



**Groupe de réflexion
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Critical review: *Nationalism vs. Globalization vs. COVID-19.*

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The new coronavirus pandemic will be an exceptional stress test for globalization. What we have seen so far is key supply chains being disrupted, countries are seeking to stockpile medicines and limit the movement of people. The crisis is forcing everyone to rethink the interconnected global economy. International trade and travels have directly contributed to the spread of the viral pandemic, which in return highlighted the interdependence of companies and countries, making them targets of unexpected shocks. Companies and governments have suddenly discovered how vulnerable they are. Apart from giving globalization a stress test it might fail, the COVID-19 pandemic snapped international relations back to the realities of nation states. While world players are trying to cooperate, whether through international institutions or bilateral cooperation, the main burden of the crisis lies on states and their respective governments. The isolationism brought by the pandemic revealed an 'each one for their own' scenario, borders are put on lock, international air travel is put on hold, and each state is managing the crisis as it sees fit. The global pandemic could very possibly leave a fertile ground for nationalism. While many experts agree that the coronavirus phase is going to be a breaking point in the international affairs system, we cannot know for sure what is going to happen next. What we know is that the variables we knew before the pandemic are not going to be the same after it ends. Global dynamics are ought to change. Up until the start of the pandemic, we lived in a "post-globalized"¹ world, the dynamics were more or less clear. Nonetheless, in recent years the world witnessed several waves of reemerging nationalism. Brexit, President Donald Trump elections and the make America great again slogan, the unsuccessful Scottish referendum for independence, the Catalonian secession attempt, right wing parties winning elections in EU countries, and other events marked the past five years. In the debate of Globalization vs. Nationalism we cannot leave the COVID-19 pandemic behind, the way the world is going to step out of this crisis is going to determine what is going to happen next. What did the pandemic unveil? What is in it for Globalization as we know it, and are we witnessing the continuation and reinforcement of the nationalism trend?

When discussing globalization and in the context of the pandemic framework, we should highlight the following: The development of international markets, the free movement of economic and political capital, the increased informational flow, migrants and tourists, alongside with the formation of transnational and international financial, economic and political institutions would eventually unite peoples and states in a global entity. However, it soon became clear that globalization, not only does not destroy, but also plays a role in preserving the established order and hierarchy of peoples and nations. Contradictions between different ethnic groups, nations, states, between national states and international power structures, amongst large regional communities, between interstate strategic associations and blocs, did not magically fade away.

¹ Michael O'Sullivan, 2019, "The Levelling: What's Next After Globalization", Goodbye to Globalization, Public Affairs, p.215-216.

Instead, this antagonism appears to have grown more acute, revealing even more issues and areas of conflict.

Why post-Globalization? After the end of the Second World War and particularly with the ‘Cold War’, keeping ocean and sea trade open the US market was a priority. It was essential to have access to most markets in the world thus to be able to create enough supply to satisfy the world's economic demand. Capital was scarce and this strategy worked up until the late 1980's. With the early 1990's, with the end of the Cold War, Europe, slowly but surely, had recovered and created its productive capacity. Then China entered the global economy with its hundreds millions productive workers. This became a breaking point in the context of globalization benefits. Global economy went from being a supply constrained growth environment to being in a demand constrained growth environment – there is not enough demand. The way states enjoyed globalization is no more. Indeed, we still benefit from international trade, international travel and most of the benefits of an interconnected world. Nevertheless, the world has outgrown that phase; we are now in a transitional period. It is a possibility that this phase will be defined by the current pandemic, which is buying us time to rethink before the next phase or the next global crisis.

The processes of globalization in the financial and informational spheres trespassed on the prerogatives of national states. While it is an obvious feature of global dynamics, economic advantages for several developed countries turned out as significant losses for many other states, which ignited a defensive reaction – the elites of the second and third world countries strive to make use of the mobilization of ideological and political opportunities of national States. Mainly we are referring to nationalism as the reaction to globalization dynamics. In turn, and in the first world countries, almost everywhere there is growing discontent with foreign-cultural immigrants, the influx of which, even in the United States, is considered a threat to national identity. This discontent was greatly noticeable in the European Union. While Germany announced an open border policy towards immigrants, less developed European states refused to share the load. Today, Germany, Sweden, France and other European states still suffer from the migrants' crisis, which was reflected in European election polls – right wing parties profited from the crisis and made a good use of populism, challenging the European liberal-globalized outlook.

