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Pandemic Politics in Eurasia: Roadmap for a New Research Subfield

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ABSTRACT
The sudden onset of COVID-19 has challenged many social scientists to proceed without a robust theoretical and empirical foundation upon which to build. Addressing this challenge, particularly as it pertains to Eurasia, our multinational group of scholars draws on past and ongoing research to suggest a roadmap for a new pandemic politics research subfield. Key research questions include not only how states are responding to the new coronavirus, but also reciprocal interactions between the pandemic and society, political economy, regime type, center-periphery relations, and international security. The Foucauldian concept of "biopolitics" holds out particular promise as a theoretical framework.

Introduction

Rarely do major research themes spring upon a discipline so suddenly that scholars must proceed without a robust research foundation upon which to build, without widespread knowledge of relevant works that do exist, and without the time to consult thoroughly with peers to develop a common research agenda. Such a situation is all the more remarkable for topics that have the potential to impact virtually all aspects of politics in all countries of the world. Yet this is the challenge scholars face with the COVID-19 pandemic. While it is probably fair to say that most political scientists would have agreed, if asked, that a severe pandemic could have political consequences, the topic of pandemic politics is all but absent in the discipline's most-read journals, and precious few political scientists have heretofore focused substantially on health politics. Thus while Eurasia has certainly experienced pandemics in the past (Cromley 2010), any lessons that might have been drawn from them have remained, at best, peripheral to the study of politics in the region.

This article seeks to help scholars meet this research (and teaching) challenge as it pertains to one particular part of the world, Eurasia. It does so by bringing together (virtually, due to the pandemic) a large multinational group of coauthors, mostly but not only political scientists, to hammer out a broad research agenda for the field. The group includes some of the few who have long made health a centerpiece of their own scholarly inquiry as well as many who are expert on key topics that now intersect with the pandemic and who are rapidly "tooling up" on the health side. Jointly, we hope to have produced a document that scholars will find useful in identifying important questions for research, framing debates, advancing some ideas, and directing scholars who are now (like us) rigorously engaging pandemic politics to relevant prior studies.

While we define "Eurasia" here as covering countries that about three decades ago gained independence from the USSR, we strongly suspect that the conclusions we draw for this part of the world will be relevant and helpful to scholars of other parts of the world. Indeed, most of the pandemic-related challenges facing Eurasia are also global challenges. At the same time, the peculiarities of the Eurasian context – and, within it, its various countries, localities, and peoples – means that the degree to which answers to different research questions will apply outside (or even within) the area will vary. For this reason, we do not take a stand on which specific questions will be applicable to which specific countries beyond Eurasia or regions within Eurasia. Instead, our goal is simply to focus on questions relevant to Eurasia, and to let those who actually conduct future research address how broadly their studies are likely to apply.

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The lessons we learn from COVID-19 will help us better understand what we are experiencing today and better prepare us to address future possible pandemics or, as now seems likely, subsequent waves of this one. At the same time, we argue that the pandemic will also help us find new and better answers to questions that the field has long been asking about Eurasia (and many countries of the world). Large-scale outbreaks of infectious diseases (with COVID-19 arguably being the most consequential in living memory) can serve as magnifying glasses for studying the societies they affect, providing new insight into societies' vulnerabilities and resiliency in the face of crisis. Viral epidemics not only exploit weaknesses in individuals' immune systems. They also test societal immunity by functioning as stressors capable of exposing weak legitimacy, inadequate standards of living, and fractured social cohesion (Price-Smith 2008; Snowden 2019). Much as with economic crises, wars, and revolutions, pandemics can amplify ethnic and class fault lines that make societies susceptible to violence, discrimination, and oppression. They also become major foreign policy issues, potentially reshaping international relations in important ways.

The discussion below, therefore, covers a wide range of topics:

- How post-Soviet states are (and should be) addressing COVID-19 from a health policy perspective;
- Interactions between the pandemic and important aspects of society (including inequality, identity issues, and gender);
- Implications for protest and the social contract;
- Issues related to regime type (including implications of digital surveillance technologies for democracy and authoritarianism);
- Center-periphery relations;
- International relations and security.

A penultimate section considers novel contributions that might emerge from Foucauldian "biopolitics" theory, an ambitious paradigm which has always focused on the relationship between the state and human bodies and which, accordingly, has received new impetus with COVID-19. We then conclude with some reflections on the big picture we are facing as scholars and human beings.

How Health Systems Can and Do Combat Pandemics

The key research questions for the health sector in post-Soviet countries place the COVID-19 pandemic at both ends of the causal chain. What have been the key drivers of the COVID-19 response at the national and sub-national level, how have these responses impacted the pandemic itself, and how are capacities and incentives shaped by the virus likely to evolve in a post-pandemic environment?

The predecessors of today's post-Soviet health systems operated under the same conditions for most of the 20th century: centrally planned state ownership and provision of care, a commitment to universal access despite high resource scarcity, grossly inefficient incentive structures dictating both patient and provider behavior, and consequent low quality of care (Field 1967; Rechel, Richardson, and McKee 2014; Rowland and Telyukov 1991). As these countries have been free to chart their own courses over the last 25 years, they have adopted widely different models of reform. Some have privatized; some have remained state-owned. Some have allocated significant fiscal and/or political resources to their health sectors; some have continued to starve. Some have built strong networks of family doctors and primary care; some have remained dominated by inefficient over-reliance on hospitals. Some have pursued creative policy innovation; some have stagnated. Some launched meaningful reforms immediately after the Soviet collapse; others have progressed only in the last two or three years (Balabanova et al. 2011; Cook 2015; Merkur, Maresso, and McDaid 2015; Rechel et al. 2012; Stepanovich 2018).

One important avenue for research will be to establish how and why such dynamics have positioned some post-Soviet health systems more favorably than others to respond to an infectious disease pandemic. In Russia, for example, while major cities like Moscow and St. Petersburg have somewhat better health care provision (though still serious shortcomings in caring for the average citizen), rural areas are substantially worse off, with significant numbers of rural hospitals lacking hot water, running water, and electricity (Izotova 2020). This is likely to seriously constrain efforts to contain the spread of COVID-19 and to treat those affected by it.

In recommending specific paths of reform, research addressing a number of questions will be very helpful. How have varied reform efforts, implemented over the last two decades, impacted the ways and degrees to which countries in the region were prepared to handle the coronavirus pandemic? Disease surveillance and health data systems have been unevenly developed. Hospital "rationalizing," implemented in the name of sectoral efficiency, is widely assumed to have degraded capacity to treat patients in respiratory distress due to COVID-19. Years' worth of investment patterns, designed largely to address each country's specific health and demographic challenges – for example, in Russia, toward maternal and neonatal care (to respond to low birth rates) and non-communicable disease (to address high excess mortality from cardiovascular illnesses) (National Projects 2020) – may have skewed resource allocation in directions that left health systems underprepared for an infectious disease pandemic. Already, Russian Prime Minister Mikhail Mishustin has highlighted the need for rapid additional investments in primary care, telehealth, the provision of subsidized and free medicines to eligible population groups, and ambulance/emergency care as a result of lessons learned during the pandemic.

