

CORONAVIRUS: between the global and the national

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MARCH
2020

This article was
previously
published
in *El País*

The coronavirus pandemic has vanished in record time the distance between global dynamics and their consequences for individuals. Against the lack of a world government and the fragility of European governance, nation-states re-emerge. In the absence of joint directives, restricting mobility and confinement remain national competences. However, nation-state is not being wholly strengthened by the coronavirus crisis, neither are we facing the definitive withdrawal of the global and supranational.

We are experiencing a global health crisis and in first person. In record time the distance has vanished between global dynamics and their consequences for individuals: a pandemic that began in China has spread across the world resulting in mass infection and the confinement of millions of people in their homes. The nation-state is re-emerging between the global and individual levels as the main guarantor of people's health and the entity coordinating crisis management.

In his famous book, *Man, the State, and War*, Kenneth Waltz proposed three levels of analysis – individual, state and system – that combine at the international level. Coronavirus is bringing about their frenetic recalibration. Globalisation has broken down barriers through global value chains and dynamics of interconnection and interdependence that are able to transcend state boundaries. But these dynamics have not been translated into a world government and trust continues to be placed in the nation-state as the main actor of international relations (with the consent of supranational organisations, transnational corporations and a globalised civil society).

The logical question is whether the central role nation-states are playing in the response to the coronavirus implies the decline of the global and supranational, as we understand them today. When human life is threatened, it returns to the centre of everything, and the first reaction is to cling to what we know. We tend to look for references close by and distrust the foreign, the diffuse and the global. We take refuge in our rooting *somewhere*, for a moment setting aside the sense of belonging *anywhere* that inhabits us as globalised beings.

At the international political level, the relationship between the global and the national also swings like a pendulum. The crisis of the 1930s that followed the

First World War and the 1929 crash brought about the rise of fascism and Nazism that in turn led to World War II. Later, the new internationalist moment that rose from the ashes of the League of Nations gave rise to multiple international organisations, structured politically around the United Nations system and economically around the Bretton Woods institutions (the World Bank and International Monetary Fund), and the General Agreement on Trade and Tariffs (predecessor of the World Trade Organization).

In the 1980s, Thatcher and Reagan's neoliberal wave claimed that there was no such thing as society, only individuals, families and of course markets. When the Cold War ended, Fukuyama's theory of an international system based on the market economy and political liberalism prevailed. As technology advanced and markets globalised, state sovereignty seemed to take a back seat. Concepts such as the responsibility to protect and human security – as opposed to that of states – emerged as key international security principles.

In the 21st century thus far new powers have been returning national interests to the heart of their foreign policies. After a decade of crisis, the rise of populism and hyperleadership has led to an emphasis on the national as a framework for defending sovereign interests, transactional bilateralism as a basis for foreign policy and unrelenting criticism of international institutions. Even the idea of a “populist international” has failed due to the disparate national priorities of the populist forces.

It is in this context that the coronavirus seems to have swung the pendulum towards the national, and the EU is no exception. In the absence of joint directives, restricting mobility and confinement remain national competences. The measures taken on healthcare and response to the pandemic diverge between EU states and sometimes within them, between central and regional governments.

The use of security forces is centrally controlled and fiscal packages for public spending and to compensate companies and workers are designed according to national logics. EU member states are re-establishing borders and restricting the freedoms of movement associated with the single market and Schengen. Some even banned the export of medical supplies to Italy in anticipation of their citizens' needs for protection (a national consideration), ignoring the rules of the single market. And, naturally, populism seeks to make political capital from coronavirus, with Boris Johnson taking idiosyncratic measures to suppress the contagion curve, Trump referring to it as the “Chinese virus” and Orbán, Salvini and Le Pen calling for border closures.

The return to the national is probably necessary to curb the contagion curve of Covid-19, given that member states have primary responsibility for social, health and border control policy. And, indeed, this is also a return to the familiar: a system of states that has shaped international relations since the Peace of Westphalia in 1648 and with which, from a historical perspective, fragile international institutions less than a century old cannot compete.

But not everything is national in the coronavirus crisis, starting with the pandemic itself. The World Health Organization is setting the guidelines to follow. Research on a new vaccine is conducted in transnational research groups. Stimulus plans should be in line with the rules set by the EU and international financial institutions. Global value chains influence productive capacity just as much as national lockdowns, and many companies have found themselves forced to close due to a lack of supplies from Asia.

China has already offered Italy and Spain medical equipment, and the cancellation of sporting events and trade fairs depends on decisions made by international bodies. Populist forces dislike the reevaluation of experts, the use of scientific data for crisis management, and the public attention received by the political message and its messengers, the political leaders, each time they emerge to detail a new action plan.

So while the nation-state is not being wholly strengthened by the coronavirus crisis, neither are we facing the definitive withdrawal of the global and supranational. As always, the two levels coexist. In the EU, the capacity for common action on health and border control is subordinate to the prerogatives of member states. There is a lack of wider European coordination of the measures to “flatten the curve”, of initiatives to ensure the supply of medical equipment in the single market and of leadership to activate an ambitious investment and fiscal package.

This is the result of fragility and a lack of effectiveness in European governance, but it does not mean the national has won a decisive victory. The results at supranational level are disappointing and the conditions for its reform remain absent. The coronavirus crisis is yet more proof that we remain trapped in the same tragedy as ever: a full return to the national sphere is no longer possible, but the conditions and political will to reform and improve the functioning of global governance mechanisms are also lacking.