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# Contents

An Especially Bad Week .....	5
Impact on Democracy and Transatlantic Relations.....	6
Impact on Black Sea Countries.....	7

When historians write about the year 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic will feature prominently in their narratives. The virus' toll in public health terms has been staggering: as of June 9, close to 7 million cases worldwide and more than 400,000 deaths. A potential second wave could see those numbers rise significantly. The pandemic has exacted a major economic cost as well, with nearly 40 million people filing for unemployment in the United States alone and economies around the globe struggling to reopen after enduring painful shutdowns to reduce the risk of contagion.

Beyond the cost in human lives and the economy, the pandemic has exacted a toll on democracy. According to *The Economist*, **more than 80 countries** have granted emergency powers to the executive, in many cases with no sunset provisions. This parliamentary yielding of checks and balances may be understandable under the unprecedented circumstances we face, but it also increases the risks that such powers will be abused.

Doubts about the accuracy of government statistics have not been limited to authoritarian regimes, though there are serious questions about the reporting on the virus coming from Moscow and Beijing. Inconsistent approaches to counting cases and the impulse to underreport to avoid bad optics are true in democracies as well. At the same time, journalists, who provide important checks and balances on authorities, are under even greater attack – in some cases literally by police – than before. This situation opens the door for disinformation and doubting of scientists – with potentially deadly consequences.

To be clear, democracy and freedom have been in decline for a while – this trend did not simply start with the pandemic. **Freedom House** has documented 14 years in a row of decline when it comes to political rights and civil liberties. The pandemic is merely making a bad situation worse. Developments in the United States have not helped either.

## An Especially Bad Week

The week of June 1 will stand out as an especially challenging time for the causes of democracy and transatlantic relations – and the pandemic had little to do with what happened that week. At the start of the week, President Trump called for the military to deploy to American cities to put down protests precipitated by the murder by police in Minneapolis of George Floyd. Earlier that day, Trump berated the country's governors for appearing weak in the face of growing protests, which had been accompanied that weekend by looting and vandalism; his Defense Secretary, Mark Esper, called on governors to “dominate the battlespace.”

For the president to stage a photo of that evening in front of St. John's Church holding a Bible across the street from the White House, U.S. Secret Service, Park Police and National Guard forces violently dispersed a peaceful crowd in Lafayette Square. It was an ugly scene against people exercising their first amendment rights under the Constitution. These developments spurred a number of retired military leaders, including former Secretary of Defense Jim Mattis, to slam the president for threatening to drag the military into domestic affairs, abusing power, and dividing the country. Former Secretary of State **Colin Powell accused the president** of lying endlessly.

As if that were not bad enough, on June 5, at the end of that week, **reports indicated** that Trump had ordered a major cut in the presence of U.S. forces based in Germany, by 9,500 from the 34,500 service members permanently assigned there. While the exact reasons remain unclear, tensions between Trump and German Chancellor Angela Merkel have been growing for several years – over defense spending, trade ties, climate, and the Nord Stream II pipeline running from Russia to Germany under the Baltic Sea.

The two leaders also could not be more different in their approach to diplomacy, and matters were not helped by the recently departed American Ambassador to Berlin, Richard Grenell, who took a most unorthodox approach to diplomacy that did not sit well among Germans. Merkel's refusal to attend a G-7 meeting in Washington this summer, which Trump tried to reschedule as a sign that things were returning to “normal” after the shutdown for the pandemic, may have been the final straw.

Whatever the reason, the decision to draw down troops sends a terrible signal to the largest country in Europe and to NATO allies that, without consultation or warning, the United States willy-nilly might adjust its military posture in Europe. What does that say about America's commitment to Article 5 of the NATO Charter, in which an attack on one member is deemed an attack on all? Such doubts about Trump's support for this longstanding principle were highlighted back in July 2018 when FOX News Host Tucker Carlson asked Trump why Americans should die for new member Macedonia.

“Let's say Montenegro, which joined last year, is attacked. Why should my son go to Montenegro to defend it from attack?” Carlson asked.

“You know, Montenegro is a tiny country with very strong people,” Trump responded. “They might get aggressive, and congratulations, you're in World War Three.”

Only Russian President Vladimir Putin can be happy with Trump's decision to reduce the American troop presence in Germany, just as Putin was happy to hear Trump sow doubts in the minds of America's NATO allies about the reliability of the United States when it comes to Article 5, two years ago. It dredges up memories from a joint press conference in Helsinki two years ago when Trump sided with Putin, not American intelligence agencies, when he was asked about Russian interference in the 2016 U.S. election.

Trump and Putin have been talking a lot lately, including on June 1, the day when Trump took his infamous stroll to St. John's Church. Trump had already made clear his intent to invite Putin to attend the G-7 meeting in Washington, an invitation that should meet with resistance from other G-7 members, including Canada, Germany and the UK. One can't help but wonder whether Putin, in his call with Trump on June 1, encouraged Trump to draw down the American military presence in Germany – or even to deal with the protestors in Lafayette Square forcefully.

## Impact on Democracy and Transatlantic Relations

None of this is good for democracy or for transatlantic relations. The pandemic had strained what were already difficult relations across the Atlantic. When Trump in March imposed a travel ban coming from Europe to the United States to stem infections of COVID-19, he did so without any warning or consultation with the Europeans. The United States offered very little assistance to countries devastated by the pandemic like Italy and Spain, leaving the field open for China and Russia to stage publicity stunts with emergency shipments, including equipment that was faulty. Washington was leaving a void that Moscow and Beijing were ready to fill.

