented new opportunities. As governments scapegoated ethnic and religious minorities, both groups stepped up their social media efforts to foment grievances among targeted minorities in countries and provinces like India, Kashmir, Xinjiang, and the Philippines.<sup>77</sup>

This strategy has already had significant security implications. ISIS mobilization and creative use of social media have made noticeable inroads in Southeast Asia, where some of the world's oldest and most active Islamist organizations were already well established.<sup>78</sup> Calls by Asian ISIS-affiliated groups, including in the Philippines, Malaysia, Indonesia, and the Maldives, to exploit the COVID-19 chaos to wage Jihad led to several attacks in

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<sup>74</sup> Djalil Lounas demonstrates similar flexibility in Al-Qaeda strategies in Tunisia and Algeria. Lounas, "La mouvance Djihadiste et le Hirak en Algérie," 42-44.

<sup>75</sup> Norlen, "The Impact of COVID-19 on Salafi-Jihadi Terrorism."

<sup>76</sup> Yaroslav Trofimov, "Faraway ISIS Branches Grow as 'Caliphate' Fades in Syria and Iraq," *The Wall Street Journal*, May 17, 2018, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/faraway-isis-branches-grow-as-caliphate-fades-in-syria-and-iraq-1526558401>.

<sup>77</sup> Samar Halarakar, "Coronavirus Is Proving to Be Another Excuse to Marginalise India's Muslims," *Quartz*, April 13, 2020, accessed June 2, 2021, <https://qz.com/india/1836768/coronavirus-is-another-excuse-to-marginalise-indias-muslims>; Zainul Abid, "Analysis: Jihadists Step up Efforts to Exploit India Sectarian Violence," *BBC Monitoring*, March 5, 2020, April 7, 2021, <https://monitoring.bbc.co.uk/product/c201iep2>.

<sup>78</sup> Samuel Henkin, Marcus A. Boyd, and Adam Martin, "Southeast Asia after the Caliphate: Identifying Spatial Trends in Terrorism and Radicalization in Malaysia," *Statistics, Politics and Policy* 11, no. 2 (December 2020): 139-65, <https://doi.org/10.1515/spp-2020-0001>.

those countries in early 2020.<sup>79</sup> In February 2020, the 221<sup>st</sup> issue of ISIS al-Naba' newsletter dedicated a whole page to India's ethnic tensions and, later the same month, the pro-ISIS group *Jundul Khilafah* published its first issue of al-Hind, a journal focusing on the marginalization of Indian Muslims.<sup>80</sup> However, despite the anti-Islamic rhetoric of the current Modi government, Muslims in India are still reluctant to adopt radical Islamic ideologies. Indeed, most Asians find the ISIS-brand of Salafi-Jihadi doctrine abhorrent, and analysts claim that recruitment in Southeast Asia still primarily focuses on finding volunteers for the Khorasan chapter.<sup>81</sup>

Thus, conflict and insurgency continue to be the main drivers for terrorism in Asia, both as a source for grievances and a sanctuary for terrorist groups. Afghanistan already accounted for 41 percent of the world's deaths from terrorism globally in 2019. The Taliban was responsible for 87 percent of those fatalities, with the Khorasan chapter of the Islamic State coming in second.<sup>82</sup> Despite a 22 percent drop in deaths from terrorism in 2019, the country saw an increasing number of attacks targeting civilians after the 2020 Doha agreement.<sup>83</sup> The UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) reported that this trend continued in the first half of 2021, when more than 124 Afghan civilians were killed and 315 were wounded in Islamic State attacks.<sup>84</sup> This was a 45 percent increase compared with the same period in 2020. The situation was compounded by a parallel rise in

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<sup>79</sup> "Global Jihadist Response to COVID-19 Pandemic," SITE Intelligence Special Report (SITE Intelligence Group, March 24, 2020), accessed April 9, 2021, <https://ent.siteintelgroup.com/inSITE-on-Bioterrorism-Public-Health/global-jihadist-response-to-covid-19-pandemic-forthcoming.html>; Joseph Hincks, "With the World Busy Fighting COVID-19, Could ISIS Mount a Resurgence?" *Time*, April 29, 2020, accessed June 2, 2021, <https://time.com/5828630/isis-coronavirus>.

<sup>80</sup> *Voice of Hind*, Issue 1, Al-Qitaal Media Center, February 24, 2020.

<sup>81</sup> Amarnath Amarasingam and Shweta Desai, "ISIS in South Asia: Struggle for Survival Beyond 'Khorasan,'" Newlines Institute for Strategy and Policy, July 29, 2020, <https://newlinesinstitute.org/isis/isis-in-south-asia-struggle-for-survival-beyond-khorasan>.

<sup>82</sup> Institute for Economics and Peace, "Global Terrorism Index 2020."

<sup>83</sup> Patricia Gossman, "Attacks Targeting Afghan Civilians Spread Terror," *Human Rights Watch*, February 23, 2021, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2021/02/23/attacks-targeting-afghan-civilians-spread-terror>.

<sup>84</sup> United Nations, General Assembly, Security Council, "The Situation in Afghanistan and Its Implications for International Peace and Security," Report of the Secretary General A/75/1010-S/2021/759, September 2, 2021, [https://unama.unmissions.org/sites/default/files/sg\\_report\\_on\\_afghanistan\\_september\\_2021.pdf](https://unama.unmissions.org/sites/default/files/sg_report_on_afghanistan_september_2021.pdf).

conflict-related casualties and a worsened humanitarian crisis as a result of COVID-19.<sup>85</sup>

A continued decline in the security situation leaves the country extremely vulnerable to exploitation from a variety of Salafi-Jihadi groups. While ISIS-K has visibly strengthened since August 2021, there is also evidence that other groups, including Al-Qaeda, are already established in some provinces. Largely tolerated by the Taliban, the groups often work with local leadership and clan structures under the guise of charity or education.<sup>86</sup>

Similar conditions exist in other vulnerable regions of the world, especially Sub-Saharan Africa, where terrorism increased significantly in 2019.<sup>87</sup> During the early phases of the pandemic, attacks attributed to ISIS- and Al-Qaeda-affiliated groups across the Sahel (including Al-Shabaab in Somalia and Jamaat al Islam al-Muslimeen) rose, as did social media activity related to these groups.<sup>88</sup> However, since the release of the GTI numbers in January 2020, the events from Nigeria, Somalia, and the Democratic Republic of Congo were largely eclipsed by news on the African East Coast. The violence in Mozambique by the ISIS affiliate Ansar Al-Sunna (ASWJ) rose dramatically during 2021 and also threatened Southern Tanzania.<sup>89</sup>

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<sup>85</sup> "Afghanistan: Civilians Targeted Amid Peace Talks," *Human Rights Watch*, January 13, 2021, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2021/01/13/afghanistan-civilians-targeted-amid-peace-talks>.

<sup>86</sup> Expert assessment during a Counterterrorism community of interest event, "The Taliban Return and the Impact on Terrorism in Afghanistan and the Region," The George Marshall Center, 19-21 January, 2022.

<sup>87</sup> Three out of ten of the most terrorism-affected countries in 2019 were in Africa. Institute for Economics and Peace, "Global Terrorism Index 2020."

<sup>88</sup> Julie Coleman, "The Impact of Coronavirus on Terrorism in the Sahel" (The Hague: International Centre for Counter-Terrorism, April 16, 2020), <https://icct.nl/publication/the-impact-of-coronavirus-on-terrorism-in-the-sahel>; "Contending with ISIS in the Time of Coronavirus" (International Crisis Group, March 31, 2020), <https://d2071andvip0wj.cloudfront.net/contending-with-isis-31iii20.pdf>; Abu-Bakarr Jalloh, "Increased Terror Attacks in Africa amid Coronavirus Pandemic," *Deutsche Welle*, September 4, 2020, <https://www.dw.com/en/increased-terror-attacks-in-africa-amid-coronavirus-pandemic/a-53066398>.

<sup>89</sup> James Barnett, "A Salafi-Jihadi Insurgency Could Spread to Tanzania," *Critical Threats*, November 19, 2019, [www.criticalthreats.org/analysis/a-salafi-jihadi-insurgency-could-spread-to-tanzania](http://www.criticalthreats.org/analysis/a-salafi-jihadi-insurgency-could-spread-to-tanzania); Declan Walsh, "ISIS, With Beheadings, Intensifies Attacks in Mozambique," *The New York Times*, November 12, 2020, A10; "US Trains Mozambican Troops on Counter Insurgency," *BBC Monitoring*, March 16, 2021, accessed April

There is reason to question the nature of the connection between the Sahel affiliates and the central Al-Qaeda and the ISIS core, as African Muslim extremist groups are often driven by opportunism and reach for the doctrine that can best serve their needs for mobilization and recruitment. Adopting the ISIS or Al-Qaeda names may be more akin to “franchising” than an actual spread of those groups into the region. For instance, while there is some evidence that ISIS operators have shared knowledge and tactical support with the group in Mozambique, there is still scant evidence that there has been direct tactical or financial support from ISIS central.<sup>90</sup>

Regardless, the rising insecurities and political polarization created by the pandemic in fragile and/or conflict-affected countries will exacerbate risk factors for terrorism and extremism in already vulnerable societies, and create, what some scholars call, an “Instability-terrorism-crime nexus.” Schumacher and Schraeder explain that instability leads to terrorism because it gives groups the opportunity to organize, recruit, and accumulate tactical skills and knowledge.<sup>91</sup> As the Salafi-Jihadi ideology and doctrine become “normalized” across both the Sahel and East Africa, more Muslim insurgents and extremists might reach for it because of its benefits for mobilization and recruitment.

### Exacerbated Drivers for Radicalization

The Salafi-Jihadi “wave” came at the end of a long struggle in the Arab world to rid itself of the tyrants who rose to power at the helm of the oil-based world order. Instead, democratic hopes were crushed in the name of counterterrorism, and the threat became self-fulfilling. Salafi-Jihadi ideology justified the use of the military against civilian targets, and the terrorist groups rose to the challenge. The Islamic State and the allure of the apoca-

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12, 2021, <https://monitoring.bbc.co.uk/product/c202fs31>; Quinn, “From Separatism to Salafism: Militancy on the Swahili Coast;” Jason Burke, “Islamist Group Kills 52 in ‘Cruel and Diabolical’ Mozambique Massacre,” *The Guardian*, April 22, 2020, [www.theguardian.com/world/2020/apr/22/islamist-group-kills-52-in-cruel-and-diabolical-mozambique-massacre](http://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/apr/22/islamist-group-kills-52-in-cruel-and-diabolical-mozambique-massacre).

<sup>90</sup> Thomas Harding, “Revealed: ISIS Central Command’s Links to Mozambique and Terror across Africa,” *The National News*, April 11, 2021, [www.thenationalnews.com/world/africa/revealed-isis-central-command-s-links-to-mozambique-and-terror-across-africa-1.1200194](http://www.thenationalnews.com/world/africa/revealed-isis-central-command-s-links-to-mozambique-and-terror-across-africa-1.1200194).

<sup>91</sup> Schumacher and Schraeder, “Does Domestic Political Instability Foster Terrorism?”

lyptic promise of the Caliphate have to be understood against those developments. However, a vacuum of leadership may arise in the wake of COVID-19 if states remain unresponsive to their citizens and use militarized responses to political dissent.