Conversely, health-system-strengthening efforts designed to address other infectious agents – such as tuberculosis and HIV/AIDS – have provided a foundation that should be transferrable to the fight against the coronavirus. Prior experience with infection control procedures, community outreach, and vaccine preparedness should have laid important groundwork. Have the skill sets of local, regional, and national public health officials been adequate for the challenge? Have the training systems for medical professionals produced physicians, nurses, lab technicians, and other health workers in the right numbers and with the right competencies to meet countries' needs? In cases where government actions and safety nets have proved insufficient, the private sector and health NGOs have already had to fill significant gaps. These questions currently lack authoritative answers and thus constitute a major gap that future research should fill.

Researchers should also be tracking – and studying in real time – how the COVID-19 pandemic interacts with preexisting divergent pathways of health sector reform to produce new reforms or resistance to reform. Will health sectors receive heightened political priority and greater financing? COVID-19 investments could enhance overall health sector capacity, but they might crowd out attention to other health priorities. Will the strategic directions of health reform – to date, largely focused on improving quality and efficiency at the expense of universal access – be rethought? How much will the activity, direction, and cohesiveness of the international aid and technical assistance community matter? The answers to these questions will be central to the future well-being of citizens in this part of the world.

Pandemics and Society: Inequalities, Patriarchy, Trust, Networks, Ethnic Profiling

The COVID-19 health crisis is also revealing important ways in which societal characteristics impact and are impacted by major public health crises. Public responses to any pandemic are conditioned by societal attitudes and the values constituting their culture. These responses can slow or accelerate the spread of the disease itself, which can, in turn, impact these same attitudes and values. We argue that particular attention is warranted to issues surrounding inequality, patriarchy, and trust in institutions and leadership.

Perhaps most prominently, the links between poverty and infectious disease are well documented in historical and contemporary studies of pandemics, bringing inequalities to the fore (Duncan and Scott 2005; Farmer 2001; Schmitt-Groher, Teoh, and Uribe 2020; Wright et al. 2020). While COVID-19 has been dubbed “the great equalizer” capable of sickening anyone, preliminary evidence from coronavirus-stricken societies suggests that it has hit the poor and marginalized harder than the affluent, controlling for age, the density of the population, and government responses (Alipio 2020; Burgen and Jones 2020; Vesoulis 2020). The poor often fall into the “high-risk” category due to preexisting health inequalities – lung, heart, obesity, and other conditions – and a lack of basic opportunities for health, wellness, and remote/online work (Mechanic and Tanner 2007; Quinn and Kumar 2014; Wright et al. 2020).

This raises a slew of important questions. If the poor in developed industrialized countries are more susceptible to infectious disease, do societies with higher rates of poverty, greater income disparity, and more widespread discrimination experience worse effects from pandemics? What factors mitigate a self-reinforcing cycle of pandemics’ impact on social and economic divisions that make the virus deadlier and more persistent? These questions face countries worldwide, but are highly pertinent to post-Soviet countries, where inequality and poverty have become – to varying degrees – enduring characteristics (Hohmann et al. 2014; Libman and Obydenkova 2019). The study of the relationship between poverty and COVID-19 could be used to better understand the extent of post-Soviet social stratification resulting from development efforts and urbanization.

Family power dynamics and related cultural norms present another politically charged arena in which the virus and society interact. These include power relationships between men and women as well as attitudes toward death. Many post-Soviet cultures are profoundly patriarchal, aptly represented by Vladimir Putin’s macho leadership style and traditionalist authoritarian agenda (Sperling 2014). It has been noted that overperformance of masculinity often belies deep anxieties and vulnerabilities (Novitskaya 2017). Threatened by the havoc of COVID-19, the leadership of Belarus, alongside large segments of other post-Soviet countries’ affected populations, have taken on a “bravado attitude” toward the coronavirus, ignoring experts’ admonitions (Kramer 2020). The bravado attitude interacts with a pervasive fatalism that has permeated Russian culture for centuries (Goodwin and Allen 2000; Nemtsova 2020), a belief that the end is inevitable, and therefore people should enjoy things while they still can (Solomon 2003), but which is not specific to Russia. Distrust in government and the prevalence of fatalist and machismo beliefs can make larger swaths of society susceptible to conspiracy theories and fake news (Coaston 2020; Jakub Šrol, Mikušková, and Cavojova 2020), with the resultant coronavirus-denialists’ subculture increasing society’s vulnerability to the disease. The role of Orthodox religion and the Orthodox Church, with some of the clerics rekindling deeply eschatological expectations focusing on the end of the world (Berkhead 2020; Deutsche Welle 2020) is another aspect of cultural milieus’ interactions with the epidemiological crisis.

Generalized trust (as opposed to trusting specific individuals one personally knows) also appears to be emerging as a major societal factor that is impacting the battle with the pandemic and that might be substantially impacted by it. In most post-Soviet countries, citizens’ distrust of government, politicians, and health care providers has been a norm (Sapsford et al. 2015). But it remains an underexplored question how citizens’ attitudes toward public institutions affect the spread of the coronavirus. Public trust in government has been dubbed “a reservoir of good will” (Turper and Aarts 2017) that is critical for citizens’ compliance with policy decisions, especially in times of crisis. Accordingly, it is widely believed to be important for obtaining citizen compliance with public orders of social-distancing, self-isolation, and quarantine, which in turn are generally believed to be essential to slowing the spread of coronavirus (Van Bavel et al. 2020; Plohl and Musil 2020). Researchers would do well, therefore, to explore how the considerable variation in the observance of public orders and new social norms among post-Soviet countries (and worldwide) relates to trust in institutions and in their specific leaders (McKee et al. 2013).

Certain peculiarities of social context common among most post-Soviet countries are also worthy of special attention by scholars, including what has variously be called “network society” (Kononenko and Moshes 2011), the “economy of favors” (Ledeneva 1998), “neopatrimonialism” (Fisun 2012; Laruelle 2012), or “patronalism” (Hale 2015). Implications for state policymaking have been explored in the case of Russia, for example, by Hill and Gaddy. They contrast Russia’s policymaking “by network” to “ends-justify-means” policymaking – all-out campaigns to achieve a goal that the leadership (typically, a military junta) is carried away with (Hill and Gaddy 2015). The latter form of policymaking may deliver results in the short term, but crumbles in the face of a failure – military juntas commonly collapse soon after being defeated in external conflicts they initiate, for example (Klapsis et al. 2020; Pion-Berlin 1985). In contrast, political systems that practice policymaking "by network" – a closely knit elite community cutting across many segments of bureaucracy and society and united by a shared vision and/or business interests – have been more resilient.

