HOW THE CORONAVIRUS PANDEMIC CONTRIBUTED TO THE RISE OF AUTHORITARIANISM THROUGHOUT THE WORLD

Valeri Modebadze *

Abstract

The article explains how the Coronavirus pandemic contributed to the rise of authoritarianism throughout the world. Advocates of the small government fear that the Coronavirus pandemic may lead to the unprecedented rise of government power and the rise of authoritarianism in the universe. The government might take advantage of the crisis and impose a lot of restrictions on the people. Governments use pandemic as a

---

* Valeri Modebadze is a Professor of International Relations, Doctor of Social Sciences at Georgian Technical University. Author can be reached at e-mail adreess: valery_4@yahoo.com

pretext to limit human rights. On the pretext of controlling the pandemic such fundamental human rights as freedom of speech and expression, freedom of assembly and association, the right to privacy, etc. are massively restricted. Since the outbreak of the pandemic civil space has been severely restricted and press freedom is a thing of the past in many countries. The state of emergency in various countries creates favorable conditions for the government to restrict human rights and impose total control over the society in order to prevent the outbreak of pandemic.

Keywords: Pandemic, Coronavirus, Rise of Authoritarianism, increase of state power, restriction of freedom, violation of human rights.

Introduction – outbreak of Coronavirus pandemic and government' reaction to the crisis

The coronavirus pandemic has affected all spheres of life, including politics. Kovid-19 has had a negative impact on every country's domestic and foreign policies. Due to the rapid spread of the coronavirus, radical political changes have taken place in various parts of the world: Because of the massive spread of the pandemic, elections in some countries have been postponed, in some places the activities of the legislative branch of government have been suspended, political leaders in some countries have been forced to suspend political activities due to fears of spreading the virus.

The coronavirus pandemic has put a lot of pressure on governments around the world to quickly and timely ease the crisis and take swift action to stop the disease. The response of different states in the world to the pandemic was different and they chose various strategies to stop the crisis. Some countries have

quickly introduced a strict lockdown policy in order to reduce the number of people infected with the coronavirus. In some places, relatively soft policies have been implemented to minimize the economic losses and financial damages caused by the pandemic (Herrera et all. 2020). In fact, because of the outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic countries faced a very painful dilemma: the government of each country had to make a very painful decision what should be the priority for society - the health of its citizens or country's economic progress and development. As the pandemic spread throughout the world, the leaders of various countries realized that if they overreacted to the threat of Covid-19 and imposed very strict restrictions, then this process would lead to a sharp decline in the global economy.

The spread of Pandemic and the unprecedented rise of government power

Due to the rapid spread of COVID-19, the struggle against the pandemic suddenly has become the top priority of each government and all other problems such as social, economic and political problems facing the state has been perceived by government officials as less important or as secondary problems. Unemployment, homelessness, poverty and other social problems have become a secondary issue and the main headache for politicians over the last years has been the fight against the pandemic.

The coronavirus pandemic has contributed to the unprecedented expansion and increase of state power. Advocates of the small government fear that states will not give up that enormous power that they have accumulated during the pandemic once the crisis will be over. Approximately 84 states have declared a state of emergency to stop the pandemic, raising fears that the government could abuse its power. In some countries, the government has taken advantage of the crisis and restricted freedom of the press. The international organization "Reporters Without Borders" claims that

38 countries have restricted press freedom since the spread of the coronavirus pandemic (Deutsche Welle, 2021a). This organization has published a report in 2020 and denounced increased attacks on journalists and various restrictions imposed on freedom of expression. According to this NGO state censorship has increased considerably over the last years and authoritarian regimes have used this unprecedented Coronavirus crisis to establish strict control over mass media. Pandemic has restricted the freedom of the press and freedom of journalists considerably. Coronavirus Pandemic gives authoritarian regimes an excellent opportunity to tighten control on journalists and control their activities. Unprecedented attacks and violence against journalists were detected not only in authoritarian countries, but also in European countries and liberal democracies. Many journalists around the world have faced retaliation for publishing critical articles or for criticizing government policies and actions (Deutshe Welle, 2021b).