When the Sudanese rose up against their government in December 2018 to protest rising bread prices, some analysts claimed that history was repeating itself. Similar protests also took place across the region, including in Algeria, Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, and Iraq. The triggers for these protests were similar to those that led to the Arab Spring when people demonstrated against deteriorating living conditions, failing economies, and corrupt political systems that favor a small elite at the expense of the masses.<sup>92</sup> Ten years after the Arab Spring, the region is now worse than it was on major economic development indicators, including poverty, inequality, political freedom, and health. While the drop in oil prices, pandemic containment measures, and a halt in international tourism have affected all MENA countries, the largest shocks will be felt in countries that are already fragile and/or in conflict. The debt-to-GDP ratio has risen to 95 % on average, and some countries, such as Lebanon, will have little reserves to provide the most basic needs of their citizens.<sup>93</sup> Huge impacts on the informal economy, as well as on remittances from citizens working in the Gulf, are straining fragile economies further.<sup>94</sup>

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<sup>92</sup> "Middle East & North Africa: Corruption Continues as Institutions and Political Rights Weaken," *Transparency International*, January 29, 2019, [www.transparency.org/en/news/regional-analysis-mena](http://www.transparency.org/en/news/regional-analysis-mena).

<sup>93</sup> Kareem Chehayeb, "Opinion: Lebanon Was on Life Support. Now It's in Free Fall," *The Washington Post*, December 29, 2020, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2020/12/29/lebanon-explosion-pandemic-economy-crisis/>; Reuters Staff, "Lebanese Banks Raise USD Withdrawal Rate to 3,850 Pounds/Dollar," *Reuters*, June 29, 2020, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-lebanon-crisis-banks-idUSKBN2401WS>.

<sup>94</sup> Bessma Momani, "The Impact of Low Oil Prices and COVID-19 on Arab Economies," *Arab Center Washington DC*, May 4, 2020, [http://arabcenterdc.org/policy\\_analyses/the-impact-of-low-oil-prices-and-covid-19-on-arab-economies](http://arabcenterdc.org/policy_analyses/the-impact-of-low-oil-prices-and-covid-19-on-arab-economies); "COVID-19 Crisis Response in MENA Countries," *OECD*, November 6, 2020, [www.oecd.org/coronavirus/policy-responses/covid-19-crisis-response-in-mena-countries-4b366396](http://www.oecd.org/coronavirus/policy-responses/covid-19-crisis-response-in-mena-countries-4b366396); Zvi Bar'el, "Coronavirus Economic Impact Could Decimate the Middle East," *Haaretz.com*, April 2, 2020, <https://www.haaretz.com/middle-east-news/.premium-economic-impact-of-coronavirus-could-decimate-the-middle-east-1.8731691>.

Hence, COVID-19 may create renewed instability in fragile and conflict-affected states, both in the MENA region and elsewhere, as new risk factors for violence are either poorly understood or overlooked. While fragility is a condition linked to conflict and violence, the absence of a registered conflict does not mean that a country is not vulnerable. Fragility is an accumulation of risk factors (including political, economic, and social insecurity) and the resilience of a country to such risks. There is also evidence that violence has shifted in scope from transnational and national to more local and regional – often between factions – while still utilizing transnational networks.<sup>95</sup> An OECD study found that there is tremendous subnational variation in conflict dynamics and patterns globally, and countries are often affected by multiple, different forms of conflict and violence simultaneously.<sup>96</sup> Salafi-Jihadi groups have become experts at exploiting local grievances and needs in communities in ungoverned spaces or where public services are lacking. The promise of spiritual rewards and an actual salary is often hard for young men to resist, especially given the powerful ideological and religious narratives that Salafi-Jihadi groups use to justify violence.

The legacy of ISIS and Al-Qaeda will be their clever use of modern technology to disseminate a uniquely Salafi-Jihadi understanding of Islamic history and doctrine, which other groups are now free to adopt and adapt to their own circumstances. While Salafi-Jihadi groups in the Levant and MENA may be on the decline, the accelerated process of “franchising” by which Salafi-Jihadi ideology becomes the preferred doctrine for many Muslim militant groups in other parts of the world has been quite alarming.<sup>97</sup> Even in cases where the choice of affiliation is more opportunistic than religious, it points to the “normalization” of terrorist violence in regional and domestic conflicts.

Such affiliations have allowed the main arms of ISIS and Al-Qaeda to maintain their propaganda and focus on making their online operations

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<sup>95</sup> “States of Fragility 2016: Understanding Violence,” *OECD*, November 30, 2016, <https://www.oecd.org/dac/conflict-fragility-resilience/publications/OECD%20States%20of%20Fragility%202016.pdf>.

<sup>96</sup> “States of Fragility 2016.”

<sup>97</sup> Toft, “Getting Religion? The Puzzling Case of Islam and Civil War”; Juergensmeyer, *Terror in the Mind of God*; Hoffman, *Inside Terrorism*; Trofimov, “Faraway ISIS Branches Grow as ‘Caliphate’ Fades in Syria and Iraq.”

more complex and sophisticated.<sup>98</sup> Early evidence in the first year of the pandemic also showed that terrorist groups were stepping up their efforts to reinforce power and influence online by reaching out to the audience held captive by COVID-related restrictions. Analysts worried that such efforts could lead to a surge in attacks once COVID-19 restrictions are lifted, but also about the possible convergence between terrorist groups and organized crime, in effect creating a cyber and crime-terror axis.<sup>99</sup> With increased levels of political insecurity and economic instability also in the West, the use of new technologies and networks may lead to heightened opportunities for violent extremism and radicalization to thrive.

## Conclusion

Since the Arab Spring, half of all newly emerged conflicts worldwide are in the Middle East, and half of the world's terrorism events are staged in the Middle East.<sup>100</sup> This analysis has shown that while cultural and historical factors at play make Arab Muslim countries more susceptible to Salafi-Jihadi terrorist ideologies, the structural and political drivers that make societies and communities more vulnerable to terrorist radicalization and recruitment are not unique to the Middle East. Because of the strong correlation between conflict and terrorism, we should be looking carefully at developments in fragile states with Muslim-majority populations, both indications that Salafi-Jihadi ideology might find a future foothold. However, as argued above, Salafi-Jihadi ideology is not alone in providing justification for violence or sanctifying sacrifice for a religious cause. Religious nationalist and ethnic supremacist ideologies that condone violence in defense of a cause are becoming more common with the global rise of polarization and fragility.

The MENA countries emerging from civil wars have an almost insurmountable obstacle ahead, compounded by the twin challenges of authori-

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<sup>98</sup> UN Security Council, "ISIL Must Be Defeated in Cyberspace, Under-Secretary-General Tells Security Council, as Terrorist Group Takes Advantage of Pandemic-Related Disruptions," Security Council Press Release SC/14433, February 10, 2021, [www.un.org/press/en/2021/sc14433.doc.htm](http://www.un.org/press/en/2021/sc14433.doc.htm).

<sup>99</sup> Jose Sousa-Santos, "COVID-19 and the Crime-Terror Nexus in the Cyber Domain," *The Strategist*, April 24, 2020, <https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/covid-19-and-the-crime-terror-nexus-in-the-cyber-domain>.

<sup>100</sup> Toft, "Getting Religion Right in Civil Wars."

tarianism and sectarianism. In order to counter societal vulnerabilities, socio-economic inequalities need to be reduced, and political representation and transparency ensured. In addition, a whole generation of young people who might have suffered from, or participated in, Salafi-Jihadi terrorism have to be rehabilitated and re-integrated. Unfortunately, government elites have become increasingly detached from the suffering of their citizens, allowing grievances to fester and legitimate demands to remain unmet while sectarian divides aggravate efforts to deal with the past and “rehabilitate” former fighters back to society. In Iraq, almost anyone who is a Sunni is suspicious of having been an ISIS member, as is anyone who complains about the system; forced confessions after gruesome torture often lead to automatic death sentences.<sup>101</sup>

While the main burden from global terrorism is felt by countries that are already suffering from conflict, this analysis suggests that even the most stable societies today may be vulnerable. While single cases of transnational terrorism in Western societies tend to be exceptions, the risk factors for “home-grown” terrorism and violent extremism are also rising in the industrialized world. The pandemic has accelerated the global decline of some of the most significant indicators for political stability,<sup>102</sup> worsening political polarization, fragility, and strife, which may explain why we are witnessing new global patterns of violence also in Western countries that have traditionally been more stable.

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<sup>101</sup> Vera Mironova, “Iraq’s Broken Justice System for Islamic State Fighters,” *Lawfare* (blog), July 24, 2020, <https://www.lawfareblog.com/iraqs-broken-justice-system-islamic-state-fighters>.

<sup>102</sup> Institute for Economics and Peace, “Global Peace Index 2020.”

# Police Services in Kyrgyzstan during the COVID-19 Emergency

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**Abstract:** This article presents the results of a field study exploring the socio-psychological conditions police officers experienced during the state of emergency declared in Kyrgyzstan due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Furthermore, it looked at police officers' job satisfaction and perceived public satisfaction with the police service provided during the nationwide lockdown. The study included an online self-reporting survey of 326 police officers across the country from October-December 2020. The research assessed perceived worries of police officers about self-infection and infection of family members with the coronavirus as a result of mandatory services provided during the pandemic. Additionally, the study aimed at predicting individual preventive measures to decrease the risk of infection. The results indicate that police officers were affected largely by the fear of the pandemic. In particular, they worried intensely about self-infection, infection of family members, temporary relocation of family members, and temporary self-relocation. However, police officers were found to experience a higher degree of satisfaction with their own service during the lockdown. Similarly, police officers highlighted a high degree of perceived public satisfaction with their service during the same period. The study recommends that the Government of the Kyrgyz Republic and the Ministry of Internal affairs develop state measures to prevent the risk of infection among police officers performing mandatory services during the pandemic. In addition, the protection of family members of officers from viral infection should be of primary concern.

**Keywords:** COVID-19, pandemic, emergency, police force

## Introduction

The worldwide spread of COVID-19 infection also captured Kyrgyzstan during the first quarter of 2020. In some regions of the country, the State of Emergency (SE) was declared while the regime of Emergency Situation (ES) was in function nationwide to prevent further contamination with the coronavirus. In later months, during the second wave of the pandemic, Kyrgyzstan became one of the top countries in terms of death caused by confirmed COVID-19. Furthermore, the announced rates of contamina-

tion and death were criticized as not reflecting the actual statistics at that time.<sup>1</sup>

Besides the medical personnel, law enforcement agencies extended their hands to provide public order and safety during the pandemic in the country. Around 3,000 police officers were deployed to checkpoints and foot and auto patrols in regions where SE was declared. Osh, Bishkek, and Jalal-Abad had the highest number of deployed personnel, with around 800, 700, and 450, respectively. Overall, 6,500 police officers provided public order and public safety services across the country, including in areas with a declared emergency situation.<sup>2</sup> Approximately 330 police vehicles were deployed to auto patrols during the pandemic. Thus, being on the frontline of the struggle against COVID-19, Kyrgyz police officers were exposed to a high risk of COVID infection. Consequently, they may have served at the same time as a source of infection for their family members, colleagues, and other close people. This study aimed to understand the fear of infection among police officers and their perceived worries about infection of family members (spouse, children, parents) due to their mandatory service during the pandemic. Moreover, the research looked at the actual decisions and actions taken by police officers individually to decrease the level of infection of their family members, including temporary relocation of families and self-relocation to a place allowing them to stay in separation from the family.

The worldwide COVID-19 pandemic is not the first event when law enforcement officers have experienced a fear of infection with highly contagious and deadly diseases. Fear of disease and officers' exposure to infectious diseases have been subjects of various studies exploring the impact of officers' safety concerns at the workplace on their job performance, job satisfaction, and job stress. Correctional officers, among other law enforcement agencies, are more exposed to HIV/AIDS, hepatitis, and tuber-

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<sup>1</sup> Mihael Bushuiev, "Coronavirus in Kyrgyzstan: The Figures Do Not Reflect the True Scale of the Tragedy," *Deutsche Welle (DW)*, August 6, 2020, <https://p.dw.com/p/3gQwT> – in Russian.

