




COMMENTARY


“From Russia with love”: Russian foreign policy in times of pandemic

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Background

At the early stages of the COVID-19 outbreak, Russia was considered less affected than other countries in fight against the pandemic. Despite sharing a long border with China, the number of COVID-19 cases remained low in January and February 2020.¹ The pandemic strongly hit Russia mid-March, with Moscow accounting for a large share of COVID-19 cases.² On May 22nd, 2020, the official numbers were of 326,448 COVID-19 cases in Russia.³

Without doubt, the pandemic has repercussions on Russia, not only on its domestic politics, altering the image of President Putin and weakening the Russian economy, but also has significant impacts on Russian foreign policy.

In that respect, one of the early consequences of the global pandemic on Russian domestic politics was the postponement of the constitutional reforms in Russia. The reform, announced by President Putin in January 2020, was approved by the Duma on March 11th, 2020.⁴ However, the referendum, which was planned on April 22nd, 2020, was postponed due to the COVID-19 outbreak. This constitutional reform would allow President Putin to run again for president in 2024, by “nullifying” his previous terms.⁵

The pandemic also has a strong impact on the Russian economy, as energy exports represent a large share of Russia’s gross domestic product (GDP).⁶ Following the outbreak of the COVID-19, there were tensions in the oil markets, particularly between Saudi Arabia and Russia. Saudi Arabia has been pushing to diminish the supply of oil to maintain high prices.

Moscow, on the other hand, was trying to keep lower energy prices to regain market shares and to overtake American shale oil producers.⁷ The tensions rose and the OPEC+⁸ meeting scheduled in March 2020 had to be suspended.⁹ The so called price war ended when Russia finally agreed to diminish its oil production at the beginning of April 2020.¹⁰ With the COVID-19 outbreak, the demand in energy rapidly diminished and the oil prices plummeted, leading to negative crude oil prices in April 2020.¹¹

¹ <https://www.csis.org/analysis/russias-response-covid-19>

² Ibid.

³ <https://стопкоронавирус.рф/#operational-data>

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[https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/ATAG/2020/646168/EPRS_ATA\(2020\)646168_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/ATAG/2020/646168/EPRS_ATA(2020)646168_EN.pdf)

⁵ <https://meduza.io/en/cards/the-constitutionality-of-six-terms>

⁶ In 2017, the oil revenues represented 6.4% of the Russian GDP

<https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.PETR.RT.ZS?locations=RU>

⁷ <https://www.csis.org/analysis/putin-and-covid-crisis-instability-opportunity>

⁸ OPEC+ consists of the members of the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries, plus Russia and ten other exporting countries.

⁹ <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-oil-opec-saudi-russia/opec-meeting-delayed-as-saudi-arabia-and-russia-row-over-oil-price-collapse-sources-idUSKBN21M0FY>

¹⁰ <https://www.worldoil.com/news/2020/4/9/saudi-arabia-and-russia-end-their-oil-price-war-with-output-cut-agreement>

¹¹ <https://oilprice.com/Latest-Energy-News/World-News/Are-Negative-Oil-Prices-About-To-Become-The-New-Normal.html>

Furthermore, the current pandemic is also likely to have significant consequences on Russia’s foreign policy. Russia has been active on multiple fronts, including eastern Ukraine, Syria and Libya, where member states of the European Union (EU) are also involved. The COVID-19 outbreak is likely to create more tensions between Russia and its geopolitical contenders as the situation created by the virus could be taken as a geopolitical opportunity by Moscow. Russia could thus benefit from a disunited European Union and affirm itself further as one of the main geopolitical contenders of the EU.

Current debates: COVID-19, an opportunity or a threat for Russia’s foreign policy?

There are two competing visions about the impact of COVID-19 on Russia: the current epidemic could be seen as a threat for Russia’s diplomatic and military actions, or it could be a geopolitical opportunity for Russia to pursue its foreign policy objectives.

Since the beginning of the COVID-19 outbreak, EU members states have been widely criticised for their lack of coordination and solidarity.¹² The US, on the other hand, has been facing internal turmoil and has not presented itself as a leader in the global fight against COVID-19.¹³ In the meantime, other geopolitical contenders of the European Union, including Russia and China, are pushing their narrative about COVID-19, and are enhancing their visibility on the international stage.

