
ВОПРОСЫ ВЫПУСК 6(70), 2021 ПОЛИТОЛОГИИ

Научный журнал

Журнал «Вопросы политологии» включен
в Перечень рецензируемых научных изданий
ВАК при Министерстве науки и высшего образования РФ
по политическим наукам, в которых должны быть опубликованы
основные научные результаты на соискание ученой степени кандидата
наук, на соискание ученой степени доктора наук

Журнал включен в Перечень научных изданий
рекомендованных ВАК Республики Узбекистан
для публикации основных научных результатов диссертаций
по политическим и философским наукам

МОСКВА, 2021

ВОПРОСЫ ПОЛИТОЛОГИИ

Научный журнал

ISSN 2225–8922

**ЖУРНАЛ ВКЛЮЧЕН
В ПЕРЕЧЕНЬ ВАК РФ**

Председатель Редакционного Совета – ПЛАТОНОВ В.М.,
к.ю.н., заведующий кафедрой политического анализа и управления РУДН,
Председатель Московской городской Думы (1994–2014 гг.)

УЧРЕЖДЕН
ООО «Издательство
«Наука сегодня»

Журнал зарегистрирован
Федеральной службой
по надзору в сфере массовых
коммуникаций, связи и охраны
культурного наследия

Per. № ПИ № ФС77–46176
от 12 августа 2011 г.
Журнал издается ежемесячно

Журнал включен в базу РИНЦ
(Российский индекс
научного цитирования)

Включен в каталог
Ulrich's Periodicals Directory

Пятилетний импакт-фактор: 1,489.

Адрес редакции:
115598, г. Москва, ул. Загорьевская,
д. 10, корп. 4, цокольный этаж,
помещение I, комната 7-1, офис 4
Тел.: (910) 463-53-42

Интернет-ресурс:
www.voprospolitolog.ru
E-mail: voprospolitolog@yandex.ru

Мнение авторов может
не совпадать с мнением редакции.
При перепечатке ссылка
на журнал обязательна.

Научные статьи, публикуемые
в журнале подлежат обязательному
рецензированию.

Ответственный редактор
Шкурина С.С.

Перевод
Чернышова Е.В.

Компьютерная верстка
Анциферова А.С.

Подписано в печать 25.06.2021
Формат 60×84/8. Объем 24,3.
Печать офсетная.
Тираж – 1000 экз.
(1-й завод – 500 экз.)
Заказ № 000.

Отпечатано в типографии
ООО «Белый ветер»
115054, г. Москва, ул. Шипок, 28
Тел.: (495) 651-84-56

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Насимова Г.О. (д.п.н.)
Шкурина С.С. (к.п.н. – ответ. редактор)

ISSN 2225-8922 (print)

12 выпусков в год и

4 выпуска в год переводной (англ.) версии

Языки: русский, английский

<http://voprosplitolog>

Входит в перечень рецензируемых научных изданий ВАК РФ

Включен в каталог периодических изданий Ульрих

(Ulrich's Periodicals Directory: <http://www.ulrichsweb.com>)

Материалы журнала размещаются на платформе РИНЦ

Российской научной электронной библиотеки, Electronic Journals Library Cyberleninka

Подписной индекс издания в каталоге агентства Роспечать 70035

Цели и тематика

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Полные сведения о журнале и его редакционной политике, требования о подготовке и публикации статей, архив (выпуски с 2011 года) и дополнительная информация размещена на сайте: <http://voprosplitolog.ru>

Электронный адрес: voprosplitolog@yandex.ru

ISSN 2225-8922 (print)

12 issues a year plus

4 issues a year of the translated (eng.) version

Languages: Russian and English

<http://voprosplitolog>

Included in the list of peer-reviewed scientific publications of the Higher Attestation Commission of the Russian Federation

Included in the Ulrich's Periodicals Directory

Materials of the journal are placed on the RSCI platform of the Russian scientific electronic library – Electronic Journals Library Cyberleninka

Subscription index of the journal in the Rospechat Agency catalogue is: 70035

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СОДЕРЖАНИЕ

ИСТОРИЯ И ТЕОРИЯ ПОЛИТИКИ

- Белоусов Г.Ф.** Теоретико-методологические подходы к анализу роли региональных элит в электоральном процессе современной России 1634
- Рожков А.А.** Неореализм о внутригосударственных факторах: концептуальный подход и его критика 1643