Faced with strong resistance, networks in the ruling coalition can regroup, adapt, and redefine their goals. Maintaining the integrity of the network is more important than achieving almost any single goal because the network believes that better opportunities are yet to emerge in the future. The flip side of policymaking by network includes dilution of responsibility and aversion to learning the lessons or removing "weak links" because such measures can undermine the implicit contract that keeps the network together. That, in turn, can lead to chronically suboptimal policy results (Hill and Gaddy 2015). A shock on the scale of COVID-19 may help to reinvent the network and keep it in place, but may also discredit it as incapable of the mobilization required to respond to the crisis. What kind of variables shape the outcome?

In addition to studying societal resilience and vulnerability to the virus itself, it is important to explore societal vulnerability to the "epidemiological imaginary," whereby the language of pandemics becomes a new rhetorical tool to frame events in social and political life. It can, for instance, foster xenophobia and racism and trigger implicit or explicit bias. The scapegoating of outsiders or migrants for spreading the virus has happened with practically every pandemic and serious disease outbreak (Taylor 2019). COVID-19 is no exception. Some of the early manifestations of the coronavirus in Central Asia, for example, came with attacks on Chinese migrants. In Georgia, a wave of xenophobia targeting ethnic Azeris blamed for spreading the coronavirus engulfed social media. Attitudinal changes toward Chinese have surfaced in Russia and Ukraine. The virus has sharpened biases and suspicions against labor migrants. If pandemics exacerbate racial and ethnic divides, do racial attitudes affect the spread of the coronavirus? A likely impact of racism on COVID-19 may be discouraging or preventing scapegoated communities from seeking health assistance, making the targeted group more vulnerable to the disease.

Transformed State-Society Relations? Protest and the Social Contract

The pandemic also has the potential to profoundly shape state-society relations more generally, including what the state asks of citizens and what citizens ask (or demand) of the state, and the new state of such relationships can easily impact the spread of the pandemic.

One set of questions concerns health communication, in particular the ways in which people respond to health-related information coming from the state. For one thing, we know precious little about how what leaders say (not just the policies they implement) actually influences citizen behavior. Are citizens really less likely to engage in pro-health behaviors when, for example, Belarus President Lukashenko jokes that a big shot of vodka may be a good way for ordinary people to combat the virus? Or, when Russia's First Channel admonishes people to wear masks in public and stay at home during official lockdown, do people actually change their behavior? How much relative weight will people put on what leaders say and what they see leaders doing, and how will this compare with the influence of what they see their fellow ordinary citizens doing? A wide range of data will be available for this enterprise, including big data and survey data, so this is likely to be a fruitful field for future research (e.g., COVID-19 Public Monitor n.d.).

Another set of questions center around protest. With the outbreak of anti-racism protests sweeping the United States in June 2020, it is more than apparent that the coronavirus also has the potential to shape people's willingness to engage in politically contentious behavior vis-à-vis the state. Early in the pandemic, it was not uncommon to read speculation that COVID-19 might at least temporarily dampen large-scale mass protest, reasoning that large shares of potential protesters would choose to stay inside rather than risk contracting the disease (Brannen 2020). And indeed, the health crisis does appear to have sparked interest in new forms of protest that minimize social contact, such as online gatherings or joint "check-ins" on GPS-based applications like Yandex Maps (Luxmoore 2020). These are unlikely to go away, making them interesting as subjects of future study. However, survey results early in the COVID-19 pandemic showed that potential protesters in countries ranging from Ukraine to Argentina were essentially undaunted by the virus, and burgeoning unrest in many countries now demonstrates the need to study whether the pandemic might not dampen but actually amplify protest potential (Onuch et al. 2020). At the same time, as large gatherings of people, protests can potentially constitute mass contagion events, potentially exacerbating the pandemic. It will therefore be important to track feedback effects over time between mass contentious action, state policy, and the spread of the disease.

The COVID-19 crisis is also poised to have a significant impact on the kind of social policy promises that will be made (and fulfilled) by post-Soviet regimes, as with regimes worldwide. In particular, it has the potential – though this is far from certain – to finally push citizens to be truly dissatisfied with their government's provision of social services, to an extent which could possibly affect the political survival of long-ruling leaders and their dominant parties, including Vladimir Putin and United Russia.

Taking Russia as an important example, there are at least two notable points about the timing of the COVID-19 pandemic that can serve as templates for analysis across the post-Soviet political space. First, the COVID-19 crisis came just as the entire Russian government had resigned and major constitutional amendments were proposed that included a significant socioeconomic block (Hale 2020). There are two important and related questions here.

One is whether the promises made in these amendments will ultimately undercut Putin's authority as the consequences of the pandemic unfold. The amendments include popular promises on the delivery of important social services and policies, including a very specific provision for an annual increase in the size of pensions. Putin had called on Russian citizens to vote on these changes on April 22, but this was postponed to July 1 as the virus spread in Russia. The results were a technical success for the Kremlin (68% participation, 78% approval) but do not solve the key issue of declining public trust in the government, including Vladimir Putin himself. When asked which five to six Russian politicians they trust, only 25% of respondents in a Levada Center poll mentioned Putin (compared to 60% in 2017, and more than 80% in 2014–15). Additionally, more than a quarter of citizens are ready to protest (Ampelonskaya 2020). It remains to be seen if the regime will be held accountable by the public in the September 2020 regional and local elections or in later national election cycles.

Second, the COVID-19 pandemic comes after a decade of stagnating living conditions, including the state of health care infrastructure. Since the 2009 global recession, wages have stagnated, housing problems persist, and the under-provision of spots in preschools and kindergartens continues (Sokhey 2020). The government's spending on education and health care continues to be well below the average spending in these categories for other developed European countries (The World Bank 2020). In short, prior to COVID-19, Russia already had a long list of serious challenges in providing adequate and quality social services. A rapidly spreading pandemic will only exacerbate and highlight these problems and has the potential to cause a true crisis in the country.

COVID-19 therefore highlights the importance of several previously pertinent, but now all-the-more urgent, research topics related to social policy in Russia. These include:

(1) How well does Russia's current system of social policy provision (in all arenas, not just health care) prepare it to handle the COVID-19 crisis? How might the pandemic influence the future of Russia's social policy provision?
(2) How well can an authoritarian regime like Russia's address a pandemic crisis, especially in light of ten years of stagnation in living standards and limited investment in health care infrastructure?
(3) What do Russian citizens truly expect the government to do regarding social policy provision? What do they think it is (and should be) capable of doing? Will Russian citizens blame the Russian government for the consequences of COVID-19 in the country, and will this lead them to try to hold it accountable?

For all of these questions, social policy provision is a critical part of both the question and answer. Understanding what the Russian government is likely to promise and what it is actually able and likely to provide will lend insight into its pandemic response and the political future of the country.