As humanity becomes more and more interconnected, it continues to be divided in many ways. On one hand, globalization threatens the continued existence of nation states, as the most widespread institutional form. On the other hand, globalization stimulates the growth of state activity, thus as a reaction to globalization, ethnic, religious, cultural, political issues and matters present a challenge if these issues become globalized. In this regard, hyperglobalists talk about the future "post-national state", "network society" or "global Empire". In contrast, skeptics and anti-globalists claim that the national state has not exhausted its historical resource and demand a return to the international community, the subjects of which would not be transnational, international, and cross-national institutions of political, economic and cultural spheres of life, but as before, sovereign national states or stateless ethnic groups. Thus, nationalism as a form of expression of national state sovereignty and as a political principle state building in the context of nation continues to be a trend as well as a great factor of modern historical development, realized in complex interaction with the globalization of humanity.

Following Bertrand Russell's definition, nationalism consists essentially in collective self-glorification and in a conviction that it is right to pursue the interests of one's own nation. However, these interests may conflict with those of others. Also according to Russell, the

emphasis upon the merits of one's own nation over others is oddly enough perceived as a virtue. Quoting Russell: What should we think of an individual who proclaimed 'I am morally and intellectually superior to all other individuals, and, because of this superiority, I have a right to ignore all interests except my own'? There are, no doubt, plenty of people who feel this way, but if they proclaim their feeling too openly, and act upon it too blatantly, they are thought ill of."²

From a theoretical viewpoint, the determination of whether we are leaving nation states behind and heading towards a 'global village' with global governance as the ultimate institutions is complicated. When looking at the matter from a theoretical standpoint we stumble upon the fact that in the scientific community there is no unitary view on the nature, forms and direction of evolution of globalization, Nations (national States), or nationalism. Accordingly, there are no generally consensual concepts of these historical phenomena. While reality presents more clear examples to understand the dynamics of both nationalism and globalization. We usually tend to view globalization and nationalism as they are usually interpreted – as unrelated and even opposing historical phenomena: globalization is considered as a recent trend towards economic and political integration of peoples and countries, and nationalism as a century's old ideology and practice that separates them. When we stick to that paradigm, we start to lose a sense of reality, since it is impossible to understand why, for example, the generally recognized actors of modern globalization like Britain, the United States, member states of the G7 are also inveterate nationalists. Nationalists who are enjoying the fruits of globalization, while insisting on one key matter, a defining element in international relations – interests. Those actors who stand on the defensive of their national interests of their peoples and corporations anywhere in the world. Meanwhile they stand as globalization and post-globalization champions, almost imposing the rules of this game on other actors who might not be even aware of the stakes at hand. Moreover, international so-called cooperation is key for a successful dynamic. Institutions and organizations of global governance play the role of consolation prize for less-influential members of the international community. We give the illusion that global governance is an independent trustworthy entity, while it is highly dependent on the financial support of states (mostly the hegemon) for its survivability. The outbreak of the covid-19 pandemic started to put things on their respective tracks. One of the many examples would be how the Trump administration, being displeased with the performance of the WHO and accused it of falling under Chinese influence, withdrew its financial contribution to the health organization. To be clear, the WHO was quite passive so far during the pandemic – states preferred to take matters in their own hands and decide how they are going to go through this crisis. Even aid and medical relief is happening amongst states, bypassing the instruments of international cooperation – Simply because it is more effective this way. While it seems that this direct state to state cooperation generated trust issues, especially in western Europe, where Russia and China got accused of propaganda and seeking political gains when presenting aid to Italy to fight the pandemic – after Italy was left behind by its European Union partners, and landlocked from all possible directions.

Like the Spanish flu, SARS, influenzas, Ebola, eventually, the current outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic will be defeated. However, different epidemics affected the course of world history in different ways. Some of them can be classified as a bug in the system — a random error in a

² Bertrand Russell, 2001, *Common Sense and Nuclear Warfare*, Chapter 10, *Some Necessary Changes in Outlook*, Part II, Nationalism, Routledge, p.64-65.

computer program that leads to an unplanned and undesirable result. Others acquired the character of a feature — that is, they became an organic property, an essential feature, a characteristic feature, an unchangeable function, and even an additional feature of the program. In other words, created a new constant in our international system.

The first scenario is that the pandemic is going to be a bug in the system. This is likely if humanity as a victim of the pandemic, as well as state and non-state actors who have become victims of the epidemic, is able to draw the necessary conclusions from the disaster and prevent its recurrence in the future. Which also means that no considerable change is going to follow the pandemic. It is more likely that the global quarantine will be used as a cover to prepare to the post covid-19 phase. The world is not going to change its course, however, some scenarios could benefit from this under the radar phase. The second scenario, when the pandemic and what is brought is not treated and addressed accordingly, the problems it generated and issues it unveiled are going to remain as a constant until the next global crisis. This would be unavoidable if the necessary conclusions are not drawn, the lessons of the disaster are forgotten, and the epidemic does not change the usual political priorities, management approaches, psychological attitudes and old way of life. A bug is perceived as a problem, a feature as an inevitability. Humanity fights with the bug, lives with the features. The current coronavirus pandemic could change that, still unlikely that we are to give up on our old habits of waiting until it goes by itself. No serious measures were taken against the pandemic until the death rate skyrocketed.