The spread of the pandemic contributed to the rise of authoritarianism as for various political regimes created justifying circumstances to reduce civil space and restrict human rights. Since the outbreak of the pandemic, democracy, pluralism, and civil society have come under pressure, and civil liberties and human rights have been severely curtailed. According to Freedom House, human rights situation has deteriorated in 80 countries since the spread of the coronavirus pandemic. According to statistics, in 2019, 40% of the world's population lived in repressive regimes. Prior to that, the number was only 19%. Authoritarian leaders deliberately use the fight against COVID-19 as a political leverage to reduce pluralism and civic space. This trend is rapidly spreading not only in authoritarian regimes but also in democracies. The global democratic space has been steadily declining in recent years, especially since various restrictions were imposed due to the coronavirus pandemic (Netherlands Helsinki Committee, 2020).

Restriction of human rights and freedoms during the pandemic

The coronavirus pandemic provided political leaders throughout the world with an excellent opportunity to increase their power and impose numerous restrictions on the people. The pandemic creates favorable conditions for them to ban mass protests, postpone or temporarily cancel elections, imprison political opponents, limit human rights, silence or arrest journalists, introduce strict rules of isolation and quarantine that will not allow opposition leaders to take to the streets and criticize the ruling regime. The coronavirus pandemic provided the representatives of authoritarian regimes with an opportunity to exercise total control over all spheres of life through strict regulations and restrictions and to severely restrict the freedom of citizens (Lawless, 2021).

During the pandemic, the use of digital technologies by the authoritarian regimes for massive surveillance of people became increasingly prevalent. Authoritarian regimes have initiated the use of surveillance tools, as well as the use of digital technologies to establish public order and to prevent the spread of the coronavirus pandemic. Such regimes certainly use the pandemic as an excuse to increase their power and try to impose total control over their citizens. Fundamental human rights such as the right to privacy, freedom of speech and expression, freedom of assembly and association are massively restricted. China and Asian countries in particular have been able to successfully manage and control the coronavirus pandemic through electronic surveillance, which has certainly been achieved at the expense of human rights abuses and gross violations (Antadze & Babunashvili, 2020).

There is a growing risk that as the fight against the coronavirus pandemic intensifies states will increase their efforts to use intelligence and surveillance tools to monitor the population in order to avoid the spread of the virus. Active use of surveillance tools can severely restrict human freedoms in the future and give the government more opportunity to intervene in an

individual's private life. For instance, in China coronavirus contact tracing apps are used regularly to control people and find out which places they have visited and where they have been. Every suspected Covid-19 case is monitored very strictly. Little regard is paid to person's privacy. China is among the countries collecting the most amounts of personal data. Authoritarian regimes in Asia have completely deemphasized privacy and freedom of movement during the pandemic. These regimes use surveillance tools to monitor and control all kinds of activities of their citizens. They justify the usage of digital technologies for massive surveillance by saying that monitoring human activity with cameras allows the government to promptly detect and defuse conflict in society. They believe that people and human interaction are the source of any kind of social conflict and social conflict and instability can be avoided with these surveillance tools.

In times of large-scale crisis, there is a demand in the society for a strong leader who will take strict measures and avoid a deadly threat to the nation. In case of unforeseen circumstances, the population is forced to support the strict restrictions and regulations imposed by the ruling political force in the hope that the pandemic will be reduced and the state of health will be improved. Like the public, the opposition is also forced to support the policies pursued by the ruling party and refuses to criticize openly the government, in other words, the political process is minimized due to the existence of a new threat. Opposition parties support the declaration of a state of emergency and share the public opinion that all parties should unite with each other and think about the resolution of a common problem. In such a situation, the society expects conformism and obedience from the opposition, which pours water on the mill of the government. Thus, the coronavirus crisis is politically advantageous situation for any government in power.

During times of a such a large-scale crisis, the public supports the ruling political force and expects it to ease the crisis. The legitimacy of the government increases

and it is allowed to consolidate the population to overcome a common threat. In such a crisis, the public expects from the opposition parties to side with the government in order to jointly overcome the social or economic problems caused by the pandemic.