Finally, it remains an open question whether pandemics like COVID-19 are more likely to be "rally events," national crises that drive people to look to strong leaders and therefore increase leader favorability through "rallying around the flag" effects, or sources of dissatisfaction that ultimately hurt leaders' support. Early looks at polling data suggest that it may be helping some leaders, like Ukrainian president Volodymyr Zelensky (Sasse 2020), but hurting others, like Russia's Vladimir Putin (Snegovaya, Volkov, and Goncharov 2020). Much could change over time, however, and researchers should pay close attention the possibility that third factors are likely to interact with the virus to produce different outcomes in different situations.

The Pandemic as a Threat to Democracy and a Rise of the Surveillance State

Early attempts to predict some possible repercussions of the COVID-19 pandemic considered a dilemma allegedly faced by governments "to choose between containing the spread of the pandemic at the cost of destroying the economy, or tolerating a higher human cost to save the economy" (Krastev 2020). However, recent political developments all over the world suggest that every government – and crucially, every society it governs – is challenged rather by the pandemic policy *trilemma*. The COVID-19 pandemic presents each government with an obligation (1) to protect public health, (2) to minimize economic recession, and (3) to guarantee civil and human rights. The devilishness of the impossible trinity is that there is always one element to be sacrificed. Mandatory seclusion – the currently preferred option to contain pandemics – tends to sacrifice the last component of the trilemma (with the second also suffering).

Even a cursory overview of the outcomes of the months of state-led self-isolation regimes in the postcommunist world reveals at least five essential threats to civil/human rights. First, freedom of expression is being significantly curtailed. For instance, Romania, Azerbaijan, and Armenia have introduced new regulations aiming to punish disinformation related to COVID-19 (OSCE 2020a, 2020b, 2020c). Moreover, journalists suffer physical assaults in Kosovo or detention in Turkey (OSCE 2020d, 2020e). Given the general vagueness of the disinformation notion and that political actors, especially incumbents, might accuse their opponents of spreading "disinformation," these developments are potentially threatening. Second, privacy is being violated. Countries as politically and culturally diverse as Bulgaria, Israel, Republic of Korea, and China allow law-enforcement agencies to data-mine Web and smartphone activities to track potential COVID-19 cases (Kim 2020; Martino 2020; Tidy 2020; Yuan 2020). Third, freedom of peaceful assembly is being restricted, often without an officially proclaimed state of emergency. Limits as drastic as two persons in a public space have been imposed. Lockdown, a typical response by governments, introduces discriminatory measures regarding specific categories of people permitted to leave their dwellings. For instance, Peru and Panama limit movement by gender, and Ukraine – by age (BBC 2020; Oppman 2020; State Sites of Ukraine 2020). Fourth, due to the pandemic crisis, the executive branch is able to accumulate more power and dismantle existing checks and balances. For example, prime minister Viktor Orban (Hungary) has been granted powers to rule by decree indefinitely and without any parliamentary oversight (Picheta and Halasz 2020). Fifth, elections and other forms of political representation are being postponed on a global scale. According to estimations by the International Foundation for Electoral Systems (IFES), 99 election events had been postponed as of June 2, 2020 (IFES 2020).

A broad set of polities is especially vulnerable to democratic backsliding: countries that are not consolidated democracies, especially those of the post-Soviet space. There, the pandemic policy trilemma offers rulers a special opportunity to dismantle the institutional framework of democracy and to further social processes of de-democratization. It is, therefore, hardly a coincidence that both in India and Russia, quarantine measures are suspected by some of being imposed at least partly as a strategy to limit civic activities (Jazeera 2020; Luhn 2020). Likewise, some see it as no coincidence that Moldova, which is currently facing a severe governmental crisis, declared a 60-day state of emergency and sent armored vehicles to patrol the streets (First Channel Moldova 2020).

The role of state surveillance and artificial intelligence merits special attention from scholars as an emergent challenge to democracy. International crises like major terrorist attacks tend to make social norms (at least temporarily) permissive of the expansion of state surveillance and even the extraordinary use of coercion (Davis and Silver 2004; Gurinskaya Forthcoming). Research is needed to determine whether permissive norms favoring surveillance and security over privacy and human rights transfer from counter-terrorism to international public health crises like COVID-19. In the West, the pandemic has evoked a public willingness to suspend concerns about privacy and societal surveillance in order to track contact with those infected by the virus in the name of public health, even normalizing China's "heavy-handed techniques of surveillance-based control and containment" that were previously denounced (French and Monahan 2020). However, the mechanisms driving this seeming demand for expanding state surveillance are unclear. For instance, it may also be the case that leaders or governments serve as "norm entrepreneurs" in attempting to link the pandemic to counter-terrorism, mobilizing wartime norms of surveillance and control, and dictating the normative stakes in public discourse about pandemic response. As suggested above, a number of countries introduced measures that enhance state power and even secured the positions of individual leaders or ruling parties. In other words, rather than responding to a public demand for security, they may have sought to turn the crisis to their political advantage.

Future research should look at two critical points. First, due to COVID-19, the number of democracies worldwide may decline, particularly non-consolidated ones. Indexes like V-Dem, Freedom House, or Polity V should be able to reflect that change, and could introduce a new set of indicators necessary for a regime to be considered a "non-consolidated democracy." Second, regional variation in regime changes is another important question. Will democratic backsliding come in clusters, or solely on the level of individual countries? Is there any kind of a "domino effect?" In particular, the study of regularities and clustering among COVID-19 casualties invites us to revisit Levitsky and Way's "linkage and leverage" model (2007). Are links less significant when borders are closed?

Another way that the pandemic provides an opportunity for scholars to observe and compare how autocracies and hybrid regimes respond to crisis situations – as well as the constraints they face in doing so – is by focusing on their adoption of digital surveillance technologies. Such advances, such as facial recognition, are attractive to autocratic regimes as a means to enhance control of political opposition, to preempt civic protest, and to reduce principal-agent concerns in wielding administrative and coercive authority (Feldstein 2019; Wright 2019). Surveillance techniques are easily shared, making it easier for authoritarian practices to diffuse across borders and even among democracies (Glasius and Michaelsen 2018). They further contribute to the performativity of autocratic state power in capital cities like Moscow, Nur-Sultan, and Baku. However, widespread deployment of digital surveillance entails economic costs (in terms of infrastructure and human capital) as well as political costs through potentially threatening elites whose power is rooted in controlling access to the state's existing infrastructure.