<sup>2</sup> Borubek Kudayarov, "More Than 6.5 thousand MOI Officers Were Involved during the Emergency," *Kaktus media*, March 22, 2020, [https://kaktus.media/doc/408691\\_vo\\_vremia\\_rejima\\_chs\\_zadeystvovany\\_bolee\\_65\\_tysiachi\\_sotrydnikov\\_mvd.html](https://kaktus.media/doc/408691_vo_vremia_rejima_chs_zadeystvovany_bolee_65_tysiachi_sotrydnikov_mvd.html) – in Russian.

culosis.<sup>3</sup> Russian scholars O. Khoreva, E. Khoreva, and L. Basova pointed out that prisons of the Russian Federation constitute an epicenter of tuberculosis (TB), threatening the staff of correctional facilities in the first place.<sup>4</sup> American researchers have drawn a similar picture about the increasing prison population with TB and hepatitis in the US. Lambert and colleagues<sup>5</sup> conducted a national-level analysis of TB infections in jails from 2002 to 2013 using the National Tuberculosis Surveillance System data. They concluded that the rate of TB infections both among prison employees and inmates was increasing. Additionally, a higher portion of those prison employees infected with TB were US-born and males. Hepatitis C is another significant threat to correctional officers in American prisons. Studies show that almost half of the prison population nationwide in the US has been infected with hepatitis C.<sup>6</sup> Journalists have expressed a similar concern about uncontrolled TB infections among inmates in Kyrgyzstan. According to Nurabaev,<sup>7</sup> during the early 2000s, incarceration was equal to sentencing inmates to the death penalty due to increasing TB infections among convicts. TB infection reached epidemic levels among prisoners in Kyrgyzstan and led to the opening of three hospitals with approximately 1,500 inmates in each receiving medical treatment.<sup>8</sup>

Previous studies tried to measure the fear of diseases and their influence on officers' level of stress and job satisfaction. The fear of disease and exposure to contagious diseases were found to be mutually exclusive with job satisfaction and positively related to job stress.<sup>9</sup> Another significant out-

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<sup>3</sup> Deborah J. Hartley, Mario A. Davila, James W. Marquart, and Janet L. Mullings, "Fear is a Disease: The Impact of Fear and Exposure to Infectious Disease on Correctional Officer Job Stress and Satisfaction," *American Journal of Criminal Justice* 38, no. 2 (2013): 323-340, <http://doi.org/10.1007/s12103-012-9175-1>.

<sup>4</sup> O.V. Khoreva, E.A. Khoreva, and L.A. Basova, "Tuberculosis in Prisons," *International Journal of Experimental Education*, no. 1 (2017), 124.

<sup>5</sup> Lauren A. Lambert, Lori R. Armstrong, Mark N. Lobato, Christine Ho, Anne Marie France, and Maryam B. Haddad, "Tuberculosis in Jails and Prisons: United States, 2002–2013," *American Journal of Public Health* 106, no.12 (2016): 2231-2237, <https://dx.doi.org/10.2105/AJPH.2016.303423>.

<sup>6</sup> L. Mathews, "Officers Personal safety," *Corrections Forum* 10, no. 2 (2001): 28-29.

<sup>7</sup> Yevgeni Nurabaev, "Kyrgyz Prisons Hit by TB: Tuberculosis Has Reached Epidemic Proportions in Kyrgyz Prisons," *Institute for War & Peace Reporting (Global voices – Central Asia)*, February 21, 2005, <https://iwpr.net/global-voices/kyrgyz-prisons-hit-tb>.

<sup>8</sup> "The State Correctional Facilities Announced Activities to Counter TB Among Prisoners," *Kabar.kg*, March 22, 2019 – in Russian.

<sup>9</sup> Hartley et al., "Fear is a Disease: The Impact of Fear and Exposure."

come of the study indicating how diseases lead to fear was shared by Epstein and co-workers,<sup>10</sup> who argue that individuals gain fear through their interactions with three types of infected people: infected with a disease (*sick person*), infected with the fear of infection (*feared but not infected*), and infected with both disease and fear of infection (*sick and feared*). Another study explored the perceived risk of contracting HIV/AIDS and revealed that the correctional officers' knowledge about diseases determines their level of perceived risk and fear of disease. In other words, a lack of knowledge about HIV/AIDS and the way of possible infection is more likely to increase correctional officers' perceived risk and fear of infection.<sup>11</sup>

Unfortunately, no studies have been found focusing on the fear of disease among police officers due to their duties. An explanation for this might be the nature of police services which do not continuously expose the police officers to high-risk populations with contagious diseases, as is the case in prisons and various correctional facilities. Thus, it was challenging to discuss this study and compare its outcomes with the findings of previous studies.

This article utilizes descriptive analysis to explain the fear of infection with the disease among police officers and their perceived job self-satisfaction and perceived public satisfaction with the service provided by the police during the pandemic in Kyrgyzstan. Outcomes are described by the rates of answers given by respondents.

## Methodology

The study deployed a self-reporting survey of police officers and was administered online. A total of 326 police officers across the country – the seven regions and the capital city of Bishkek – responded online. It includes questions on demographics (*gender, age, education, ethnicity, region, house-*

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<sup>10</sup> Joshua M. Epstein, Jon Parker, Derek Cummings, and Ross A. Hammond, "Coupled Contagion Dynamics of Fear and Disease: Mathematical and Computational Explorations," *PLoS One* 3, no. 12 (2008): e3955, <http://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0003955>.

<sup>11</sup> Leanne Fiftal Alarid and James W. Marquart, "Officer Perceptions of Risk of Contracting HIV/AIDS in Prison: A Two-State Comparison," *The Prison Journal* 89 no. 4 (2009): 440-459, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0032885509349571>.

*hold information*), worries about getting infected with COVID-19 and a follow-on infection of their family members, actual infections with COVID-19, and individual measures taken by police officers to decrease the likelihood of infecting family members (*either relocating the family temporarily to another place or moving out temporarily from the house*). The analysis was limited to a descriptive explanation of the rates of answers given by respondents to each question. Thus, this study does not aim to find causal relationships between factors such as *fear of infection* and *job satisfaction*. A follow-on study will analyze some cause-effect relationships.

A Google Class platform was used to administer the online survey. With the assistance of colleagues, a link to the survey was forwarded to WhatsApp groups of police officers working in cities, regions, and districts across the country. Thus, the survey link was forwarded to approximately 600-700 police officers. However, many of the officers hesitated to answer or approached the survey with a certain prejudice. The response rate was evaluated as low, which is the study's main limitation.

## Results

### *Demographics*

With the set of demographic questions, we aimed at relating respondents' differences to fear of COVID-19 infection. The study hypothesizes that police officers – if they are female, of older age, with higher education, Kyrgyz nationals, serving at checkpoints or in bigger cities (Bishkek, Osh), with bigger families or living together with parents – are more likely to be worried about infection with COVID-19 and to have a lower degree of job self-satisfaction and perceived public satisfaction with the police services during the pandemic.

Table 1. Demographics.

Factors	Answers/Indicators									
	Gender	Male	Female	Total						
286 87.7%		40 12.3%	326 100%							
Age	18-25	26-35	36-45	46 +	Missing	Total	No Answer			
	50 15.8%	158 50%	88 27.8%	19 6%	1 0.3%	317 100%	6			
Ethnicity	Kyrgyz	Kazakh	Uzbek	Azerb.	Dungan	Tatar	German	Total		
	307 97%	3 0.9%	2 0.6%	1 0.31%	1 0.31%	1 0.31%	1 0.31%	317 100%		
Education	High School	Vocational School	Bachelor	Master's	Ph.D.	Other	Total			
	17 5.2%	20 6.1%	130 40%	136 41.7%	15 4.6%	8 2.5%	326 100%			
Regions	Bishkek	Osh	Batken	Chui	Jalal-Abad	Naryn	Talas	Issyk-Kul	Total	
	125 38.3%	36 11.1%	11 3.4%	42 13%	54 16.7%	19 5.8%	11 3.4%	28 8.6%	326 100%	
# of persons in family	1-4	5-6	7-8	9+	Total					
	119 36.5%	136 41.7%	55 17%	16 5%	326 100%					
# of kids age ≤ 5	No kids	1 kid	2 kids	3 kids	4-5 kids	Total				
	107 32.8%	97 29.8%	94 28.8%	24 7.4%	4 1.2%	326 100%				
# of kids 18 ≥ age ≥ 6	No kids	1 kid	2 kids	3 kids	4 kids	5+ kids	Total			
	125 38.3%	75 23%	77 23.6%	29 8.9%	14 4.3%	6 1.8%	326 100%			
Live with parents	Yes	No	Total							
	156 48%	170 52%	326 100%							

To summarize the demographic information – respondents were dominantly male (87.7 %), Kyrgyz (97 %), in the 26-35 age group (50 %), with higher education degrees (Bachelor – 40 %, Master's – 41.5 %), with moderate (5-6 persons – 41.2 %) and small families (1-4 persons – 37 %), mainly from Bishkek (38 %) and living without parents in the household (52 %). Almost half of the respondents (48 %) indicated that their parents live with them, which could increase the level of worries about the likely infection of

parents because the police officers belong to a high-risk group. Please refer to Table 1 for more detailed information about the demographics of the respondents.

### *Fear of COVID-19 (Worries about the Likelihood of Infection)*

Initially, police officers were asked whether or not they performed the duties at checkpoints or patrol during the pandemic. 79 % of officers worked at checkpoints, while the other 21 % did not. These answers are reasonable because a portion of police officers was left in offices to perform administrative and analytical work at various police departments and the central apparatus of the Ministry of Interior. Furthermore, respondents were asked to indicate their perceived worries about self-infection with COVID-19. 37 % indicated that they were worried *very strongly*, 32 % of the officers were *strongly* worried, and 23 % of respondents indicated being *slightly* worried that they might get infected while performing their duties. Another 4 % *were not worried at all*.

Responding to the question about infecting family members (*spouse, children*), 69 % indicated that they were *very strongly* worried, 22 % were *strongly* worried, and 6.2 % were *slightly* worried. The remaining 3 % indicated that they *were not* worried at all. As for transmitting the infection to parents, response rates show that 64 % of respondents indicated they were worried *very strongly*, 22 % were *strongly* worried, and 7 % as *slightly* worried. Another 5.5 % of respondents indicated that they *did not worry at all* about infecting their parents. The latter choice was probably made by police officers who did not live together with their parents during the pandemic, which is likely to decrease the level of worry of police officers about infecting parents. Police officers were also asked how much they worried about the need to temporarily relocate family members (*parents, spouse, and children*) to another place due to the risk of infecting them with the coronavirus. Almost 40 % of respondents indicated that they were worried *very strongly*, 29.4 % worried *strongly*, 13 % were *slightly* worried, another 10.4 % indicated that they *did not worry at all*, and 7 % found the question *difficult to answer*. To compare the perceived worries of police officers about the need for temporary relocation of family members to another place and the actual relocation, police officers were asked whether they temporarily relocated their family members to another place to decrease the likelihood of infection. Almost 28 %

responded positively, 68 % gave a negative answer, and 3.7 % chose OTHER.<sup>12</sup>

In addition, police officers were asked how much they worried about temporarily living in separation from the family so as not to infect family members. 34.6 % of respondents indicated being *very strongly* worried, 28 % were *strongly* worried, and 17 % *slightly* worried. Another 14.4 % *did not* worry at all, and 6 % found the question *difficult to answer*. Further, police officers were asked whether they actually went to a different place so as not to infect their families. This aimed again at revealing differences between perceived worries of police officers about self-relocation and the actual decision to relocate and thus understand how the fear of infection impacted police officers' decision-making. 17.5 % of respondents *always* lived *separately* (temporarily), 17.5 % *most of the time*, 18 % *some time*, and 2.5 % *very rarely*. However, 44.5 % of respondents shared that they *did not live separately* at any time during the pandemic. This could be explained by police officers living alone and not seeing a need for changing their place.