There is a growing demand in the society for an "omnipotent" state, which will ease the current crisis and ensure the security of the population. Society ultimately comes to the conclusion that overcoming pandemics and global crises is only possible under the strong government. Advocates of the strong government often cite as an example such an authoritarian state like China, where the government managed to stop the pandemic by carrying our harsh measures (Lawless, 2021).

Such a political regime may not be a conscious choice of the population, as it is not in the interests of any sensible person to lose freedom, but it is quite possible that in order to escape the difficult situation, people might be forced to give up some freedom and voluntarily submit to the authoritarian ruler for reasons of security. The precondition for the formation of such a state is the pandemic and the social and economic problems caused by the coronavirus. Currently, in the eyes of the ordinary people, a democratic regime may look weak, as liberal democracies have completely failed to stop the spread of the Coronavirus pandemic, and that is why there may be a need for the emergence of an authoritarian state. Taking into account the example of China, it is widely believed today that an authoritarian regime is a more successful form of government that can deal more effectively with pandemics.

If we analyze the history of mankind, then we will see that in times of emergency and global crises, the political force holding the reins of the country has a greater chance to increase its power and establish total control over all spheres of public life. That is why there is a danger that under conditions of a Coronavirus pandemic, the leaders of many countries prone to authoritarianism will try to govern society through strict

measures and will impose various restrictions on society.

Conclusion

The spread of coronavirus (COVID-19) has radically changed the world and affected almost every sphere of life. The leaders of all countries were forced to act quickly to defuse the crisis and take strict measures to stop the pandemic. Measures taken by the leaders of different states are aimed at preventing the spread of the virus, protecting the health of the population and saving the economy. Although strict measures and a state of emergency may be needed to resolve the current crisis, there is a risk that they may adversely affect the development of democracy in the short and long term. The imposition of various kinds of restrictions can lead to the rise of authoritarianism in the world and the undermining of democratic values and norms. There is a serious danger that the leaders of different countries will take advantage of the situation, will try to increase their power at the expense of limiting human rights and democratic norms. The pandemic creates favorable conditions for authoritarian leaders and dictators to further increase their power and bring all areas of life under total control.

The state of emergency in various countries creates favorable conditions for the political forces that have the reins of power into their hands to intensify the surveillance of citizens, to restrict their rights in order to prevent the spread of the coronavirus. That is why international organizations and civil society institutions should focus more attention on the restrictions of freedoms and liberties in order to prevent the rise of authoritarianism in the world. Civil society institutions, as well as international organizations around the world, must be activated to prevent the abuse of power by governments and the restriction of human rights. If these measures will not be taken in the future and the international community will continue to ignore government violence and abuse of power, then it will

most likely lead to the proliferation of authoritarian regimes around the world.

Literature:

1. *Antadze Giorgi, and Babunashvili, Sofia (2020) "Tracking and Control Mechanisms in the Postcode World", Geocase.ge, https://www.geocase.ge/media/598/Pandemic-Surveillance---G.-Antadze%2C-S.-Babunashvili.pdf*

2. *Deutsche Welle (2021a) "Reporters Without Borders: Press freedoms under pressure in pandemic", https://www.dw.com/en/reporters-without-borders-press-freedoms-under-pressure-in-pandemic/a-57259020*

3. *Deutshe Welle(2021b) "Journalists under threat: April's 10 most urgent cases", https://www.dw.com/en/journalists-under-threat-aprils-10-most-urgent-cases/a-57063303*

4. *Herrera, Helios, Konradt Max, Ordoñez Guillermo, Trebesch Christoph (2020) "The political consequences of the Covid pandemic: Lessons from cross-country polling data." VoxEU.org, London, https://voxeu.org/article/political-consequences-covid-pandemic*

5. *Lawless, Jill (2021) "Authoritarianism advances as world battles the pandemic", AP News, https://apnews.com/article/joe-biden-business-health-religion-government-and-politics-a127151d7208b79c02767b435355511d*

6. *Netherlands Helsinki Committee (2020) "The Impact of COVID-19 on Human Rights: Recommendations to the Dutch Foreign Affairs Committee", https://www.nhc.nl/the-*

impact-of-covid-19-on-human-rights-recommendations-to-the-dutch-foreign-affairs-committee/