A promising avenue for future research concerns the relationship between state capacity and authoritarianism in accounting for popular acceptance of (or resistance to) state surveillance. Unlike the usual tools of maintaining autocratic power in Eurasia, the high costs of deploying and utilizing digital surveillance potentially highlight the vulnerabilities and limits of low capacity autocracies. One vulnerability is found in regime legitimation, where non-democracies promise to provide economic performance or essential social protections in exchange for the population remaining politically disengaged (Dukalskis and Gerschewski 2017; Petrov, Lipman, and Hale 2014). In such cases, public responses to the state's failures to implement digital surveillance after insisting upon its necessity for safeguarding the nation are potentially indicative. Azerbaijan's attempt to introduce smartphone tracking stumbled in its implementation, repeatedly crashing in its first few days even as it stimulated the creation of a new black market selling passes for essential workers. Russia promoted the implementation of facial recognition in Moscow early in the crisis as a sign of its technological leadership, only to see the system strain under the growing crisis until city authorities abandoned it in favor of a lower tech "social monitoring" application. Widespread reliance on the banned smartphone application Telegram for vital information about the pandemic even led Russian State Duma deputies to argue for lifting the ban, "which hurts the government's prestige more than the app" (Kheifets, Diuriagina, and Shestoperov 2020).

Yet another important question that requires further scholarly attention is that of the duration of democratic backsliding provoked by the COVID-19 crisis. Is de-democratization temporary or, rather, are the pandemic's negative impacts bound to last? It is arguable that some of the trends discussed above (e.g. postponements of elections and restrictions imposed on civil activities) are impermanent improvisations. As soon as the crisis passes, they will be lifted and both procedures and institutions will return to normalcy. Others, however, are more ominous. In particular, deeper penetration of surveillance techniques and their wider acceptance by the public merit especial caution. Once budgets for surveillance technologies are allocated, agencies responsible for carrying out these functions established, and ways to implement surveillance are learned, it will be difficult to put the genie back into the bottle. This "surveillance ratchet effect" is particularly menacing under non-consolidated democracies, for combined with incumbents' opportunities to gain additional leverage against political opponents (both within elites and the populace in general), the new surveillance authoritarianism may last much more longer than the healthcare crisis provoked by COVID-19.

At the same time, there are good reasons to expect that the surge in surveillance does not automatically equate to a long-term growth in autocratic power. In the first place, the rapid growth in surveillance technology compounds the rising interest in "datafication," facial recognition, smart cities, and artificial intelligence. These amount to a potentially massive source of patronage that may induce a divisive internal competition among elite factions or clans, government agencies, and para-statals or "national champions." The expectation of dramatic market gains in AI and facial recognition raises the stakes of such a competition with the prospect that early winners may lock in their gains and exclude their competitors from future access to patronage and power.

Second, the spread of surveillance technologies is not just a challenge for the state's finances but for the availability of human capital to maintain and operate them. On the one hand, there are likely to be gaps in the ways that various local, provincial, and federal agencies manage surveillance technologies. Studies of predictive policing in the US have found that dirty police departments produce dirty data, and that these data tend to get shared with other institutions (Richardson, Schultz, and Crawford 2019). For low capacity autocracies, the problem of dirty data is amplified by competing agendas and uneven competencies in ways that risk creating a data-driven "Tower of Babel." At the same time, new technologies enable new forms of "data activism" (Milan and van der Velden. 2016) that can exploit the state's weaknesses in managing surveillance technologies to expose corruption and rights violations.

Federalism and Center-Periphery Relations

The pandemic has forced countries worldwide to wrestle with the degree to which national versus provincial governments should be spearheading the policy response as well as how authority and responsibility should be divided, and the post-Soviet world is no exception. COVID-19 is thus not only shedding new light on the state of center-periphery relations in Eurasian polities, but is potentially transforming these relations for some time to come, subjects that will be important for researchers to address moving forward.

The case of Russia illustrates many of the research challenges ahead. At least nominally a federal country, Russia's initial response to the pandemic threat included increased decision-making autonomy for regional governors. This is challenging the norms of the "power vertical" established early in Putin's tenure, revealing new debates over the stressors and stabilizing mechanisms that shore up the regime (Cohen 2020; Gel'man 2020; Snegovaya, Volkov, and Goncharov 2020; Twigg 2020; Yaffa 2020). Within this system, the regime regularly devolves power to implement centrally devised policies. Where the pandemic response diverges from past practice is that the Kremlin has conferred significant authority on governors to *make* policy that accounts for the differences in geography, urbanization, and economic foundations that require unique regional solutions (Bovt 2020; Eckel 2020; Mukhametshina 2020; Zadorozhnyi 2020). This new mandate opens the door to variation in regional response based on the severity of the crisis, regional governance capacity, preparedness, and underlying structural conditions. This variation is ripe for study, opening up a natural laboratory for understanding variations in response and effectiveness. This variation also defies systemic constraints devised to foster discipline and loyalty in regional leaders, raising questions about regional leaders' capacities to take initiative and engage in independent decision-making. How they respond to this new mandate will be an important factor in the enduring effects of the pandemic on the political system, and hence an important topic to study in the time ahead.

The devolution of authority may also have a political motive that deserves scholarly attention. Many Russia-watchers argue that decentralization is part of a strategy to shift blame from the central government to the regions (Smeltzer 2020; Zavadskaya 2020). On April 8, 2020 President Vladimir Putin warned governors, "I believe you understand how much personal responsibility you have for ensuring that the allocated funds are used as effectively as possible" (Laru et al. 2020). In an April 13, 2020 meeting with the officials Putin warned of the potential for criminal negligence, underscoring the consequences of poor management (Kalyukov 2020). In his April 28, 2020 regional meeting, the President again pointed out the new powers and urged governors to use them effectively, managing trade-offs between the public health threats and the potential economic costs of the virus (President of Russia 2020). Managing this trade-off has emerged as a central source of variation in regional policy responses, due in part to variation in the economic vitality of regions.

A second type of regional differentiation centers on whether or not regulations are implemented or enforced. Again looking at the Russian example, while Moscow and Chechnya have rigorously enforced quarantine regulations, many regions, including the city of St. Petersburg, have been lax. Some regional capitals adopted digital pass systems (Moscow, St. Petersburg, Kazan) requiring residents to get digital permits for moving around the city and many regions are next in line for adopting this system. Others, such as Sverdlovsk Oblast, rejected these measures. Regional level factors, therefore, may comprise one explanation for the wide cross-regional and cross-individual variation in compliance with regulations that is evident from individual-level polling data.

Finally, regional leaders in Russia have themselves adopted very different decisions on how to delegate initiative and authority within their own provinces. This includes substantial variation in the degree to which the public itself and grassroots organizations have been able to shape regional agendas, including through collective action. For example, most governors support veterans and the elderly with programs to deliver food, medical supplies, and health information. In many regions, both the United Russia party and the pro-Putin All-Russian People's Front are organizing these efforts. It will also be important to study whether and how governors are delegating responsibility and authority to the chief executives of cities within their provinces.