One of the tools used by Russia during the COVID-19 pandemic to help achieve its foreign policy objectives is the disinformation campaigns. The disinformation campaigns regarding the coronavirus have been particularly vivid on social media platforms and Russian media outlets.¹⁴ The European External Action Service (EEAS) identified 110 disinformation cases defaming the efficiency of the EU’s action¹⁵ or questioning the origin of the virus.¹⁶

The proliferation of misleading content tends to create more confusion both for national and international audiences. In that respect, the Russian disinformation campaign was described as “systematic, well resourced, and perpetrated on a larger scale than similar campaigns by any other country.”¹⁷

Disinformation is an important tool of Russian foreign policy, used even before the COVID-19 outbreak. It was already denounced in the 2016 US elections, the 2019 European Parliament elections or the yellow vests protests in France.¹⁸ It is, however, difficult to assess the impact of such disinformation on its audience.¹⁹

Russia can seize the opportunity of the pandemic to undermine rival powers, first through disinformation but also by offering visible help, to accumulate soft power, which can mean a lot for

¹² <https://www.euractiv.com/section/coronavirus/news/commission-chief-meps-slam-lack-of-eu-solidarity-in-covid19-crisis/>

¹³ <https://www.fpri.org/article/2020/03/the-effect-of-covid-19-on-the-u-s-economy/>

¹⁴ <https://euvsdisinfo.eu/eeas-special-report-update-2-22-april/>

¹⁶ <https://euvsdisinfo.eu/eeas-special-report-disinformation-on-the-coronavirus-short-assessment-of-the-information-environment/>

¹⁷ <https://carnegieeurope.eu/strategieurope/81322>

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ <https://www.csis.org/analysis/russias-response-covid-19>

many other countries in a time where the EU is divided more than ever and the US is not willing to lead.²⁰

Military medics and medical equipment, as well as protective equipment and ventilators, were for instance sent by Russia to the US²¹, Italy²² and Serbia²³. This humanitarian effort has been widely criticised for playing on the European lack of unity.²⁴ Offering assistance is a way for Moscow to appear as a potential partner and to build a better image abroad. Russia's assistance received criticisms for its ulterior motives but also because some of the equipment provided by Russia was faulty.²⁵

Russia can use the COVID-19 crisis to request the international community to lift its sanctions as well. Reviving the international discussion on sanctions would be an important geopolitical gain for Moscow. Russia has been under sanctions since its illegal annexation of Crimea in March 2014²⁶ and its support to self-proclaimed governments in eastern Ukraine.²⁷

International sanctions have a strong economic impact on the Russian economy and in a period of crisis, Moscow would want them to be removed. The United Nations (UN) stated that under the pandemic's special circumstances, economic sanctions could be temporary eased to avoid the collapse of frail health systems in states under sanctions, such as Iran, Venezuela or the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK).²⁸

In that regard, Russia suggested lifting international sanctions to provide targeted states with the economic capability to contain the virus. During the G20 meeting in March 2020, President Putin called for a moratorium on sanctions for essential goods.²⁹ However, Russia is not at the moment in an economic position as fragile as the other states mentioned by the UN.

Lifting the sanctions against Russia during the pandemic could have strong consequences. It might eventually lead to the recognition of Russia's territorial claims in Ukraine. Since 2014, the EU has maintained its consensus towards Russia, yet some EU member states, such as Italy and/or Hungary, could be inclined to resume a dialogue with Moscow.³⁰

As some European member states want to benefit from Russia's assistance during the pandemic, the EU consensus on sanctions against Russia could be eroded. Heather A. Conley, Senior Vice President

²⁰ <https://www.cepa.org/from-russia-with-love-think-again>

²¹ <https://www.state.gov/u-s-purchase-of-needed-supplies-from-russia/>

²² <https://www.lastampa.it/topnews/primo-piano/2020/04/01/news/gli-aiuti-russi-in-italia-sul-coronavirus-il-generale-che-li-guida-e-i-timori-sull-intelligence-militare-in-azione-1.38664749>

²³ <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2020/04/03/russia-sends-military-coronavirus-aid-to-serbia-a69864>

²⁴ <https://www.cepa.org/from-russia-with-love-think-again>

²⁵ https://www.lastampa.it/topnews/primo-piano/2020/03/25/news/coronavirus-la-telefonata-conte-putin-agita-il-governo-piu-che-aiuti-arrivano-militari-russi-in-italia-1.38633327?refresh_ce

²⁶ <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/policies/sanctions/ukraine-crisis/>