ИСТОРИЯ РОССИИ

- Слизовский Д.Е., Жалнин В.А., Медведев Н.П.** К вопросу о национальных системах образования: история и современность 1651
- Нисневич Ю.А., Орлов И.Б.** Попытка демократического прорыва: взлеты и падения Государственной Думы первого созыва (1993-1995 гг.) (к 30-летию Российской Федерации). Часть II 1665
- Самов А.А.** Идея «истинного государя» в отечественной социально-политической мысли советского периода 1679

ПОЛИТИЧЕСКАЯ СОЦИОЛОГИЯ

- Беспмятнова М.Н., Попов С.И.** Исследование возможности гармонизации функций институтов местного самоуправления как фактора политической стабильности: методика эмпирического исследования 1688
- Блинов В.В.** Трудности перевода классической лево-правой модели идеологического континуума для анализа политических предпочтений современной России 1694

ПОЛИТИЧЕСКИЕ ИНСТИТУТЫ, ПРОЦЕССЫ И ТЕХНОЛОГИИ

- Родионова М.Е., Гималиев В.Г., Назарова Н.А.** К вопросу о трансформации избирательной системы в Российской Федерации (от 1993 года до наших дней) 1706
- Волконский Ю.К.** Исторические тенденции формирования и становления лоббизма в США в XX в. 1716
- Сабирова Н.С.** Формирование «гражданской нации» как приоритет политической культуры России 1723
- Николенко А.А., Шевченко Е.А.** Анализ возможных сценариев геополитического будущего России 1730
- Гусейнова Д.М.** Влияние террористической угрозы на программные и тактические установки политических партий России (конец 1990-х годов) 1739
- Еловик А.А.** Образ России в социальных медиа белорусской оппозиции (2019-2020 гг.) 1748
- Белякова Т.М.** Технологии формирования имиджа современной Русской православной церкви 1756

<i>Лазебник А.Г.</i> Ценности как фактор трансформации политических режимов.....	1761
<i>Золотарев Н.А.</i> Миграционные процессы и особенности интеграции внешних мигрантов в современном обществе	1769
<i>Макаров А.В.</i> Приоритетные направления реформирования образовательной политики суверенного государства.....	1775
<i>Куйлиев Б.Т.</i> Characteristics of Convergent Political Manipulation Technologies used on the Internet/ Характеристики конвергентных технологий политического манипулирования, используемых в интернете.....	1783

ГОСУДАРСТВЕННОЕ УПРАВЛЕНИЕ И ОТРАСЛЕВЫЕ ПОЛИТИКИ

<i>Гончаров Д.К., Гончарова Д.Д.</i> Особенности применения математических методов в системе поддержки принятия решения в политике	1791
<i>Петров Д.Ю.</i> Социальная политика и реализация национальных проектов России	1802
<i>Копасов А.И.</i> Конструирование дефиниции «Государственная политика территориального развития»	1808
<i>Дмитриев Д.И.</i> Актуальные политические риски в российском нефтегазовом комплексе.....	1817

ТЕОРИЯ И ИСТОРИЯ МЕЖДУНАРОДНЫХ ОТНОШЕНИЙ И ВНЕШНЕЙ ПОЛИТИКИ

<i>Ванковска Б.</i> The Synergy Between Geopolitics and Biopolitics: COVID-19 Vaccines in Focus/Синергия между геополитикой и биополитикой: в центре внимания вакцины от COVID-19.....	1825
<i>Солодова Г.С.</i> Россия в Евразийском пространстве – причины обращения к теме.....	1833
<i>Никитенко Е.Г., Муравых О.А.</i> Международный терроризм – феномен современной мировой политики.....	1840
<i>Колосова И.В.</i> Христианское экуменическое движение в контексте мировой политики	1849
<i>Красавин Д.В., Попов Д.Г.</i> Аналитические центры в постсоветских странах Центральной Азии – особенности восприятия векторов внешней политики (на примере проектов ЕАЭС и «Один пояс – один путь»)	1856
<i>Мановицкая В.А., Шангараев Р.Н.</i> Последствия событий «арабской весны» в контексте трансформации международных отношений.....	1863
<i>Маканбаев Б.М.</i> Вопросы здравоохранения как элемент обеспечения национальной безопасности в Центральной Азии: новые вызовы и угрозы	1871