As the focus of the virus shifts from a national health crisis to a new source of economic woes with important local dimensions, it will also be important to study citizen responses to regional efforts. In Russia, for example, regional officials are clearly anticipating this shift, and hedging their bets by returning to "normal" economic production as quickly as possible. Early polling suggests that regional governors have gotten a bump from their response to the pandemic, a finding that resonates with patterns from the economic woes of the 1990s when citizens consistently blamed the center for policy failures (Javeline 2009; Person 2015; Rozman 1997). Yet, these data do not distinguish among regional leaders. Tracking differences in isolation practices, enforcement, and policy differences is critical to understand longer term impacts on the mechanisms that sustain the power vertical and the regime's capacity to shift blame to lower level officials in order to maintain support and legitimacy. This is yet another important avenue for future research.

Impact on International Relations in Eurasia

The pandemic also has the potential to impact international relations, though it remains to be seen whether resulting changes will be fleeting or profound. Here we identify several aspects of international relations in post-Soviet Eurasia that are of global importance and that could be shaped substantially by the ongoing pandemic: Russian foreign policy orientation generally, transnational disinformation campaigns, the virus as a potential source of Russia-China tensions, geopolitical competition (especially between Russia and China) in Eurasia's artificial intelligence market, and the Russia-Ukraine war in the Donbas.

Russian Foreign Policy and Russian Foreign Policy Attitudes

One important question is whether the need to alleviate the economic and political consequences of the COVID-19 crisis, not unlike the global economic downturn of 2008–09, will require a reorientation of Russia's foreign policy from maximizing sovereignty and national security toward facilitating economic collaboration with rich and technologically advanced nations.

Aside from the challenges of an economic recession, such evolution could result from a decrease in the capacity of the government to rally public opinion behind the overall purpose and specific objectives of Russia's engagement with the outside world. One interpretation of Russia's foreign policy holds that its mission pivots around shielding the country from outside influence and assisting the perceived decline of the West – mainly the United States and its bonds with allies in Europe and Asia (Burns 2019; Lo 2015; McFaul 2018; Sciutto 2019). By implication, it will be important to measure the extent to which the crisis will increase interest among Russians in independent sources of information and views on foreign matters of foreign relations. A significant change in such exposure could make for a breach in the "informational autocracy," as it was described by Guriev and Treisman (2019), and strengthen the demand for a foreign policy that would serve the measurable purposes of economic advancement and social progress. Or, on the contrary, it might reinforce autocracies, as public opinion would not be willing to exacerbate uncertainty by changing leaders in times of national crises.

Another promising research direction would focus on the potential for the pandemic to change countries' preferred instruments of statecraft. The 2014 crisis downgraded the role of allies in Russian foreign policy (Shagina 2019). The Eurasian Economic Union and CSTO partners – as well as bigger partners, such as China – turned out to be reluctant to throw their full weight behind Moscow's pursuit of what Russia has called its vital national interests. During the pandemic, the trend toward distancing from immediate neighbors has seen a dramatic spike as Russia closed its borders even with closely allied Belarus. Post-crisis developments will be crucial in measuring the extent to which Moscow deems it necessary to reassure allies and partners. In an interesting turn of events, Russia may conclude that developments during the pandemic provide it with additional leverage in relations with those players, so that keeping many restrictions in place and lifting them only in return for concessions makes both tactical and strategic sense. That could trigger frantic attempts by post-Soviet Eurasian countries to further diversify their foreign policy bets and priorities.

The pandemic has also impacted the perception of the world order and therefore Russia's perception of its own place in that order. By some accounts, the international management of the crisis reveals the disappearance of US leadership: not only is Washington not ahead of any "coalition of the willing," but it is even going against international cooperation in the search for a vaccine and the crucial role of the World Health Organization (Osterholm and Olshaker 2020). The EU's forecast does not appear bright either: European states have been managing the crisis alone, closing their borders inside the Schengen space, competing with each other (and occasionally helping each other), and Brussels' response has been slow to materialize. After the previous debt and migration crises, the COVID-19 pandemic adds a drop of water to an already full glass, continuing to delegitimize the European construction. It remains to be seen how Euroskeptic forces will instrumentalize the state's failure to prevent the pandemic in order to weaken the EU project. At the same time, China tries to present its model of governance as more efficient in situations of health crisis. Globally, compared to its wealth and governance records, the West has underperformed in terms of preparation and management of the crisis, while democratic Asian countries such as South Korea and Taiwan, and countries with a mixed democratic-one party domination system such as Singapore have shown greater success (Long 2020; Popov 2020; Salmon 2020).

In such a context, one line of research will be to follow how pandemic management will impact Russian narratives of the country's positioning between East and West. For instance, one could imagine that those in favor of an Asian model of development – whatever they have in mind: China, Singapore, South Korea – would find new arguments about the need for social compliance in case of threat to the national body. On the other side of the spectrum, Russia's liberals, accustomed to looking at the West not only as a model but also as a safe harbor offering security and quality of life, may have more difficulty making their viewpoint convincing. The impact of COVID-19 on identity positioning – Russia as a European, Eurasian, or a specific civilization – and how it is operationalized at the state level, by non-state actors, and by Russian public opinion will contribute to our understanding of the constructed and evolving nature of national identity (Hale and Laruelle 2020).

Transnational Disinformation Campaigns

Importantly, the COVID-19 crisis is occurring in the shadow of the 2020 US presidential election, which was already destined to bring Russia's use of disinformation campaigns as a tool of foreign electoral interference to the forefront of US-Russia relations (Golovchenko et al. 2020; Linvill and Warren 2020; Stewart, Arif, and Starbird 2018). As the pandemic has been accompanied by what some are calling an *infodemic* – Dr. Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, general director of the World Health Organization, warned that misinformation "spreads faster and more easily than [COVID-19], and is just as dangerous" (Naughton 2020) – Russia's role as both the source and spreader of this misinformation is sure to become a matter of concern among US policy makers and politicians (Cinelli et al. 2020; Kouzy et al. 2020; Van Bavel et al. 2020). This is especially the case as Russian propaganda has previously been linked to supporting anti-vaccination movements and conspiracy theories in the United States (Broniatowski et al. 2018; Kirk 2019). That said, a key difference between 2020 and 2016 is that we now know many other countries besides Russia have embarked on information influence campaigns on social media (Twitter 2020).

This leads to a number of important Russia-related research questions over the coming months. First, will Russia replicate its attempts to interfere in the US presidential election in 2020, and, if so, how much of this effort will (a) include direct tie-ins to COVID-19 related misinformation and/or (b) attempt to build on the unique circumstances surrounding a US presidential election held in the shadow of COVID-19 and the concomitant *increase* in reliance on social media by the US population (Hutchinson 2020)? Second, what will be the relevant impact of Russian influence campaigns during the 2020 US election in a context in which (1) both the US government and social media platforms are anticipating such campaigns, (2) other foreign actors may also be mounting information campaigns, and (3) US domestic actors are likely to be using the same tools as the Russians used in 2016?