²⁷ <https://www.crisisgroup.org/europe-central-asia/eastern-europe/ukraine/256-peace-ukraine-i-european-war>

²⁸ <https://news.un.org/en/story/2020/03/1060092>

²⁹ <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-health-coronavirus-g20-putin/putin-at-g20-summit-proposes-lifting-sanctions-on-essential-goods-amid-coronavirus-idUSKBN21D3DR>

³⁰ <https://www.europeanleadershipnetwork.org/commentary/friend-or-foe-mapping-the-positions-of-eu-member-states-on-russia-sanctions/>

for Europe, Eurasia and the Arctic in the CSIS explained that “a weakened Europe would be more susceptible to Russian and Chinese influence, ultimately accommodating their preferences.”³¹

Ukraine is strongly against easing sanctions against Russia unless the Minsk Agreements³² are implemented and until the Ukrainian’s territorial integrity is restored.³³ President Zelensky’s first year of presidency has not yet managed to fulfil the promise of ending the war in eastern Ukraine.³⁴ However, there were some encouraging signs between Kyiv and Moscow, with multiple exchanges of prisoners, the latest one taking place in eastern Ukraine on April 16th 2020.³⁵

The geopolitical gains of COVID-19 for Russia, specifically the discussion on international sanctions and the campaign to improve Moscow’s image abroad, can be nuanced. For instance. Moscow has recently been struggling to impose its view in Syria where Syrian President Bashar al-Assad refused to follow Russia’s advice when negotiating with the Syrian opposition.³⁶

Assad, who retained his grip on power through the Russian intervention, refuses at the moment to compromise on a political settlement. However, Russia seems more incline to negotiate an end to the conflict in Syria while it still has the upper hand to maintain its influence in the region.³⁷ A weakened Russia due to a COVID-19 recession could struggle further to impose its vision in Syria.

To date, the COVID-19 outbreak does not seem to jeopardise Russia’s efforts on the international stage. On the contrary, Moscow was capable to promote its narrative about the pandemic and was able to launch a dialogue on sanctions. However, a weakened economy might impair Russia’s foreign policy objectives.

Conclusion and outlook

During the COVID-19 outbreak, Russia has been consistent in its foreign policy. Leaning on existing tools, such as disinformation and humanitarian assistance, Moscow attempted to push the international community towards a certain direction, to discuss lifting sanctions for the 2014 annexation of Ukraine and the Russian support to self-proclaimed governments in east Ukraine.

Two potential scenarios could be drawn for Russia’s foreign policy after COVID-19. First, a global economic recession could jeopardise Russian ambitions abroad. The combination of international sanctions and a weak economy could prevent Russia from multiplying fronts. The socio-economic domestic situation could become critical and could negatively impact Russia’s foreign policy.

However, Russia could grow stronger as other international players are increasingly divided. Russia has already managed to impose itself as a key player in multiple conflicts, playing on the lack of unity of EU member states and the vacuum left by the current American leadership. Libya is a good example of Russia’s ambition. Moscow has secured a front-row seat in negotiations on Libya by benefiting from the divisions between Italy and France.³⁸ It is unlikely that Russia would abandon its position in global conflicts.

³¹ <https://www.csis.org/analysis/eroding-european-union>

³² Minsk agreements were negotiated in 2015 and 2016 by the OSCE.

³³ <https://www.ukrinform.net/rubric-polytics/2908600-ukraines-permanent-representative-at-un-lifting-of-sanctions-illtimed.html>

³⁴ <https://mailchi.mp/bearmarketbrief/one-year-of-zelensky>

³⁵ <https://www.osce.org/special-monitoring-mission-to-ukraine/450805>

³⁶ <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2020-04-28/putin-has-a-syria-headache-and-the-kremlin-s-blaming-assad>

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ <https://www.forbes.com/sites/aldasairlane/2020/01/10/eu-sidelined-on-libya-as-russia-and-turkey-take-leading-role/>

Furthermore, Russia’s foreign policy also include a long-term strategy in Africa. In North-Africa with Libya and in Sub-Saharan Africa with the presence of Russian private military groups in the Central African Republic.³⁹ Despite COVID-19, Russia has a strong interest in maintaining its presence in these regions, thus increasingly competing with existing influence in the region, in particular EU member states. Russian foreign policy remains ambitious but could be scaled down in case of a seriously weakened Russian economy in post-COVID-19.

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³⁹ <https://www.csis.org/events/online-event-russias-private-military-companies-example-wagner-group>