Бросович Ф.Д. Политическое, экономическое и социальное развитие Южной Америки: итоги современного этапа	1877
Розенберг В.И. Конституционный комитет Сирии: позиции участников и первые результаты	1885
Рупакова Е.А. Возможности и перспективы белорусско-российского взаимодействия с Турецкой Республикой	1890
Эсмаили С. Положение «иранских женщин в прессе» и развитие «женской прессы в Иране»	1899
Цой С.В. Ядерная программа КНДР как фактор межкорейского раскола	1906
Чжао Лу. Внешнеполитическая стратегия Китая в контексте трансформации современного международного порядка	1911
СТУДЕНЧЕСКАЯ НАУКА	
Степанькова Д.С., Швырков В.С., Корольков К.А. Первичные элементы в структуре местного самоуправления стран АТР	1919
Хомяков Д.О. Сравнительный анализ функционала и возможностей социальных сетей с целью рационального их использования в политическом SMM	1930
НАШИ АВТОРЫ	1943
ТРЕБОВАНИЯ К ОФОРМЛЕНИЮ РУКОПИСЕЙ	1952

СИНЕРГИЯ МЕЖДУ ГЕОПОЛИТИКОЙ И БИОПОЛИТИКОЙ: В ЦЕНТРЕ ВНИМАНИЯ ВАКЦИНЫ ОТ COVID-19

Статья проливает свет на причины и последствия геополитики в отношении вакцин от COVID-19. Ключевая предпосылка заключается в том, что в гибридной международной системе геополитика приобретает еще большее значение, чем раньше. В этом контексте пандемия COVID-19 и вакцины превратились в инструменты политики власти, а не в медицинские проблемы и актив для спасения жизней. Источниками исследований в основном являются средства массовой информации, но из различных географических районов, которые затем соотносятся с имеющимся научным анализом в отношении так называемой пандемополитики во многих частях мира. В статье показаны текущие тенденции, формирующие мир: внешняя геополитика и внутренняя биополитика. Частные корпорации усилили свою власть над государствами и их населением. Результат этих двух сочетающихся тенденций (геополитики и биополитики) показывает реальный баланс сил: преобладают корпоративные интересы, в то время как государство склоняется к авторитаризму.

Ключевые слова: геополитика, COVID-19, вакцины, многополярность, пандемополитика, глобальная солидарность.

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THE SYNERGY BETWEEN GEOPOLITICS AND BIOPOLITICS: COVID-19 VACCINES IN FOCUS

The article sheds light on the causes and consequences of the geopolitics of vaccines against COVID-19. The key premise is that in the hybrid international system, the geopolitics gets more importance than before. In that context, the COVID-19 pandemic and the vaccines have turned into power politics tools rather than a medical issues and an asset to save lives. The research sources are mostly media-based, but from a variety of geographical areas, and then are correlated with available academic analyses concerning the so-called pandemopolitics in many parts of the world. The article displays the ongoing tendencies that shape the world: geopolitics externally and biopolitics internally. Private corporations have strengthened their grip on the states and their populations. The outcome of these two combining tendencies (geopolitics and biopolitics) reveals the real power balance: the corporate interest is prevailing, while the State succumbs to authoritarianism.

Key words: *geopolitics, COVID-19, vaccines, multipolarism, pandemopolitics, global solidarity.*

Introduction. For some time after the end of the (first) Cold War, it looked as if the applicability of geopolitical theory was seriously questioned and even abandoned in some academic circles. But as soon as Fukuyama's prophesied "end of history" proved to be just a pipe dream, or better as an expression of another hegemonic geopolitical agenda in disguise, there was a shift. The use of geopolitical lenses in various contexts witnesses a revival: it implies a new dynamic of the changing international order with no unanimously accepted definition. The COVID-19 pandemic is just the latest instance that speaks of the regained importance of geopolitics in 21 century, which is especially emphasized in the world of so-called second global bipolarity and/or bi-multipolarity [9]. The line between potential 'friends and foes' is hardly defined. Fouskas and Roy-Mukherjee rightly point out that "global politics can no longer be premised on the binary Schmittian divide of 'friend-enemy', as was the case during the Cold War ('us against Communism') and after 9/11 ('us against the terrorists') – domestic politics is a different ballgame." [5]

The State's Comeback: Good or Bad News? The State has always been a Janus-like entity: it is all about a dialectic unity of the two sides of the state's functions. The façade of the public and good things done for the sake of the people provides legitimacy even for the policies that go in the opposite direction. The most developed Western states have compromised the idea of a welfare state due to the global impact of neoliberal medicines of the 70s. National leaders openly declared that “the welfare state of the 20th century is over” and a new “participation society” should take its place, in which people must save and invest to create their own social safety net with less help from the government [4].