Third, will Russian actors – above and beyond attempts to directly interfere in the 2020 election – dedicate some portion of their disinformation efforts in the coming months (or have they already?) to COVID-19 related disinformation specifically? If so, what will be the response of US actors, and what impact will this ultimately have on the larger questions of US-Russian relations, especially if there is a change in the US administration following the election? Finally, it is worth asking whether foreign state actors outside of Russia will take the opportunity presented by COVID-19 to turn the very tools pioneered by the Russian Internet Research Agency in 2016 against Russia during the current crisis. Should Sino-Russian relations in particular deteriorate, this might bear watching.

COVID-19 as a Source of Russia-China Tensions

Despite a deepening partnership at the global level, the pandemic led to some ethnic profiling of Chinese in Russia, where the media have at times referred to COVID-19 as the "Chinese virus" (Balitski 2020; Romashkov 2020). The Chinese Foreign Ministry has protested some instances of mistreatment of Chinese nationals in Russia, but overall Putin and Xi have pledged to cooperate in combating the pandemic (Gazeta 2020; Zhou 2020). Russia has faced several health-related risks from China in the past, ranging from food safety scandals, to water contamination, and it will be important to assess whether this latest pandemic is changing Russian calculations of the domestic risks involved in partnership with China. At this writing, Chinese nationals seeking to return to China via the Russian Far East from European Russia appear to be responsible for the increased number of cases in eastern Russia and northeastern China, which could influence Beijing's perception of how Russia is handling the crisis (Foreign Affairs Office 2020; Konkurent 2020).

In addition, we can observe parallels in Russian and Chinese efforts to capitalize on the global health crisis for their own foreign policy benefit. This has been most striking in Europe, where Russia and China have sought to make political points and earn goodwill at a time of disarray in the EU and the US by sending individual good will missions to hard-hit countries like Italy. Tracking Russian and Chinese "health diplomacy" efforts and their relation to Russian and Chinese foreign policy initiatives in Europe and elsewhere in the world will enable us to gain a better understanding of the interaction between non-traditional security and diplomacy goals in the two countries.

Geopolitical Competition in the Artificial Intelligence Market in Post-Soviet Countries

Given the importance of artificial intelligence discussed above, a special word is warranted on the implications of geopolitical competition among artificial intelligence technology suppliers in the post-Soviet market. For suppliers, this technology has the potential to promote dependence. It also could undercut the democratizing influence of what Levitsky and Way (2007) have called Western "linkage and leverage" (though this has historically been weak in most of the post-Soviet world, they argue. See also Krastev and Holmes 2020).

Russia and China have sought to expand their roles in Eurasia by exporting digital surveillance technologies and services. China has been particularly active in Central Asia, extending soft loans for digital surveillance technologies produced by Chinese companies like Huawei and Hikvision (Jardine 2019; Marat 2020). Similarly, the reliance on foreign technologies raises the potential to observe grassroots limitations on autocrats' abilities to exploit crises – for instance where it inflames nationalist sentiment concerning the exposure of biometric data to foreign security services. A minor scandal erupted in Moscow when users examining the city's "social monitoring" application found that it transmitted Russians' biometric data to an Estonian facial recognition service and stored the data on German servers. Popular awareness of regimes' reliance on foreign technologies potentially contributes to re-assessments of their capacity to monitor and repress and could also prove fertile ground for opposition.

The Russia-Ukraine War

The arrival of the COVID-19 pandemic occurs at a very bad time for Ukraine. Ongoing armed conflict with Russia challenges settled borders and exacerbates preexisting deficiencies in state capacity related to corruption, resource constraints, and instability (Alexseev 2015). The indeterminate and contested nature of the state itself in the Donbas region magnifies uncertainties regarding geopolitical and humanitarian outcomes (Buckley, Clem, and Herron 2020). A central question for researchers thus concerns how states negotiate simultaneous conflict and disease outbreak and public pressures that may push states in different directions. Generating an enormous loss of life (including thousands of civilian deaths) and massive population displacement, the Donbas conflict has seriously degraded the capability of the Ukrainian state to provide basic services to its population (Buckley et al. 2018; Buckley, Clem, and Herron 2019a, 2020; Herron, Clem, and Buckley 2019; Lasocki 2019; Yakovliev and Chumachenko 2017).

In other world regions, governments have faced simultaneous conflict and disease outbreaks, and rarely have the outcomes been good. Indeed, in many instances conflict germinates disease or, at the very least, hampers efforts to deal with emergent public health crises (Leaning and Guha-Sapir. 2013). Extant studies have focused on regions with low to no public health services pre-conflict, while Ukraine faces a population with high expectations of health services. Ukraine finds itself in this unenviable position and, arguably, faces a more daunting set of challenges than any other country in the post-Soviet space (Hale et al. 2020).

It will be important for researchers to consider the relationship between state capacity and human security. In its broadest sense, state capacity refers to the ability of a government to *control* its territory and *extract* the means for survival from the population. We would especially emphasize here a third aspect of state capacity that is more relevant to the subject at hand: the ability to *deliver services* that provide well-being and how the populace perceives that delivery, with the risk of a failure of state capacity (Buckley, Clem, and Herron 2020). In addition to illuminating the capacity of states and societies in general to deal with mass crises such as pandemics, a focus on Ukraine casts into a particularly sharp focus the capacity to deliver services and safeguard human security in contested territories involving great power competition (Buckley, Clem, and Herron 2019b).

One question is the extent to which state failure in this regard will manifest ultimately in a growing lack of confidence among citizens in their governments. This, in turn, might portend an erosion of legitimacy that, if left unchecked, may lead to political and geopolitical instability. Research will thus be important on how existing capacities affect orientation toward the state and civic identities, including whether the pandemic might strengthen inclusive forms of identification with Ukraine (a sense of "we are all in this together") or the intensification of ethnic othering (Kulyk 2020). If those identities are unstable, how will cross-cutting state capacities manifest in the conflict region (i.e., GCA (Government Controlled Area), within and between parts of the non-GCA, and cross-border Russia) (Alexseev 2015)? Further, some assessment is required of the extent to which demands on state capacity would be tempered by appeals to the larger issue of identity or allegiance to the cause, whether that is to the Ukrainian state, to one of the non-state regimes, or to Russia.

Research on this question apropos of Ukraine will require in the first instance the compilation of data on state capacity measures, most obviously in the healthcare sector, as well as on COVID-19 morbidity, with figures disaggregated to the largest geographic scale (i.e., the smallest political-administrative units) both in the GCA and the non-GCA zones and, importantly, in neighboring regions of Russia. Secondly, the fact that this extensive damage to humanitarian infrastructure along the line of contact is recent makes Ukraine a uniquely valuable case study for expanding insights into how conflict accelerates the spread of infectious disease. The reification of borders between Ukraine and the non-GCA (such as the regulation of movement and access to healthcare) and links between the non-GCA and Russia proper provides valuable opportunities for better understanding the effect of mobility or the lack thereof on public health crises. Finally, studies of mobility and both hard (infrastructure) and soft (medical professional) healthcare resources in eastern Ukraine provide a means of framing COVID-19 within discussions of state capacity, enhancing our ability to incorporate the state's efficacy and popular expectations of state delivery of welfare goods into our analysis of the socio-political impacts of the current and future pandemics.