Trump's lack of empathy for the plight of Europeans amid the pandemic – a dearth he has shown for his own citizens, too – has inflicted damage on America's soft power efforts. America's standing in Europe continues to plunge, according to various surveys. In the wake of the protests over the murder of George Floyd, citizens from London to Berlin, Madrid and Paris staged their own protests in front of American embassies on the continent. They voiced support for George Floyd, opposition to police violence, and criticism of Donald Trump.

With Trump increasingly focused on his re-election campaign ahead of this November's election, the attention of the United States risks shifting from "America first" to "America only," oblivious to what nefarious actors like Putin in Moscow and Xi in China are up to. At least in the case of China, Trump has been on a campaign blaming the Communist Party for the pandemic, a way to deflect attention from his own mishandling of the crisis in the U.S.

When it comes to Putin, however, Trump seems blind to the Russian leader's ongoing aggressive actions, whether continued fighting in Ukraine, moving the demarcation line in Georgia, supporting Assad in Syria or intervening on the side of rebel forces in Libya. Putin continues his crackdown on criticism and opposition at home, but the ability of the United States to push back against such anti-democratic behavior is compromised by the Trump administration's own autocratic tendencies.

These tendencies are playing out in Europe as well, in a further setback for democracy on the continent. Hungary's parliament granted Prime Minister Viktor Orban emergency powers that he in turn could wield against his critics and opponents. Journalists have been targeted by governments in Turkey and Russia, this time under the pretext of spreading false information regarding the virus. Even doctors have been targets of repressive measures. In Russia, three doctors critical of their government's handling of the pandemic recently have **"fallen" out of windows**, two fatally.

Meanwhile, Trump's handling of the racially-driven protests, his denigration of the media, his questioning the legitimacy of the upcoming November election, his efforts to suppress voter turnout, his defiance of Congress in its role as a check and balance on the executive – all these things have turned the United States from a model of democracy into a laughing stock. They give ammunition to those who accuse the United States of hypocrisy and double standards for criticizing their abuses when Trump engages in abuses of his own.

As **Finlan O'Toole** wrote in the Irish Times, "The country Trump promised to make great again has never in its history seemed so pitiful." How can the United States lead on democracy, freedom and human rights or in improving transatlantic relations when we have lost the respect of so many people around the world who previously looked to us for moral, political and financial support? In calling for police and the military to "dominate the streets," Trump is taking a page out of the authoritarians' handbook. He has tarnished the image of the United States as that shining city on a hill, as President Ronald Reagan spoke about, and has made the job of democracy activists and human rights defenders exponentially more difficult.

By contrast, Trump is making the job of leaders in China, Iran and Russia easier. As Freedom House put it in its annual **Freedom in the World** report:

*"Democracy advocates around the world have historically turned to the **United States** for inspiration and support, and Congress has continued to fund programs to that end in practice. To date, however, the Trump administration has failed to exhibit consistent commitment to a foreign policy based on the principles of democracy and human rights..."*

*"This problem has been compounded by efforts to undermine democratic norms and standards within the United States over the past several years, including pressure on electoral integrity, judicial independence, and safeguards against corruption. Fierce rhetorical attacks on the press, the rule of law, and other pillars of democracy coming from American leaders, including the president himself, undermine the country's ability to persuade other governments to defend core human rights and freedoms, and are actively exploited by dictators and demagogues."*

## Impact on Black Sea Countries

For countries in the Black Sea region, none of this is good news, though the picture is not entirely bleak. In Tbilisi, the U.S. has had an ambassador in place, Kelly Degnan since January after being without one for almost two years. In Kyiv, Trump has nominated Keith Dayton, a respected retired Army Lieutenant General. Dayton awaits confirmation from the U.S. Senate and will fill a post left vacant after Marie Yovanovitch was removed last spring (former U.S. Ambassador to Ukraine William Taylor filled in until early this year). Having these two positions filled will help in lending the necessary gravitas to U.S. diplomatic efforts.

While the Trump administration deserves credit for providing lethal military assistance to Ukraine, something President Barack Obama refused to do, the president and his personal lawyer, Rudy Giuliani, have ensnared Ukraine and its new president in American domestic politics in a way very harmful to U.S.-Ukrainian relations. Even after the impeachment proceedings in the past, two committees in the Republican-controlled Senate intend to revive allegations of impropriety involving former Vice President Joe Biden and his son, Hunter. This will continue to leave Ukraine in an uncomfortable position vis-a-vis the U.S.

When it comes to the pandemic, Georgia's government and citizenry have been models, with fewer than 1,000 registered cases and 13 deaths due to the virus. Early action taken by the government and responsiveness on the part of society were especially important given the explosion of cases relatively speaking in neighboring Russia and Armenia. In Russia, there are nearly half a million cases, while in neighboring Armenia, which has just under 3 million people compared to Georgia's population of 3.7 million, there are close to 14,000 cases and some 217 deaths (as of June 9).

The key question for Georgia is whether the pandemic will affect the schedule for this fall's parliamentary elections. The authorities should be taking steps to ensure that voters will not have to choose between exercising their right to vote or risking getting infected by standing in poll lines. That, of course, is true in the United States as well as in other countries holding elections this year.

The government must also fulfill its commitment to release all political prisoners – two, Gigi Ugulava and Irakli Okruashvili, were released last month but a third, Giorgi Rurua, remains in jail. The opposition and Georgian Dream need to formalize the new arrangement for electing the parliament, with a proportional system determining four-fifths of the seats. Now that it has a fully confirmed ambassador in place, the United States should join with European allies to make sure that Georgia stays on a democratic path.

We are only halfway through 2020 and already it seems like an eternity. The second half of the year promises to be no less significant, with the likelihood of a second wave of the pandemic, at least in some places, consequential elections in Georgia and the United States, and democracy facing a major challenge from authoritarianism. The first half of the year has been a painful period. Let's hope the second half brings with it less damage and promise for the future.