Table 2. Worries about Infection with COVID-19 among Police Officers.

Factors	Indicators					
	Too much	Much	Slightly	Not worried	Difficult to answer	Total
Worried about self-infection	122 37.4%	104 31.9%	75 23%	13 4%	12 3.7%	326 100%
Worried about infecting spouse and children	224 68.7%	71 21.8%	20 6.1%	9 2.8%	2 0.6%	326 100%
Worried about infecting parents	208 63.8%	72 22.1%	22 6.7%	18 5.5%	6 1.8%	326 100%
Worried about relocating the family	131 40.2%	96 29.4%	42 12.9%	34 10.4%	23 7.1%	326 100%

<sup>12</sup> OTHER option can be interpreted in different ways such as either police officer is a single, divorced, or lives separate from the family or he temporarily moved out from home during the pandemic.

Worried about living separately from family	114 34.6%	91 27.9%	55 16.9%	47 14.4%	19 5.8%	326 100%
Actual temporary relocation of family	Yes	No	Other	Total		
	92 28.2%	222 68.1%	12 3.7%	326 100%		
Actual temporary separation from family	All the time	Very often	Some time	Seldom	No	Total
	57 17.5%	57 17.5%	59 18.1%	8 2.5%	145 44.5%	326 100%
Worked at checkpoints	Yes	No	Possibly	Total		
	259 79.4%	67 20.6%	-	326 100%		
Actual infection during the pandemic	98 30.1%	109 33.4%	119 36.5%	326 100%		
Efficiency of personal protection equipment	Absolutely efficient	Efficient	Not efficient	Absolutely inefficient	Difficult to answer	Total
	27 8.3%	68 20.9%	138 42.3%	46 14.1%	47 14.4%	326 100%
Considering resigning from the service	All the time	Very often	Seldom	Did not consider	Difficult to answer	Total
	9 3%	23 7%	21 6.5%	257 79.3%	14 4.3%	324 100%

Police officers were also asked whether they actually got sick with COVID-19 due to their services. 30 % of respondents replied positively (*Yes, I got sick*), 36.5 % indicated that they possibly got sick (*not confirmed*), while 33.4 % responded that they *did not get any* infection.

#### *Police and Public Satisfaction with the Police Service during the State of Emergency*

The survey included questions about police officers' perceptions of their job satisfaction and the public satisfaction with their service during the State of Emergency. The aim was to determine whether the fear of infection with COVID-19 impacted job satisfaction. 55 % of respondents were *very satisfied*, 27 % *satisfied*, 3,4 % *unsatisfied*, and 3.7 % *very unsatisfied*. Another 11 % of police officers found this question difficult to answer. Furthermore, police officers also responded to questions on perceived public satis-

faction with the police service: 40 % – *very satisfied*, 38 % – *satisfied*, 4 % – *unsatisfied*, and 4 % – *very unsatisfied*, while another 11 % found the question difficult to answer. Our assumption was that fear of infection may decrease job self-satisfaction. Contrary to expectations, however, most police officers were satisfied (more than 80 % cumulatively) with their services during the SE. Only 7 % of police officers indicated being either “unsatisfied” or “very unsatisfied.” Moreover, most police officers indicated a greater perceived public satisfaction with the police service during the pandemic. As expected, the police services during the lockdown were appreciated and supported by communities.

Table 3. Perceived Police and Public Satisfaction with Police Service during the SE Due to the COVID-19 Pandemic.

Police job self-satisfaction with own services	Very Satisfied	Satisfied	Difficult to answer	Unsatisfied	Very Unsatisfied	Total
	178 54.6%	88 27%	37 11.3%	11 3.4%	12 3.7%	326 100%
Public satisfaction with police service	130 40%	125 38.3%	45 13.8%	12 3.7%	14 4.3%	326 100%
Public compliance with quarantine requirements (social distance, mask, curfew)	Full Compliance	Compliance	Yes and No	Not Compliance	Fully not compliant	Total
	35 10.7%	57 17.5%	122 37.4%	104 32%	8 2.5%	326 100%
Perceived efficiency of PPE for protection from COVID-19	Fully efficient	Efficient	Difficult to answer	Not efficient	Fully inefficient	Total
	27 8.3%	68 21%	47 14.4%	138 42.3%	46 14%	326 100%
Intention to resign from the service	All the time	Very often	Seldom	Did not consider	Difficult to answer	Total
	9 2.8%	23 7.1%	21 6.4%	259 79.4%	14 4.3%	326 100%

Additionally, police officers were asked to indicate how much the public complied with the quarantine requirements, such as keeping a social distance, wearing a mask, and obeying curfew rules during the SE. As results show, 11 % and 17 % of respondents indicated that the community *fully complied* and *complied* with the epidemiological situation requirements. In contrast, it was reported that people *did not comply* (32 %) and *did not fully comply* (2.5 %) with the rules of the SE. However, the highest rate of the respondents (37 %) indicated that people behaved differently depending on the situation. In general, the police officers assessed the rate of compliance negatively.

Further, the police officers were asked to evaluate the efficiency of all types of personal protection equipment (PPE) provided by the government. Response rates show that only 8% and 21 % of respondents consider the PPE either *fully efficient* or *efficient*, respectively, while 14 % and 42 % reported that PPEs were either *fully inefficient* or *inefficient*. The remaining 14 % of the respondents found the question difficult to answer. In general, 56 % of the police officers perceived PPEs as *inefficient*.

Lastly, police officers were asked whether they considered resigning from the service on their own decision due to the risk of infecting their family members while serving during the pandemic. 79 % of respondents gave a negative answer, while 3 % of police officers think of this *all the time*, 7 % – *very often*, 6.4 % – *seldom*, and 4.3 % found the question *difficult to answer*.

### *Discussion*

The descriptive analysis of worries of police officers about the coronavirus infection demonstrates serious psychological conditions caused by the likelihood of self-infection or infecting family members (*spouse, children, and parents*) due to their mandatory service during the pandemic. Respondents described themselves as *very strongly* and *strongly* worried in response to questions asking respectively about self-infection (69 %), infection of spouse and children (90.5 %), and infection of parents (86 %). Worries about infecting spouses and children were higher among police officers than worries about self-infection and infection of parents. The lower rate of the latter can be explained by the fact that not all police officers live together with their parents. The worries about parents' infection were still higher

(86 %) than worries about self-infection (69 %). This might be explained by the concerns of police officers who limited the visits to their parents in order not to infect them. Additionally, the rate of respondents considering temporary relocation of the family (69.6 %) and self-relocation (62.7 %) was also high. Temporary relocation of the family (e.g., to a village) was the more reasonable option than self-relocation for police officers to keep their families from infection. Thus, the actual temporary relocation of families showed a higher rate (28 %) than self-relocation or living in separation from the family (17.6 %).

The survey found that job satisfaction during the pandemic was high, as rated by almost 82 %, versus 7 % feeling *unsatisfied* or *very unsatisfied*. This was unexpected since the fear of infection might negatively affect workers' job performance, thus generating dissatisfaction and lowering morale. Similarly, the perceived public satisfaction with police services was rated by 78 % as "satisfied" versus 8 % as "unsatisfied." Expectedly, police services during the pandemic were valued, appreciated, and supported by the communities. In general, the fear of infection with COVID-19 among police officers did not negatively impact their job performance and job satisfaction. Furthermore, the number of police officers who intended to resign from the service due to the risk of infection of self and family members was really low, with 80% not considering this option.

Inefficient personal protection equipment provided by the government might have increased the fear of infection with COVID-19 among law enforcement officers. For example, 56.7 % of police officers indicated that the PPE they used during the pandemic was either *inefficient* (42.5 %) or *absolutely inefficient* (14.2 %) for protection from the coronavirus. Furthermore, police officers were highly affected by overwhelming and misleading information circulated on social media on the alleged deterioration of the situation in the country. Moreover, the lack of proper awareness of virus contamination and self-protection increased police officers' worries and risk perception.

Regarding policy implications, the current study recommends that the government provide police officers with adequate guidance and advice to increase the awareness of coronavirus contamination and protection from infections. It also suggests that law enforcement agencies offer proper so-

cio-psychological assistance to police officers to maintain their morale. Government agencies are advised to equip the law enforcement officers with proper PPE, which is likely to serve as a positive tool for preventing negative effects on morale.

### *Policy Recommendations*

As for policy implications and recommendations, the study suggests that the Government of the Kyrgyz Republic and, in particular, the Ministry of Internal Affairs develop state measures to reduce the likelihood of infection of police officers during the mandatory activities performed during the pandemic. Protection of family members from infection should be another main concern of that state. This might include temporary isolation of police officers from their families during deployment and quarantine time after deployment. Furthermore, maximum isolation should be applied for police officers deployed at checkpoints to prevent them from spreading the infection to colleagues. Further, it is suggested to use dedicated transportation for these officers, isolating them from other colleagues. Moreover, police officers might be a source of infection for other citizens they would contact at checkpoints. Thus, to prevent two-way infections between officers and citizens, the government is also advised to provide officers with proper personal protection equipment. Leaflets or brochures might be helpful for police officers working at checkpoints, with instructions and rules for certain required behaviors during contact with citizens. This would increase the awareness of police officers on pandemic contamination and protection from infections. It is nearly impossible to avoid entirely COVID-19 infections the world has been experiencing since 2019. Thus, the study also recommends that the Ministry of Internal Affairs make its hospital more efficient in providing treatment in case of COVID-19 infections of police officers and their family members.

### Conclusion

The presented study explored the fear of infections police officers experienced during the COVID-19 State of Emergency. Police officers involved in mandatory services to maintain public order were found, to a large extent, affected by the pandemic. Officers were worried about infecting themselves and possibly their family members. More than half of the police

officers were also concerned about temporarily relocating themselves or their families to decrease the likelihood of infection. However, very few officers had the opportunity to relocate during the pandemic. Regardless of the fear of self-infection and infecting family members, officers did not intend to resign from the police. Proper social, medical, and logistic assistance by the government to police officers and their families will serve to protect their right to health and life.

#### About the Author

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# The “Garmisch Superspreaderin” – Case Revisited: Legal and Other Considerations

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Abstract: This contribution does not primarily attempt to link the coronavirus with international security studies. Elaborating an alleged superspreader incident in the rather early phase of the pandemic, it focuses instead on the virus' impact on the community level. The article sheds light on the legal difficulties to mitigate COVID-19, politician's crisis communication, and the media's critical role.

Keywords: COVID-19, community impact, crisis communication

## Introduction

On September 13, 2020, Germany's biggest tabloid, *Bild*, headlined: “26-jährige Amerikanerin ist ‘potentielle Killerin’: Superspreaderin in Garmisch-Partenkirchen” (26 year-old [female] American is “potentially” a killer: Superspreader in Garmisch-Partenkirchen).<sup>1</sup> German TV stations sent camera teams to the Bavarian town to broadcast long queues of individuals awaiting COVID-19 testing. They interviewed angry owners of bars that the American visited, although she had been showing symptoms of corona and did not wait for the results after being tested.<sup>2</sup> In parallel, thousands of social media commentaries condemned the woman and demanded harsh consequences. Some political voices joined the chorus and publically called for penalties. The Munich-based public prosecutor's office launched an investigation into whether to charge the American negligently committing bodily harm to those she might have infected.

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<sup>1</sup> H. Kohlmaier and T. Gautier, “Garmisch-Partenkirchen sauer auf die Superspreaderin,” *Bild*, September 13, 2020, [www.bild.de/news/inland/news-inland/superspreaderin-von-garmisch-nach-dem-corona-test-ging-amerikanerin-feiern-72892604.bild.html](http://www.bild.de/news/inland/news-inland/superspreaderin-von-garmisch-nach-dem-corona-test-ging-amerikanerin-feiern-72892604.bild.html); see also: “US-Bürgerin als Superspreaderin in Garmisch,” *Welt*, September 12, 2020, <https://www.welt.de/vermischtes/article215594552/Coronavirus-US-Buergerin-als-Superspreaderin-in-Garmisch.html>.