The wake-up call of the COVID-19 in 2020 was not gentle at all. The State has revamped its traditional mission (*res publica*) since ‘participation society’ has proved unable to deal with such a dramatic health crisis. It was more than 50 years ago when Margaret Thatcher called for a reduction of social institutions because they were “too costly”. All societies that were saving on public services now faced the consequences of the disastrous economic logic applied primarily to health sector. Having been unable to change things amidst the havoc, they have resorted to other measures, such as lockdowns, disciplining the masses, fear mongering, and even stigmatization and punishment for the disobedient ones. The biopolitical power for the sake of Life is in the hands of the State, but the medical protection (be it in a form of medical equipment, research, therapy, and/or vaccines) is merely out of state control – except in the states (such as China and Russia) where the market is not as ‘free’ as it should be according to the neoliberal paradigm.

An insightful analysis shows that there is nothing novel in the recent turn. There has always been a hidden bond between corporate capital and state – ever since the Great Deal, or the bail-out operations during the 2008 global financial crisis. Without state support (and public money) the financial sector could not have got out of the deep crisis imposed by bubble financialization. The only novelty now is the both State and Capital have been enforced to take care of Life (and Death), i.e. population as such (which is a definition of biopolitics).

The pandemic has proved the validity of the dictum “socialism for the rich and capitalism for the poor” since state policies assure that more resources flow to the rich than to the needy. Sharma [14] argues:

“Modern society looks increasingly to government for protection from major crises, whether recessions, public-health disasters or, as now, a painful combination of both. Such rescues have their place, and few would deny that the COVID-19 pandemic called for dramatic intervention. But there is a downside to this reflex to intervene, which has become more automatic over the past four decades. Our growing intolerance for economic risk and loss is undermining the natural resilience of capitalism and now threatens its very survival. The world economy went into this pandemic vulnerable to another financial crisis precisely because it had already become so fragile, so heavily dependent on constant government help.”

Despite all the critical tones and promises that “once the pandemic is over, we all need to talk”, there is still a major concern about how to save and beautify the capitalist system and thus hide the structural violence embedded in it. A recent Oxfam study [11] found that since the start of the pandemic, the world’s richest 10 billionaires have seen a wealth increase of half a trillion dollars – enough to pay for every person on the planet to get a vaccine.

Vaccines (Dis)Order: Competition vs Health Protection? With no intention to go deeper into the issue of the virus’ origin (Boyle 2020), it seems appropriate to agree that the notion of pandemopolitics may help understand how a public health problem becomes a geopolitical and geo-economic issue [20]. Like in any war, here too truth was the first victim: China was almost immediately blamed by the Trump administration as the main culprit for the origin and the spread of the disease. In other words, great powers acted and positioned themselves internationally in the face of the pandemic in a strongly geopolitical way along areas of divergence which had persisted for a long time.

China indeed quickly imposed censorship on academic and research findings, while across the ocean there was hate speech on the “Chinese virus”. For President Trump the pandemic was a bigger attack on the US than the one on Pearl Harbor and the 9/11 [16]. The rare critical voices were either ‘canceled’ or downplayed. One state after another were undertaking measures that had been heavily criticized in the time when Wuhan was the center of attention. The lockdowns and various means of intrusion into people’s privacy have become commonplace. The rise of state responsibility and the borders re-appeared even within the EU. The growing and urgent needs for medical equipment quickly exposed the fractures of the EU’s alleged solidarity. Only when China, Russia, and Cuba appeared as leading powers in the so-called ‘mask diplomacy’ did the West see the geopolitical danger.

The road to vaccines has not differed much. The West have become aware of its dependency and vulnerability in the pharmaceutical field especially because the most medicines were produced in Asia. The pandemopolitics called for a new marriage of interest between pharmaceutical companies and politicians in the risk society. The issue of having control over ‘national’ pharmaceutical capacities (but also in others, such as food production) was seen as an issue related to national sovereignty and society’s resilience. As said in the media “a shortage of masks, gloves, swabs... and now health has become a matter of sovereignty and national security” [10].