When the pandemic passes, the restrictions to travel are going to be lifted. However, it is unlikely that there will be a full recovery, and some would say that there is no going back to the world, which existed before Covid-19. There is an opinion that the nation-state is returning, aided by this extraordinary crisis. Global governance has failed, and globalization as we know it did not stand the test of self-isolation. The pandemic revealed several dynamics. The variables we knew of the international system could hold as much as no value after we overcome the crisis. Suspicions and mutual accusations between the United States and China.

We shall highlight three features, which are likely to remain as constant feature in the post covid-19 world. Something for us to consider when we are to analyze the development of the situation further ahead.

- First, the pandemic demonstrated so far that during an emergency, people have a tendency to return within the state. The state that has independent financial, organizational capabilities, rather than to global institutions. People fall back under the protection of the “shell”.

- Second, the disease revealed the fragility of global logistics. It is hard to believe that the big players of the international arena are going to continue to put up with a situation in which they have to import most of their vital medical supplies, being dependent on aid from supposed possible rivals. While all states, no exceptions benefited from mutual aid, each and every state tried to undermine this factor. For a very good reason, times of crisis are the least favorable time for anyone to question the effectiveness of the “shell” and its readiness and ability to protect its people.

Finally, the pandemic is strengthening political trends that were already strong before the crisis. In particular, the demand for increased protectionism, localization of production and stricter border controls.

At the moment, a temporary tightening of border control makes sense. Moreover, if this return to the national state remains, within certain limits, it will not necessarily be something bad. This will simply be a kind of political correction of the course that is present in democratic States, in response to events and changes in public mood. Nevertheless, the danger is that such a rebirth will lead to uncontrolled nationalism, which means a decline in world trade and a partial rejection of international cooperation. The worst-case scenario would be the collapse of the European Union and the breakdown of relations between the US and China, which could lead to something more serious than a trade war.

The return to within the borders of the nation-state was particularly striking in Europe. When German Chancellor Angela Merkel made an emergency address to the nation, she never mentioned the European Union³. Border control between France and Germany was suddenly restored. Financial assistance for businesses and the unemployed mostly comes directly from European countries, not from the EU. Prominent politicians in Poland, Italy and Spain have criticized the EU for failing to fulfill its pledge of solidarity. In this regard, the pressure on European solidarity is growing.

Logic suggests that in the face of a common threat, a population should rally. We as Homo sapiens, rally as a community around our nations flag. Man, as we know, is a social being. Putting aside—at least for a while — internal divisions and group conflicts, human society should focus on finding a solution to a truly universal problem.

However, what happened so far shows us that awaited changes did not take place, yet. Political leaders have shown a persistent reluctance to make any significant changes to their international agendas. The spread of the coronavirus did not prevent the recent escalation of the situation in Syria, nor the collapse of the cease-fire agreements in Libya. The transformation of Iran into one of the main centers of the pandemic did not entail even a symbolic easing of Washington's economic sanctions against Tehran. The pandemic did not prompt Russia and Saudi Arabia to make mutual concessions during the OPEC+ talks and prevent a collapse in oil prices and subsequent panic on global financial markets. In each of these cases, and in many others, the universal self-preservation interests of the human population were consistently downgraded to the background in favor of opportunistic political, economic, or other group interests. Moreover, the pandemic itself has become perceived as an opportunity to strengthen states position in geopolitical and economic competition. The first states to recover from the pandemic, are the ones to become main players in the post pandemic times. U.S. Commerce Secretary Wilbur Louis Ross said optimistically that the coronavirus epidemic "will help accelerate the return of jobs to North America." A number of Western economists were quick to declare that the pandemic would mean the end of the Chinese era in global industrial production and the final victory of the United States in the economic standoff with Beijing. This changed during the pandemic, and the tone of accusation drastically intensified between Beijing and Washington. From what we know so far, states are now more than willing to stand by their own national interests, international altruism went to the background of the daily reports. Could the pandemic actually ignite a new wave of nationalism? Could it set a casus belli for long absent interstate wars?

Hoping that this will not be the case...

³ Posaner, J. (2020, March 19). Angela Merkel: Coronavirus is Germany's biggest postwar challenge. Retrieved from <https://www.politico.eu/article/angela-merkel-coronavirus-is-germany-biggest-postwar-challenge/>