<sup>2</sup> “‘Superspreaderin’ in Garmisch-Partenkirchen,” *Reuters*, September 13, 2020, [www.reuters.com/video/watch/superspreaderin-in-garmisch-partenkirche-id719057749](http://www.reuters.com/video/watch/superspreaderin-in-garmisch-partenkirche-id719057749).

What happened in that alpine town of 27,000 inhabitants, usually known for its world cup ski races, mountain scenery, and Bavarian coziness, to attract such German-wide, and due to the specific circumstances, even global attention?<sup>3</sup>

To understand the mid-fall 2020 uproar, we need to consider the specifics of the incident in a country already under restrictions introduced to flatten the curve of infected residents since the outbreak in March 2020. This article will touch upon the legal framework applicable at that time. Further legal elaborations will dive into the allegations made by the various executive authorities. The case shall also show how decision-makers struggled to find an adequate crisis communications strategy to manage the situation. Lastly, the incident provides an opportunity to shed some light on the media's approach to reporting on COVID-19 related misconduct.

### Reports, Political Reactions, and COVID-19 Countermeasures

On Friday, September 11, 2020, the first articles, mostly in local media outlets, reported that an American female infected with COVID-19 enjoyed several "Kneipentours" (barhopping) evenings and thus could have spread the virus to an indefinite number of Garmisch-Partenkirchen residents.<sup>4</sup>

The woman worked in a rest and recreation facility located inside a US military compound in Garmisch. She was reported to have been on a trip to Greece, insinuating that she could have imported the virus from that vacation.<sup>5</sup> She must have noticed, however, that she had coronavirus symp-

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<sup>3</sup> Stephanie Halasz and Frederik Pleitgen, "A 26-year-old American Woman Is Believed to Have Caused a Coronavirus Outbreak in Germany," *CNN*, September 14, 2020, [https://edition.cnn.com/world/live-news/coronavirus-pandemic-09-14-20-intl/h\\_a9071c19bc8a73f1c4d7e77ed9b08e3e](https://edition.cnn.com/world/live-news/coronavirus-pandemic-09-14-20-intl/h_a9071c19bc8a73f1c4d7e77ed9b08e3e).

<sup>4</sup> Christian Fellner, "Frau (26) sorgt in Bars für großen Corona-Ausbruch in Garmisch – jetzt droht ihr empfindliche Strafe," *Merkur.de*, September 12, 2020, <https://www.merkur.de/lokales/garmisch-partenkirchen/garmisch-partenkirchen-ort28711/garmisch-partenkirchen-coronavirus-superspreederin-bar-frau-strafe-gap-bayern-symptome-herrmann-regeln-90042458.html>; see also: "Edelweiss Lodge and Resort Staff Test Positive for CORONA-19," *Bavarian News*, September 11, 2020, <https://www.bavariannews.com/blog/2020/09/11/edelweiss-lodge-and-resort-staff-test-positive-for-corona-19>.

<sup>5</sup> Marcel Laskus and Matthias Kirsch, "Corona Fall in Garmisch-Partenkirchen. Oder war es doch ein bisschen anders?" *Die Zeit*, October 1, 2020, 58, <https://www.zeit.de/>

toms during the weekend of September 5.<sup>6</sup> Directed by her supervisor to refrain from working, she voluntarily took a test at the local test station on Monday, September 7.<sup>7</sup> As explained further below, what happened at the test station is quite decisive in liability terms but still not fully clear in factual and legal detail. A day later, Tuesday, she socialized in Garmisch's nightlife without awaiting the test results.<sup>8</sup> On Wednesday, September 9, the 26-year old woman learned that she was infected with corona. On Thursday, September 10, US helicopters brought medical personnel and test kits to the garrison. Some hours later, around two dozen employees were informed about their positive COVID-19 tests.<sup>9</sup> A day later, the *Landratsamt* (county administration) – a body in-between municipal and state competencies of the Free State of Bavaria – stated that the county surpassed the so-called seven-day incidence of back then 50 tolerable cases of new infections (per 100,000 residents). Immediately, further Corona-related restrictions were introduced, such as earlier closures of bars and restaurants and limiting public assembly to no more than five persons.<sup>10</sup> On Saturday, September 12, citizens were asked to get tested.<sup>11</sup> The call was supposed to target everybody between 18 and 35 years of age who had spent time in one of the taverns allegedly visited by the US female. More than 1000 individuals did respond.

The county chief, *Landrat* Anton Speer, expressed himself as follows: "I am angry at the young woman. Notwithstanding symptoms and quarantine, she enjoyed the nightlife. She infected at least 22 Americans. It will be a Herculean task to identify all contact persons."<sup>12</sup> Being mindful of the fact that

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2020/41/corona-garmisch-partenkirchen-superspreaderin-infektionsgeschehen.

<sup>6</sup> Laskus and Kirsch, "Corona Fall in Garmisch-Partenkirchen."

<sup>7</sup> Laskus and Kirsch, "Corona Fall in Garmisch-Partenkirchen."

<sup>8</sup> Laskus and Kirsch, "Corona Fall in Garmisch-Partenkirchen."

<sup>9</sup> Laskus and Kirsch, "Corona Fall in Garmisch-Partenkirchen"; see also: "Noch mehr Ärger für Superspreaderin: Auch die US Army soll ermitteln," *Focus online*, October 9, 2020, [www.focus.de/politik/deutschland/corona-ausbruch-nach-kneipentour-virus-hotspot-garmisch-was-wir-ueber-die-superspreaderin-wissen-und-was-nicht\\_id\\_12429418.html](http://www.focus.de/politik/deutschland/corona-ausbruch-nach-kneipentour-virus-hotspot-garmisch-was-wir-ueber-die-superspreaderin-wissen-und-was-nicht_id_12429418.html).

<sup>10</sup> "Superspreaderin in mehreren Bars unterwegs," *n-tv.de*, September 12, 2020, <https://www.n-tv.de/panorama/Superspreaderin-in-mehreren-Bars-unterwegs-article22032222.html>.

<sup>11</sup> "Wegen Superspreaderin: Viele Tests in Garmisch-Partenkirchen," *br.de*, September 12, 2020, <https://www.br.de/nachrichten/bayern/wegen-superspreaderin-viele-tests-in-garmisch-partenkirchen,SAOoc7k>.

<sup>12</sup> "Corona-'Superspreaderin' in GAP: Ermittlungen wegen Körperverletzung – Falsche

health and public order issues lay in the competence of the 16 *Länder* in the German constitutional setup,<sup>13</sup> the case was then picked up by Bavaria's Minister of the Interior, Joachim Herrmann. On Sunday, September 13, the Minister said that if allegations turn out to be true, the female should receive an administrative fine.<sup>14</sup> He continued that this incident of ruthlessness calls for a clear signal, and sanctions should display the consequences for those who ignore the rules. On September 15, Bavaria's Head of State, Markus Söder, Germany's *de facto* man in 2020 and 2021 to fight the pandemic, gave a press briefing in Munich. Without going into details, he also labeled the incident in Garmisch as a model case of recklessness and encouraged the competent authorities to assess consequences for deterrence purposes.<sup>15</sup> On Wednesday, September 16, the highest military representative of the US Armed Forces in Bavaria visited Garmisch-Partenkirchen to meet with county and town top officials to exchange information on the incident.<sup>16</sup> One side expressed its dismay concerning the behavior of the woman, the other side expressed dismay about how the press handled the case. Nevertheless, the meeting ended in the good spirit

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Hotels erleben Storno-Welle," *Merkur.de*, September 15, 2020, [www.merkur.de/lokales/garmisch-partenkirchen/coronavirus-garmisch-partenkirchen-bayern-soeder-superspreederin-tests-usa-ergebnisse-details-zr-90043224.html](http://www.merkur.de/lokales/garmisch-partenkirchen/coronavirus-garmisch-partenkirchen-bayern-soeder-superspreederin-tests-usa-ergebnisse-details-zr-90043224.html).

- <sup>13</sup> Sebastian von Münchow, "COVID-19: How to Implement a Lockdown in a Democratic Context," *Strategic Insights* 57 (Garmisch-Partenkirchen: George C. Marshall Center for Security Studies, 2020), [www.marshallcenter.org/sites/default/files/files/2020-06/Security%20Insights%2057.pdf](http://www.marshallcenter.org/sites/default/files/files/2020-06/Security%20Insights%2057.pdf), 3.
- <sup>14</sup> "Corona Outbreak in Garmisch: Superspreader Threatens to be Punished," *The NewsABC.net*, September 13, 2020, <https://newsabc.net/corona-outbreak-in-garmisch-superspreader-threatens-to-be-punished>, see also: "Garmisch-Partenkirchen: Bayern empört – Superspreaderin drohen Bußgeld und Schadensersatzforderungen," *Welt Nachrichtensender*, September 14, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IR0A1jKNDd8>.
- <sup>15</sup> Sabine Dobel and Rachel More, "Germany Investigating 'Superspreader' Who Went Bar-hopping with COVID," *dpa-international*, September 14, 2020, <https://www.dpa-international.com/topic/germany-investigating-uperspreader-went-bar-hopping-covid-urn%3Anewsml%3Adpa.com%3A20090101%3A200914-99-560242>; see also: "Staatsanwaltschaft ermittelt gegen Superspreaderin in Garmisch-Partenkirchen," *Südwest Presse*, September 14, 2020, [www.swp.de/panorama/corona-bayern-aktuell-superspreader-garmisch-partenkirchen-staatsanwaltschaft-ermittelt-soeder-bussgeld-koerperverletzung-kneipen-51385202.html](http://www.swp.de/panorama/corona-bayern-aktuell-superspreader-garmisch-partenkirchen-staatsanwaltschaft-ermittelt-soeder-bussgeld-koerperverletzung-kneipen-51385202.html).
- <sup>16</sup> "US Army General Meets with German Officials over Outbreak at Military-run Resort," *ArmyTimes*, September 16, 2020, <https://www.armytimes.com/news/your-army/2020/09/16/us-army-general-meets-with-german-officials-over-outbreak-at-military-run-resort>.

to deepen cooperation and coordinate steps to stop a potential coronavirus outbreak in the county.

After the weekend of mass testing, *Landrat* Speer, called for a press conference in the afternoon of September 15 in front of the Bavarian Red Cross-run corona test station.<sup>17</sup> He wanted to brief on the test results. The crowd and countless TV viewers in Germany awaited this event broadcast live to get an answer to one question: Did the "*Amerikanische Superspreaderin*" cause a major corona outbreak?

## Legal Considerations

Before discussing the test results and further developments of the case, some of the COVID-19 related applicable rules and regulations need to be revisited. This is a prerequisite to determine any legal violations that the person in question may have committed.

Residents in Bavaria have to adhere to the coronavirus-related restrictions foreseen in the Bavarian ordinance mandating a temporary curfew. This ordinance is a ministerial decree first introduced in March 2020 and amended subsequently in view of the necessity to ease or harshen limitations.<sup>18</sup> This *Bayerische Infektionsschutzmaßnahmenverordnung* is the *Freistaat's* major legislative tool to mandate physical distance between persons, allow or prohibit access to facilities, or close or open businesses. The decree allows the government to set the hygienic standards and authorizes the counties to determine closing hours. To ensure compliance with the above-mentioned regulation, the Bavarian Ministry of the Interior and the Ministry of Health issued a catalog of fines (*Bußgeldkatalog "Corona-Pandemie"*).<sup>19</sup> Breaches are categorized as administrative offenses and not as crimes under

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<sup>17</sup> "Corona-Ausbruch in Garmisch-Partenkirchen: Allgemeinverfügung gilt weiterhin," *Kreisbote*, September 15, 2020, <https://www.kreisbote.de/lokales/garmisch-partenkirchen/corona-ausbruch-garmisch-partenkirchen-partynacht-90043535.html>.