The ongoing conflict raises another critical question: which state's capacity is challenged? Given the demands that the COVID-19 crisis imposes on both Ukraine and Russia, will the former or the latter have the capability and the resolve to mobilize it so as to provide medical and other humanitarian assistance to the borderized or NGCA areas and by what means/across which borders might international relief efforts be directed? This framing may generate durable insights on state resilience and future domestic and geopolitical challenges emerging within and outside public health in Eurasia and elsewhere. Beyond public health and human security, the pandemic has raised the question of whether the economic costs would be more likely to compel Russia or Ukraine to blink first and abandon their core demands in the Donbas (Haberman 2020).

Biopolitics as Overarching Theoretical Frame

The very nature of pandemics raises many questions that are directly problematized by biopolitics theory, and since these are particularly pertinent to post-Soviet regimes, we give them special treatment here. Biopolitics has elucidated a number of important dimensions of the pandemic and, more specifically, offered particular interpretations of three key concepts of sovereignty, governance and civil society.

The pandemic has brought us back to a world of allegedly sovereign and self-minded nation-states with borders, citizenships, and national governments. Accordingly, this would validate an argument that "sovereignty's aim is no longer to act on the legal component of the state, but on the biological dimension of life" (Raimondi 2016). In an ostensible reversal of the globalization logic, the pandemic crisis is re-signifying all big spaces as sources of imminent danger, thus pushing the society into the biopolitics of small spaces that are expected to be controlled and monitored much better than big cross-border expanses. This trend might be conceptualized as bio-security (Maureira and Tirado 2018), with new disciplinary practices and regimes of control and regulation over human bodies and their mobilities (Cameron 2007).

Yet from a biopolitical perspective, the retrieved and revalidated sovereignty looks very precarious. In light of the current crisis, it becomes increasingly lucid that the "power of the sovereign is most bare" (Muller et al. 2016), which implies the fragility and vulnerability of the sovereign authority in times of emergency, and therefore outdates Carl Schmitt's valorization of sovereignty based on "political will."

One might hypothesize that sovereignty becomes precarious for several reasons. Prior to the onset of the COVID-19 crisis, most of the affected countries in the West had voluntarily delegated significant parts of their sovereign competences to the EU, NATO, or other international organizations. Many countries have no national currencies, national banking systems, or national air companies. Sovereigns themselves might be easily affected by the virus (Boris Johnson) and quarantined (Angela Merkel), and thus are as exposed to its vulnerabilities as any other "bare lives." And most importantly, the virus pandemic has made sovereignty heavily dependent on "first responders" – medical professionals and scientists, hospital personnel, municipal authorities, volunteer organizations, trade unions, scholars, et cetera.

This raises the importance of governance, or, in Foucauldian terms, the sphere of governmentality. The near future may re-emphasize the critical importance of digital biopolitics (Colman 2015), with "health scan" technologies that had been already used to monitor refugees (Ajana 2005), as well as new forms of "biological identity – with underlying conceptions of health and illness" (Friend 2014, 38) produced by medical knowledge in conjunction with governmental officials. Biopolitical literature conceptualizes these innovations as "algorithmic governmentality, a certain type of (a) normative or (b) political rationality resting on the automated harvesting, aggregation and analysis of massive quantities of data so as to model, anticipate and affect possible behaviours in advance" (Cooper 2020, 30). Critics say that "algorithmic governmentality" might reduce individuals

> … to the profiles and series of statistical data involved, for instance, in the constitution of databases (through what is called "data mining") which serve to influence further choices. In this respect, every profile is normalized and offers a way to predict, on the basis of tendencies derived from observed regularities," (Lallement 2012)

Others add that governmentality inevitably makes the logic of "tolerable suffering" part of the biopolitical normalization of the crisis, which creates a fertile ground for the harshest (bio) political debate on whether protecting the lives of (mostly elderly and sick) citizens is worth an economic and societal collapse ("allowing the few to die so that the many could live") (Broglio 2013).

Finally, the biopolitical scholarship adds new nuances to the debate on civil society through theorizing "biopolitics from below" (Lemke 2011), or "democratic biopolitics" (Schubert 2020), grounded in the assumption of people's self-control and self-discipline ("responsibilization") (Gray 2009), as opposed to sovereign decisionism. "Democratic biopolitics" implies, as a key point of the anti-crisis management, people's ability and willingness to change their lifestyles and sacrifice meaningful parts of their daily habits, freedoms, and rights for the sake of public (as well as their own) safety, including strong elements of social distancing and isolation.

Each of these biopolitical perspectives opens up spaces for new research questions. When it comes to sovereign power, it would be interesting to learn more about how the pandemic changed the dominant perceptions of sovereignty, and how national authorities legitimize their crisis management strategies through elections held during or immediately after the emergency? In regard to governmentality, researchers might wish to find out how the new life-saving agenda changed political and institutional practices in different countries, and more specifically, how new digital technologies can be factored in the biopolitical agenda of governments. As for societal level, a puzzling question would be to see how the pandemic fosters different social statuses within societies on the basis of age, gender, profession and other criteria.

Conclusion

In sum, while the COVID-19 pandemic presents its most vital research challenges to those in the sphere of medicine, it is also incumbent upon political scientists to do their part. Political science research (and social science more generally) can shed light not only on how the current health crisis is (or is not) transforming political phenomena and how lasting such changes may be, but also on how the realms of the social, political, and economic can in turn impact the spread of the virus, potentially with ongoing feedback effects in both directions. And this is not merely an exercise in documenting an important episode in history for people who will later look back on this time and want to understand what happened. Political science research has the potential to identify patterns that could inform policymaking (and potentially even individual behavior) in ways that could promote pro-health behavior in later waves of the current pandemic (the 1918 "Spanish flu" pandemic, for example, involved several waves over more than one year) as well as future pandemics. Indeed, while about a century had passed prior to COVID-19 since the last pandemic of comparable geographic scope and severity, the next one could come at any time, and we had best be prepared.

We hope that we have identified some directions that future research might fruitfully take and advanced some useful ideas about what might be happening, at least as it appears in the first months of the new coronavirus pandemic. And while we find such topics span virtually the entire subfields of comparative politics and international relations, our goal has not been to present an exhaustive list but instead to present some ideas that can structure research for some and inspire new and different initiatives for others, even if the inspiration comes in the form of disagreement or proposing alternative frameworks for understanding a given phenomenon. Only with open minds, hard work, and a collaborative spirit can we maximally leverage what political science has to offer what might be called a new subfield of pandemic politics research.

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