



INTERNATIONAL WEBINARS AND LIVE EVENTS

Competing Global Narratives: Covid-19 and Beyond

Geneva Centre for Security Policy, 4 June 2020

Panellists:

Prof. Yulia Nikitina, Leading Research Fellow, Centre for Post-Soviet Studies, MGIMO University, Russia

Ms Xinyu Yuan, Doctoral Researcher, The Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies, Geneva

Dr Reinhard Krumm, Head of Regional Office for Cooperation and Peace in Europe, Vienna, Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, Germany

Dr Daniel Warner, former Deputy to the Director, The Graduate Institute, Geneva

Mr Patrick Mathys, Head of Section for Crisis Management and International Cooperation, Swiss Federal Office of Public Health

Mr Kazushige Kobayashi, Doctoral student, The Graduate Institute, Geneva

Moderator: **Alexandra Matas**, Head, Effective Governance Cluster, GCSP

The Moderator opened the panel by underlining that the **Covid-19 crisis has amplified divergent narratives reflecting pre-existing cleavages**, between Russia, the US, the EU, China. The narratives show a steep rise in **self-isolationism, protectionism**, and a **decline in multilateralism**. The panel discussion would hopefully find common ground to revive international cooperation.

Yulia Nikitina observed that in the case of Russia, the narrative basically concerned **global power as opposed to State capacity**. In the Western view, Russia was using propaganda and soft power by distributing humanitarian and medical assistance to Italy, US, which was found to be inappropriate and useless. The view also questioned the **credibility of Russian official sources**, in particular the **figures of coronavirus deaths**. The conceptual frame of Covid narratives comprises three concepts: Democratic accountability; Rule of Law; and, State capacity. The third ought to be considered the most important, as it concerns the delivery and quality of services in the sectors of health, security, education.

Xinyu Yuan dealt with the **Chinese narrative of Covid-19**. She noted that during the early stages of the pandemic, China focused on scientific data and recognition of international support received from Japan, Germany, the US, among others. Later on, **the narrative evolved**, highlighting **China's efforts in containing the pandemic** and refuting Western narratives, notably related to the Chinese origin of the virus. However, it avoided undue politicization, observing that this was an issue best left to the scientists. This approach opened a window of opportunity to ease tensions and downplay competing narratives.

Daniel Warner spoke about the **US narrative**, underlining at the outset that the current **situation in the US was volatile** and that the presidential election in November represented the most vital and unavoidable element in the national landscape. He submitted five observations: **Will the election take place** and how would people vote directly, as there remained legal issues about voting by mail. **Racial issues** have come to the forefront with Covid-19, for disproportionate numbers of blacks and Latin-Americans have been affected by the virus, thereby putting the **health system under heavy criticism**. There is finally a dramatic fading away of the American dream with unheard of **unemployment and a failure of health care**. The US narrative has thus been a result of this failure and consisted of finding someone to blame, such as China by naming Covid the **Chinese virus**, blaming and pulling out of **WHO**, multilateral agreements like the Paris climate agreement, nuclear deals with Russia, criticizing the WTO, the UN. All this is not a revival of the Cold War as there is no ideology at stake. It is basically an American problem. The implication is a **leadership vacuum at the international level**, blocking the UN Security Council and, more generally, **international cooperation**. In the evolving, post-pandemic world model, the private sector such as the likes of Bill Gates and Mark Zuckerberg, are in the process of **filling the leadership vacuum**.

Reinhard Krumm stated that the **EU perspective in the Covid-19** crisis reflected two often conflicting issues: **international responsibility and internal recovery**. Even before the onset of the pandemic the EU was weak, with Brexit and a sharply declining Euro. The crisis came as a **determining test**. The critical debate was on State capacity, polarized by differing political cultures. One, the northern EU comprising Scandinavia and the Netherlands, was not in favour of supporting the southern, namely Greece and Spain. Here the **Franco-German initiative** on an unprecedented relief package constituted a turning point, it proved that not national interests, but **the Union was in the driver's seat for getting money from the markets**. The EU might be on its way to **becoming a political player to reckon with**, something unimaginable earlier. It is working towards more international cooperation, supporting the UN and other multilateral and regional organizations. In this way, **Covid-19 can be considered to have been a catalyst for the EU**.

Patrick Mathys explained that in a crisis such as Covid-19, public health is managed at the Federal, Cantonal and Regional levels. New legislation enacted in 2016 – **the Epidemics Act** – drew **lessons from previous pandemics** such as bird flu and influenza, which was very helpful. The highest priority was protection of **public health**, by preventing hospital overloading and steps to contain spread of the virus. This included a partial lockdown, special protection for vulnerable groups, social distancing, border closures. Intensive communication was undertaken by the authorities to inform and explain to the public. The exit strategy now consists of testing, contact tracing, quarantine for exposed persons. **Switzerland's success** in dealing with the pandemic largely reflects the Swiss political system and the political culture of its citizens and residents.

Kazushige Kobayashi referred briefly to the **Japanese narrative**. The governments efforts were criticized as ineffective by certain politicians and press sectors. However, **Japan was more successful**, particularly in terms of figures, than many Western nations such as Germany, France, Italy. An important element in this success was **regional cooperation** in times of crises, which during the pandemic was very fruitful with South Korea and China.