<sup>18</sup> For latest amended version, see: Zwölfte Bayerische Infektionsschutzmaßnahmenverordnung (12. BayIfSMV) vom 5. März 2021 (BayMBl. Nr. 171, BayRS 2126-1-16-G), Staatsministerium für Gesundheit und Pflege, Freistaat Bayern, March 5, 2021, accessed April 23, 2021, [www.gesetze-bayern.de/Content/Document/BayIfSMV\\_12](http://www.gesetze-bayern.de/Content/Document/BayIfSMV_12).

<sup>19</sup> Latest version, see: Bußgeldkatalog "Corona-Pandemie," Staatsministerium für Gesundheit und Pflege, Freistaat Bayern, December 17, 2020, [www.verkuendung-bayern.de/baymbl/2020-768](http://www.verkuendung-bayern.de/baymbl/2020-768).

the German Penal Code. The *Bußgeldkatalog* lists the fines, for instance, that caterers pay if guests ignore wearing masks or if the number of visitors exceeds a pre-set number of allowed guests per square meter. Since the catalog does not list any violation of possible quarantine rules, the decree on the *Vollzug des Infektionsschutzgesetzes – Isolation von Kontaktpersonen der Kategorie I, von Verdachtspersonen und von positiv auf das Coronavirus getesteten Personen* (Enforcement of the Infection Protection Act – Isolation of category I contact persons, persons suspected of being infected and coronavirus positively tested persons) may apply.<sup>20</sup> This decree refers to the Federal Infection Protection Act. This Act was enacted 20 years ago in response to the HIV virus.<sup>21</sup> Section 73 of the Provisions on administrative fines states that an administrative offense shall be deemed to be committed by any person who willfully or negligently contradicts an enforceable order.

The latter reveals the first legal dilemma of the case. Did the individual ignore an enforceable order? The county authorities claim that she signed a *Musterformular des Bayerischen Ministeriums für Gesundheit und Pflege* (a sample form by the Bavarian Ministry of Health) to temporarily quarantine herself as a person suspected of having been infected with COVID-19.<sup>22</sup> The county also argues that the Bavarian Red Cross personnel running the station explained the situation to her in English.<sup>23</sup> Applying a strict legal assessment, the explanation and the signed form may not pass the legal threshold that the individual received an executive order she had to follow. Germany's Federal Administrative Procedures Act,<sup>24</sup> section 35, reads: "An administrative act shall be any order, decision or other sovereign measure taken by an authority to regulate an individual case in the sphere of public

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<sup>20</sup> "Vollzug des Infektionsschutzgesetzes (IfSG) Quarantäne von Kontaktpersonen der Kategorie I und von Verdachtspersonen, Isolation von positiv auf das Coronavirus getesteten Personen (AV Isolation) – (BayMBl. 2020 Nr. 705)," Staatsministerium für Gesundheit und Pflege, Freistaat Bayern, December 2, 2020, [www.verkuendung-bayern.de/files/baymbl/2020/705/baymbl-2020-705.pdf](http://www.verkuendung-bayern.de/files/baymbl/2020/705/baymbl-2020-705.pdf).

<sup>21</sup> "Gesetz zur Verhütung und Bekämpfung von Infektionskrankheiten beim Menschen (Infektionsschutzgesetz – IfSG)," last amended version from December 21, 2020, <http://www.gesetze-im-internet.de/ifsg/index.html>.

<sup>22</sup> Formular Isolation von Kontaktpersonen der Kategorie I, Staatsministerium für Gesundheit und Pflege, Freistaat Bayern, [https://www.stmgp.bayern.de/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/formulare-isolation-verdachtspersonen\\_bf.pdf](https://www.stmgp.bayern.de/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/formulare-isolation-verdachtspersonen_bf.pdf).

<sup>23</sup> Laskus and Kirsch, "Corona Fall in Garmisch-Partenkirchen."

<sup>24</sup> Verwaltungsverfahrensgesetz (VwVfG), January 1, 1977, <https://www.gesetze-im-internet.de/vwvfg/VwVfG.pdf>.

law and intended to have a direct, external legal effect.” The subsequent sections then explain the conditions under which an administrative act takes effect (signature, explanation of grounds, information on legal remedies, etc.). While the question of whether the form constitutes a valid administrative act may be disputable, a sound clarification of whether the American female comprehensively understood the Red Cross staffer is left to the conversation between the two individuals on site on September 7. Certainly, a prerequisite to issuing a valid executive decision depends on the actual and cognitive understanding of the act’s addressee.<sup>25</sup> Hence, a good lawyer could call into question the *Lankreis*’ health authorities’ fine because it is not based on a solid administrative act.

Another legal question is determining the individual’s eventual criminal liability. This question is linked to the emotional debate about whether the person actually did spread the virus. This legal assessment would be left up to the Munich-based prosecutors who took it upon themselves to file a case of negligently committing bodily harm to others.<sup>26</sup> According to section 229, Germany’s Criminal Code<sup>27</sup> foresees a penalty of imprisonment for a term not to exceed three years or a fine. Section 203 defines willful bodily harm. In this section, a penalty of imprisonment for a term not to exceed five years or a fine is imposed when someone physically assaults or damages another person’s health. However, one component of tort is causation. Causation asks for the causal relationship between a defendant’s conduct and the end result. In the case of negligence, causation is met when a defendant failed in that duty where a reasonable person would not have, and that failure resulted in measurable harm. In any case, causation connects an individual’s conduct with a resulting effect. Anglo-Saxon jurisprudence tries to establish factual causation through the so-called “but-

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<sup>25</sup> Steffen Detterbeck, *Allgemeines Verwaltungsrecht* (München: C.H. Beck), 2002, 154-158.

<sup>26</sup> “Staatsanwaltschaft ermittelt gegen ‘Superspreaderin’ von Garmisch: Welche Konsequenzen drohen der Amerikanerin?” *Jura-Online*, September 17, 2020, <https://jura-online.de/blog/2020/09/17/staatsanwaltschaft-ermittelt-gegen-superspreaderin-von-garmisch-welche-konsequenzen-drohen-der-amerikanerin>, see also: “Nur drei neue Corona-Fälle nach Massentest in Garmisch,” *Der Tagesspiegel*, September 15, 2020, [www.tagesspiegel.de/wissen/staatsanwalt-ermittelt-gegen-superspreaderin-nur-drei-neue-corona-faelle-nach-massentest-in-garmisch/26182206.html](http://www.tagesspiegel.de/wissen/staatsanwalt-ermittelt-gegen-superspreaderin-nur-drei-neue-corona-faelle-nach-massentest-in-garmisch/26182206.html); “US Woman May Face Jail for Spreading COVID-19 during Bar Crawl in Germany,” *New York Post*, September 16, 2020, <https://nypost.com/2020/09/16/american-could-face-jail-for-spreading-virus-during-bar-crawl-in-germany>.

<sup>27</sup> Strafgesetzbuch, January 1, 1975, <https://www.gesetze-im-internet.de/stgb>.

for test." Its basic question is, "But for the defendant's act, would the harm have occurred?". The Roman law-rooted *conditio-sine-qua-non* threshold is a similar concept to identify a circumstance in which a certain act is a material cause of a certain injury. Without a doubt, the American ignored any possible instructions given and socialized while displaying symptoms. However, the legal assessment would also need to prove that her negligent actions caused further infections. In other words: individuals would have to be identified who were infected by that very person.

End of October 2020, Bavaria's public broadcasters reported that the county could not associate one single case to the person in question, neither in relation to the circa two dozen infected employees of the hotel nor any other individual in Garmisch-Partenkirchen.<sup>28</sup> They could not verify her as "Patient Null" (patient zero) for the increase of infections.

Without criminal liability, it would seem difficult to establish any legal liability under civil law. This could apply in favor of infected persons claiming compensation of healing costs or compensation for pain and suffering. This could also matter since some Garmisch caterers voiced their anger that the incident encouraged the county's administration to end operating hours at 10 pm instead of 11 pm. They argued that the person could be liable for the loss of profit related to drinks or food, which could not be consumed during the hour in question. The challenge is that claimants would also need to prove that the individual's behavior caused an infection leading the *Gesundheitsamt* (health authority of the county) to order an earlier closure of businesses. Similar to the scenario above, any causation will be hard to establish in the absence of a single case stemming from the woman's activities. It is, however, not known if any caterer or any tavern visitor filed a civil lawsuit.

The county's decision to accelerate testing and tracing efforts and to immediately introduce restrictions must be assessed in the light of administrative law. The Bavarian decrees, fine catalogs, and the Federal Infection Protection Act are *lex specialis* in relation to the authorities' overall duty to protect

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<sup>28</sup> "Die Superspreaderin, die keine war: Die Fakten im bundesweit bekannten Corona-Ausbruch von Garmisch," *Merkur.de*, October 25, 2020, [www.merkur.de/lokales/garmisch-partenkirchen/garmisch-partenkirchen-ort28711/garmisch-patenkirchen-coronavirus-superspreaderin-usa-touristin-zr-90079327.html](http://www.merkur.de/lokales/garmisch-partenkirchen/garmisch-partenkirchen-ort28711/garmisch-patenkirchen-coronavirus-superspreaderin-usa-touristin-zr-90079327.html).

public security and order.<sup>29</sup> While protecting order clearly requires that residents obey norms, the protection of “public security” is an undefined legal term. Legal scholars consider individual rights, such as the right to life or personal freedom, as part of public security.<sup>30</sup> Hence, authorities are allowed to take measures to protect these rights from harm. The prerogative of assessing whether public security is threatened is up to the authorities.<sup>31</sup> Through these lenses, the challenge was to prevent a major outbreak based on the knowledge the *Landrat* had at the time (*ex ante*). After six months of coping with the pandemic, and considering the *Landkreis*' demography, one may conclude that the measures taken were in accordance with the applicable norms. Garmisch-Partenkirchen and its surrounding towns have the third-highest age average in Bavaria (around 46 years).<sup>32</sup> Thus, the *Kreis* hosts many individuals belonging to the most vulnerable group in danger of dying from the coronavirus. The *Landrat* may have feared that younger nursing staffers could have been infected during their nighttime activities and then could have unknowingly carried the virus into the many retirement homes. His guiding thought may have been to prevent what happened in the town of Murnau, approximately 30 kilometers north of Garmisch-Partenkirchen. There, an outbreak of the virus in a retirement home caused ten elderly people to die within a few days during the first COVID-19 wave in April 2020.<sup>33</sup>

Disregarding any eventual judicial claims, the individual left Germany around the end of September 2020. One can conclude from this that nothing was filed to prevent her from leaving the Federal Republic. The airport-based federal police officers have access to warrants and would have stopped her from boarding a plane if that had been the case. Whether the Munich prosecutors will continue to pursue charges or dismiss the case in

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<sup>29</sup> Volkmar Götz, *Allgemeines Polizei- und Ordnungsrecht*, 10<sup>th</sup> ed. (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1991), 38 et seq.

<sup>30</sup> Götz, *Allgemeines Polizei- und Ordnungsrecht*, 41 et seq.

<sup>31</sup> Götz, *Allgemeines Polizei- und Ordnungsrecht*, 66 et seq.

<sup>32</sup> Matthias Holzapfel, “Werdenfelser Land: Höchster Altersschnitt in Oberbayern,” *Merkur.de*, April 10, 2014, [www.merkur.de/lokales/garmisch-partenkirchen/garmisch-partenkirchen-ort28711/zensus-werdenfelser-land-garmisch-partenkirchen-hoehster-altersschnitt-oberbayern-3474338.html](http://www.merkur.de/lokales/garmisch-partenkirchen/garmisch-partenkirchen-ort28711/zensus-werdenfelser-land-garmisch-partenkirchen-hoehster-altersschnitt-oberbayern-3474338.html).

<sup>33</sup> Christian Fellner et al., “Corona in Murnauer Seniorenzentrum: Zwei weitere Tote – Insgesamt zehn Bewohner gestorben,” *Merkur.de*, April 20, 2020, [www.merkur.de/lokales/garmisch-partenkirchen/murnau-ort29105/coronafaelle-in-murnauer-seniorenzentrum-zwei-weitere-tote-insgesamt-zehn-bewohner-gestorben-13640563.html](http://www.merkur.de/lokales/garmisch-partenkirchen/murnau-ort29105/coronafaelle-in-murnauer-seniorenzentrum-zwei-weitere-tote-insgesamt-zehn-bewohner-gestorben-13640563.html).

accordance with Germany's Criminal Procedure Code remains unknown. If the prosecutorial office wishes to pursue the case, it is uncertain whether a US counterpart would agree to pursue the case in America.

## Facts and Fiction

Returning to the press conference by county chief Speer on the afternoon of September 15, the journalists present and countless TV viewers were informed that the mass testing of more than 1000 persons resulted in three cases of infected individuals who could eventually be linked to the woman's appearance in Garmisch's restaurants and bars. The *Landrat* and the town's lord mayor were relieved that the incident did not cause a major outbreak in the county.<sup>34</sup> However, for a sober analysis of what actually happened, it was too late.

*Bild*, along with other tabloids and regional and less sensational federal-wide newspapers, had already set the tone by using the German-English mashed term "*Superspreaderin*" and printing the unfortunate quote of a Garmisch bar owner calling his guest a "potential killer."<sup>35</sup> Other media outlets joined quickly. The incident made it into Germany's prime time news and was then picked up by other European media fora like Euronews, Austria's *Krone*, and the UK's *Sun*, which wrote "COVIDIOT American superspreader, 26, faces ten years in jail for exposing 710 people to COVID on a German bar crawl."<sup>36</sup> The latter thought on legal conse-

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<sup>34</sup> "BR24Live: Ergebnis der Corona-Tests in Garmisch-Partenkirchen," *Bayerischer Rundfunk*, September 15, 2020, <https://www.facebook.com/BR24/videos/br24live-ergebnis-der-corona-tests-in-garmisch-partenkirchen/331805521493337>.

<sup>35</sup> "Potentielle Killerin! – Superspreaderin feierte beim Karaoke-Abend," *Bild*, September 13, 2020, [www.bild.de/video/clip/news/potentielle-killerin-superspreaderin-feierte-beim-karaoke-abend-72888180-72890888.bild.html](http://www.bild.de/video/clip/news/potentielle-killerin-superspreaderin-feierte-beim-karaoke-abend-72888180-72890888.bild.html); see also: "Ausbruch in Garmisch-Partenkirchen – Superspreaderin wartete Corona-Test nicht ab," *Bild*, September 12, 2020, <https://www.bild.de/video/clip/news/ausbruch-in-garmisch-partenkirchen-superspreaderin-wartete-corona-test-nicht-ab-72875218-72876804.bild.html>.

<sup>36</sup> "Vorwürfe gegen US-Bürgerin – Die angebliche Superspreaderin von Garmisch," *Tagesschau*, September 17, 2020, <https://www.tagesschau.de/faktenfinder/superspreaderin-garmisch-corona-101.html>; Andrea Büring, "Nach Superspreaderin in Garmisch: Junge Leute sollen zum Coronatest," *Euronews*, September 13, 2020, <https://de.euronews.com/2020/09/13/nach-superspreaderin-in-garmisch-junge-leute-sollen-zum-coronatest>; "Corona-Superspreaderin zog in Garmisch durch Bars," *Kronen Zeitung*, September 12, 2020, <https://www.krone.at/2228797>; "COVIDIOT: American

quences obviously attracted similar commentaries like "Superspreaderin (26) könnte 10 Jahre hinter Gittern landen" (Superspreader (26) may spend 10 years behind bars).<sup>37</sup> Due to the citizenship of the woman, the story was picked up by US-based media outlets. CNN reported, "Germany links COVID-19 outbreak at ski resort to US citizen who failed to quarantine," and Fox News speculated on judicial consequences: "Germany may fine US woman over coronavirus outbreak in Alpine resort."<sup>38</sup> Needless to add, countless commentaries in social media speculated about the woman's role, the outbreak, possible penalties, etc. In other words, the incident, the involved female, and the town of Garmisch-Partenkirchen received global attention. Not to forget that the individual also received death threats.

Media reporting is of interest for many reasons. One is that many stories were not thoroughly researched. Early reporting speculated whether the US person was a tourist or even an American soldier stationed in Garmisch.<sup>39</sup> Later stories were able to link the incident to the American presence in the town but then jumped to the conclusion that the individual could have been a NATO-soldier or someone stationed in the local "NATO camp." Later and more thorough research then revealed that the female was a civil-

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Superspreader, 26, Faces Ten Years in Jail for Exposing 710 People to COVID on Germn Bar Crawl," *The Sun*, September 17, 2020, <https://www.thesun.co.uk/news/12693194/american-superspreader-facing-jail-german-bar-crawl-covid>.

<sup>37</sup> "Superspreaderin (26) könnte zehn Jahre hinter Gitter landen," *Head Topics*, September 18, 2020, <https://headtopics.com/ch/superspreaderin-26-konnte-zehn-jahre-hinter-gitter-landen-15722212>.

<sup>38</sup> Stephanie Halasz, Frederik Pleitgen, and Zamira Rahim, "Germany Links COVID-19 Outbreak at Ski Resort to US Citizen Who Failed to Quarantine," *CNN*, September 15, 2020, <https://edition.cnn.com/2020/09/14/europe/germany-bavaria-outbreak-coronavirus-intl/index.html>; Robert Gearty, "Germany May Fine US Woman over Coronavirus Outbreak in Alpine Resort," *Fox News*, September 14, 2020, [www.foxnews.com/world/germany-us-woman-coronavirus-outbreak-alpine-resort](http://www.foxnews.com/world/germany-us-woman-coronavirus-outbreak-alpine-resort); see also: "US Woman Faces Hefty Fine after 'Causing Coronavirus Outbreak in Bavaria'," *The Local*, September 13, 2020, <https://www.thelocal.de/20200913/us-woman-faces-hefty-fine-after-causing-coronavirus-outbreak-in-bavaria>.

<sup>39</sup> See, for instance: "Eine Superspreaderin geht auf Kneipentour," *Stuttgarter Zeitung*, September 12, 2020, <https://www.stuttgarter-zeitung.de/inhalt.corona-ausbruch-in-garmisch-eine-superspreaderin-geht-auf-kneipentour.1ca86328-c113-45a2-afc4-03a94304ff28.html>; "Exclusive: US Military Employee with COVID-19 'KISSED Multiple Employees on German Bar Crawl Despite Not Feeling Well Enough to Work and While Waiting on Her Test Results' and Now Faces Jail," *Daily Mail*, September 17, 2020, <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-8743873/US-military-employee-COVID-19-kissed-multiple-employees-German-bar-crawl.html>.

ian employee of a rest and recreation facility primarily for US members of the Armed Forces. Other journalists confused Garmisch with a NATO School located in a neighboring northern valley. Perhaps it took some time and research to get a clearer picture of which entities are located in Upper Bavaria.

Many pieces reported that the employee did a "*Kneipentour*" (barhopping).<sup>40</sup> They used the plural for the German term *Kneipe* (tavern), insinuating that she visited various locations. Some articles speculated about several nights, at least mentioning two evenings. A night that was repeatedly mentioned was Saturday, September 5. The location she supposedly visited was identified as the "Irish Pub," a popular hangout for Garmisch's Anglophone community. In fact, she visited this bar on Friday, September 4. Her data (name, visiting hours, phone number and/or email) was registered according to the Bavarian Corona regulation of the time. Corona-related warn-apps were just introduced in June 2020 and digital registration apps did not exist at that time. Therefore, a hard-copy with these details was then handed to the *Gesundheitsamt*.<sup>41</sup> It is, however, not known whether she visited any other locations on that night. Accordingly, she would have visited the Irish Pub before she showed any signs of COVID symptoms. The remaining night, when she undisputedly showed up after she took the test, was at the resto-bar "Peaches" on Tuesday, September 8. Every Tuesday, it attracts US employees when drinks can be paid for in US Dollars at an exchange rate of 1 : 1 to the Euro.<sup>42</sup>

The media reporting is also of interest for two more reasons: It revealed the woman's first name, her age, and her citizenship. Publishing a person's name is a sensitive legal and ethical question in Germany and probably in most liberal states. The decision to publish the name is a balancing act between the public's interest for information and the individual's right to self-determination. The latter may matter less the more an individual becomes a public figure through his or her activities. The German press codex tries to respect these principles.<sup>43</sup> Newspapers usually print abbreviations of the

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<sup>40</sup> "Exclusive: US Military Employee with COVID-19 'KISSED Multiple Employees'."

<sup>41</sup> Laskus and Kirsch, "Corona Fall in Garmisch-Partenkirchen."

<sup>42</sup> Laskus and Kirsch, "Corona Fall in Garmisch-Partenkirchen."

<sup>43</sup> "Pressekodex: Ethische Standards für den Journalismus," <https://www.presserat.de/pressekodex.html>.

family name to make a person less identifiable. Full family names of criminals, for example, are normally published only after a conviction.<sup>44</sup> Nevertheless, stating her first name and her exact age in a rather small community like Garmisch might be reckless. In contrast to this case, the German press has become very restrictive in recent years to share first names. This is mostly concerning the country's struggle with violent crimes. The restrictive policy appears to prevent readers from making false assumptions when, for instance, the suspect has a Middle or Near Eastern-sounding first name.<sup>45</sup>

An additional interesting aspect is that reports clearly identified the woman as an "*Amerikanerin*." That is again noteworthy because naming nationalities is also usually handled with care in Germany. Suspects of crimes like homicide, rape, bodily harm, robbery, theft, but recently also corona-related curfew breaches are usually described as "men," "a group," "youngsters," or simply as "the suspect(s)." While there may be many reasons why German editorial boards prefer to stay vague in these cases, the discrete handling may once again serve to avert news consumers from drawing quick conclusions.<sup>46</sup> However, the female involved in this case was not given any of these considerations.

## Post "Superspreaderin" Garmisch

Although public attention on Garmisch-Partenkirchen faded away quickly after the *Landrat's* press conference, Corona-related curfew breaches continued. On Sunday, November 1, local police officers stopped a party in a restaurant in the Partenkirchen district. The event had 80 persons in attendance instead of the maximum 50 allowed back then. The participants were celebrating without masks and without maintaining a physical dis-

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<sup>44</sup> Daniel Tobias Czeckay, "Darf die Presse meinen Namen nennen? Der Name und Fotos des Beschuldigten in der Berichterstattung," *anwalt.de*, September 7, 2019, [https://www.anwalt.de/rechtstipps/darf-die-presse-meinen-namen-nennen-der-name-und-fotos-des-beschuldigten-in-der-berichterstattung\\_158484.html](https://www.anwalt.de/rechtstipps/darf-die-presse-meinen-namen-nennen-der-name-und-fotos-des-beschuldigten-in-der-berichterstattung_158484.html).

<sup>45</sup> See: "Nennen oder nicht? Die Nationalität von Straftätern," *BR24*, February 9, 2021, <https://www.br.de/nachrichten/bayern/br24-korrekturen-und-was-fuer-uns-qualitaetsjournalismus-ist,RmilBWm>.

<sup>46</sup> Bärbel Röben, "Öffentliches Interesse oder Rassismus?" *Menschen Machen Medien*, August 2, 2019, <https://mmm.verdi.de/beruf/oeffentliches-interesse-oder-rassismus-60059>.

tance. Unlike the incident related to the “Amerikanerin,” the party in Partenkirchen was primarily reported by the local press and a local radio station.<sup>47</sup> None of the outlets revealed any background information about the attendees. Only *Bild*, Germany’s cross-regional tabloid, picked up the story.<sup>48</sup> Its reporters, at least, remained consistent and identified the event as “a Turkish engagement party.” In this light, several open questions remain. Why identify the women as American when the media refrains from linking nationality to other cases of misconduct or crime? Why is there inconsistent press portrayal on other superspreader events, i.e., the so-called “mass weddings”? Would the county chief have mentioned the individual’s background had the case involved any other Garmisch resident with a non-American or non-German origin? Looking retrospectively, why did the media echo faintly when a 24-year-old American woman was sexually assaulted in Garmisch-Partenkirchen in the summer of 2019?<sup>49</sup>

The Garmisch case can also be viewed as the public kick-off for Germany’s second corona wave, succeeded by the third wave in spring 2021 and the waves dominated by the omicron variant as of winter 2021/2022. Lockdowns enacted at the beginning of November 2020 morphed into a Germany-wide “strict lockdown” until mid-spring the following year. Only work remained, as long as home office options were inexistent. Bars, restaurants, hotels, schools, sports facilities, and ski resorts closed down. No more than three persons could gather, masks were to be worn indoors, and Bavaria introduced a curfew from 9 pm until 5 am. Notwithstanding temporary easing or even tightening restrictions, the lockdown continued until May 2021. While the Federal Republic was down to 6,000 active cases in summer 2020, the following eruptions increased the numbers compared to the spring 2020 outbreak several-fold. By early 2022, Germany has exceed-

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<sup>47</sup> “GAP: 80 Personen feiern in Gaststätte – Hygieneregeln werden ignoriert,” *Radio Oberland*, November 2, 2020, <https://www.radio-oberland.de/nachrichten/gap-80-personen-feiern-in-gaststaette-hygieneregeln-werden-ignoriert>.

<sup>48</sup> “Polizei beendet Verlobungsfeier,” *Bild*, November 2, 2020, [www.bild.de/regional/muenchen/muenchen-aktuell/in-partenkirchen-polizei-beendet-verlobungsfeier-73721194.bild.html](http://www.bild.de/regional/muenchen/muenchen-aktuell/in-partenkirchen-polizei-beendet-verlobungsfeier-73721194.bild.html).

<sup>49</sup> See: Katarina Amtmann and Manuela Schauer “Vergewaltigung einer 24-Jährigen bei Garmisch-Partenkirchen: Wende lässt Taxi-Branche aufatmen,” *Merkur.de*, December 9, 2019, [www.merkur.de/lokales/garmisch-partenkirchen/garmisch-partenkirchen-ort28711/garmisch-partenkirchen-frau-24-steigt-in-auto-mann-vergewaltigt-sie-tatverdaechtiger-gefasst-13269891.html](http://www.merkur.de/lokales/garmisch-partenkirchen/garmisch-partenkirchen-ort28711/garmisch-partenkirchen-frau-24-steigt-in-auto-mann-vergewaltigt-sie-tatverdaechtiger-gefasst-13269891.html).

ed the number of 120,000 deaths attributed to the coronavirus. The county of Garmisch-Partenkirchen mourns around 120 deceased.

Did the incident affect the American-German community in Garmisch-Partenkirchen? The American presence in Garmisch has existed for 75 years. It changed from peaceful coexistence in the early years to friendship and jointly conducting security studies programs for more than 25 years at the Marshall Center. One must also be conscious of the fact that more than 2,000 Americans, be it employees, academics, or military personnel plus their respective dependents, reside in Garmisch-Partenkirchen. This group constitutes the municipality's largest non-German community. If one adds the roughly 900 foreign officials who attend resident courses at the Marshall Center annually in non-corona times, the economic impact is significant. Beyond the profit interests of retailers and property owners, the desire to maintain decades of friendship and cooperation trumped the atmospheric media-generated disturbances. Within the garrison, staffers from all nationalities followed the news closely. Still, the incident did not interrupt the professional conduct of daily operations to prepare security studies-related online courses or publish assessments on the international crisis. In their daily cooperation, American, German, and other nationalities' experts manage a complementarity of regulations to the best extent possible to prevent infections. In parallel, social interaction continued. The Anglophone community continued to socialize with its local age peers in the known hangouts – until the harsh lockdown began in late 2020. When the garrison-located resort intended to host reunions around Easter 2021, the facility made it into the local news again.<sup>50</sup> However, it was immediately underlined that the gatherings were coordinated with the county's health authorities under strict application of social-distance and hygienic standards. In addition, the local gastronomy association voiced its solidarity by underlining authorization of professional reunions under the Bavarian caveats to the restrictions.

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<sup>50</sup> Tanja Brinkmann, "Während dritter Corona-Welle: Konferenzen mit über 100 Menschen im Hotel Edelweiss – Mitarbeiter verunsichert," *Merkur.de*, March 26, 2021, [www.merkur.de/lokales/garmisch-partenkirchen/garmisch-partenkirchen-ort28711/corona-lockdown-garmisch-us-hotel-edelweiss-konferenzen-planung-angst-mitarbeiter-impfung-infektion-90260096.html](http://www.merkur.de/lokales/garmisch-partenkirchen/garmisch-partenkirchen-ort28711/corona-lockdown-garmisch-us-hotel-edelweiss-konferenzen-planung-angst-mitarbeiter-impfung-infektion-90260096.html).

## Lessons Learned

Are there any lessons learned from the incident of the “Superspreaderin”? There may be some related to the legal implications of the case, the communication skills of political decision-makers fighting the pandemic, and the media, which put itself in jeopardy to become a catalyst for stigmatization.

First, the legal debate about coronavirus and criminal or civil liability has just begun. Proving causation linking a negligent action of a COVID-positive person to an infection of another individual will be difficult. It will require accurate medical information to prove that an identifiable person caused specific harm to a peer.<sup>51</sup> In this regard, the current debate is reminiscent of the early HIV cases in the 1980s when courts had to determine sentences for the willful or negligent spread of that virus. Given that the “Superspreaderin” case will likely never result in a decision, the incident will not contribute to German case law.

Second, leadership directly relates to communication skills. Bavaria’s leadership could obviously convince residents to obey the restrictions they introduced to fight the first corona wave. According to polls, 89 % of residents backed the government in spring 2020. On a federal level, the number dropped to 18 % by December 2021.<sup>52</sup> The statements by Bavaria’s Interior Minister and Head of State in September regarding the case have to be judged in that context.<sup>53</sup> They were stark, but none of the statements mentioned the nationality of the person in question. In addition, both linked the question of legal consequences with a “thorough assessment” of the case by competent authorities. The latter prerequisite drowned amidst the ocean of news stories on the incident. The nexus between the female’s citizenship and possible penalties was something the press, rather than the

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<sup>51</sup> “Staatsanwaltschaft ermittelt gegen ‘Superspreaderin’ von Garmisch.”

<sup>52</sup> “Sind Sie mit dem Krisenmanagement von Bund und Ländern während der Corona-Krise sehr zufrieden, zufrieden, weniger zufrieden oder gar nicht zufrieden?” *Statista*, January 24, 2022, <https://de.statista.com/statistik/daten/studie/1105161/umfrage/corona-krise-umfrage-zum-krisenmanagement-der-bundesregierung/>.

<sup>53</sup> See also the parliamentary repercussion of the prejudgments related to the Garmisch incident in the Bavarian *Landtag* through a so-called minor *parliamentary interpellation* and the respective response by the Bavarian State Ministry of Health and Care: Bayerischer Landtag, 18. Wahlperiode, February 17, 2021, Drucksache 18/12911.

politicians, talked about. It is undetermined whether the Bavarian officials could have foreseen their statements reduced to a pithy headline.

The crisis communication by the county chief in the affected region of the incident is more complex. In non-corona times, a county is an administrative level with a rather short catalog of competencies, one of which is usually health and the management of hospitals. That is why this level gained such significance since the pandemic's outbreak. For the average citizen, the municipal mayors or the composition of the state's government matter. Therefore, county chiefs rarely have a political career profile like their community or capital level peers. That may explain why Anton Speer's statements appear to be more emotional than the ones from Bavaria's state-level politicians. However, he gave perhaps the most insightful interview on Monday, September 14, to the Germany-wide broadcast station WELT.<sup>54</sup> This interview occurred some hours before the press briefing in front of the testing station. Mr. Speer repeated his anger towards the "Amerikanerin" in the beginning. Yet, he resisted the interviewers' attempt to elicit any speculation from him on any possible punishment. The *Landrat* stood firm and focused on health crisis management. In summary, the aggressive pursuit of the case was rooted less in the actions of state and local leaders; the spin appeared to have come from the journalists.

## Conclusion

Returning to our case, this article does not intend to judge the individual's behavior. While many of the reports about the incident were factually incorrect, speculative, and overblown in tone, the young female went to a bar before awaiting her test results. Whether she infected anyone in that location or her colleagues at the resort could never be determined. Nevertheless, she lived and worked in a region plagued by the new virus for six months. She knew that COVID-19 spreads easily and that there was no vaccine in place. She knew that an infection could lead to deadly consequences. Every reader can make up his or her own mind whether this passes the threshold of having committed a crime beyond a reasonable doubt.

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<sup>54</sup> "Landrat richtig sauer: 'Unverantwortlich, was die Amerikanerin mit der Kneipentour angerichtet hat!'," *Welt Nachrichtensender*, September 14, 2020, [www.youtube.com/watch?v=Mra7pOgU4CA](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Mra7pOgU4CA).

Or if it constitutes ignorance, recklessness, typical behavior of youngsters stationed overseas, or fatigue due to ever-changing restrictions lasting several months. Notably, the case in question made it into a section of the German language version of the portal Wikipedia. The article on the term “Superspreading” contains a sub-section on stigmatization. The section briefly explains the case. It notes that the new phenomenon of corona-related stigmatization deserves further research.

It was probably helpful that some of the early angry protagonists clarified their original statements. Citizens wrote to the Garmisch town hall and the *Landkreisamt* arguing that the American deserved an apology in view of media reporting. In parallel, some news outlets revised previously published reports focusing on what actually occurred. Other news outlets even pondered the story's spin.

Until today, the reports on the *Superspreaderin* remain the only story in Germany where an individual was singled out as a source of contamination. Eventually, this hints that editorial boards also picked up a lesson and refrained from similar reporting approaches.

In a final attempt to actually link the case up with international security studies, it has to be taken into account that totalitarian regimes are using their propaganda repertoire to insinuate that they are better equipped to handle crises like the pandemic. Nothing is more in their interest than the division of western societies and communities. Since World War II, the wider transatlantic family's strongest countermeasures have always been honesty, transparency, sober analysis skills, and a united stand. In this light, the Garmisch *Superspreaderin*-incident might have constituted a necessary reminder to leaders and editors how to handle emotionalizing individual cases.

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In summer 2020, the PfP Consortium of Defense Academies and Security Studies Institutes published a special edition on the Security Impacts of the COVID-19 Pandemic. Authors who contributed to the first volume were invited to revisit, verify and modify their conclusions and contribute to this follow-up issue. Additional authors joined, providing a fresh look at previously addressed challenges or adding a new coronavirus-related theme. Hence, this issue allows the expansion in the range of topics. This edition also includes additional observations on how malign actors tried to instrumentalize vaccine deliveries to achieve their political aims and how they partly failed.

**ISBN: 978-3-903359-51-2**



Special Edition in cooperation with the  
PfP Consortium Editorial Board