Promoting the idea that the pandemic was not only a global health issue but rather a geopolitical and geo-economic one, some scholars joined the blame game. They argue that “humanity has entered a new geopolitical cycle in which China’s centrality cannot be ignored”, i.e. that the multipolar world would be increasingly dominated by China, who will not be shy to use all geopolitical and geo-economic levers to discourage its competitors [20]. This position echoes that

of NATO: China has been identified as a key danger for the Alliance in the coming period, in addition to Russia. In fact, the expert report *NATO 2030: United for a New Era* [12] directly points out to Russia and China, as key enemies.

At first, the scientists were cautious with regard to vaccine production. What used to take a few years, all a sudden obtained a dimension of geopolitical urgency and it became a matter of international prestige. According to the WHO, as of 18 February 2021 [21], at least seven different vaccines across three platforms have been rolled out. More than 200 additional vaccine candidates are in development, of which more than 60 are in clinical development. The experience with the SARS virus and vaccine made the entire endeavor less demanding. WHO officials stress the unprecedented amount of financial means invested: the COVID-19 crisis caused a huge impact that resulted in the highest allocation of money ever recorded in world history in making a vaccine [18]. However, one can hardly disregard competitiveness, secretive efforts, and the lack of wider global cooperation, which speaks volumes about the state of affairs when it comes to humanity.

The corporate media have had their role in the creation of the overall atmosphere of the vaccine race on a global level. Russia was the first country to register a COVID-19 vaccine (Sputnik V) in August 2020, followed by Pfizer and others. Instead of relief and joy over the discovery, the media fueled distrust that came close to a conspiracy theory – as if it was not enough that the world population had already been exposed to numerous paranoid versions of the “real goals” behind the mass vaccination process.

Instead of Conclusion: Vaccines as Global Public Good. Even before the promotion of the first vaccines, many guessed that the ultimate geopolitical game would be that of vaccine distribution: “Who will get the coronavirus vaccine first? All the lofty rhetoric aside, geopolitics and money talk. It’s not purely about protecting a population’s health” [15]. A vaccine is also vital in getting economies back on track. In the first months of 2021, not only USA (in cooperation with Germany), China, and Great Britain (in cooperation with India) licensed their vaccines, but in addition to Russia there were other producers, such as Cuba. In the best case scenario, smaller states may appear as subcontractors/hubs. Belorussia and Serbia come to mind thanks to their close relations with Russia [13]. The lack of empathy and fair distribution is evident as solidarity is closer to science fiction than a realistic scenario. Probably, the most discouraging example is the EU itself. The smaller and weaker states could hardly get a fair share of the vaccines. They are rather pawns in the geopolitical games in which major producers give ‘vaccine packages’ in a pompous way, through ceremonies and in front of cameras, to promote their alleged solidarity and closeness to one or another country/region.

A global alliance known as COVAX, established with an aim to accelerate the manufacturing of COVID-19 vaccines and to ensure fair and equitable access, failed too. *De facto* there is no efficient global alliance yet, and the states are try-

ing to find their own way to vaccines. Two contrasting examples from the heavily dependent Balkans come to mind. The Croatian president said: “This is not about sovereignty but about loyalty to the citizens. I would have bought vaccines even from the Chechen mafia, if available. That’s right, I’m caricaturing. Of course, Russia does not have enough. But this concerns my citizens, and who asks Brussels... Just like with the migrants, one should work based on one’s own interests.” [8] On the other hand, the Bulgarian parliament rejected the proposal of the largest opposition party to start negotiating the delivery of the Russian vaccine. [2]. The Macedonian case is illustrative too: the newest NATO member state has been wavering between its commitment and loyalty to the West at any cost, including the health of its population. Paradoxically, the first vaccines (even in a symbolic number) were delivered by a non-NATO neighbor Serbia and by the new ‘archetypal’ enemy – Russia. Next on the row are the Chinese vaccines. Vaccines are not only a matter of global geopolitical rivalries but they create similar effects on a regional level too. From a wider point of view, it is interesting to point out that Macedonia and Ukraine, two countries that went through colored revolutions/regime change inspired from the West, seem to be forgotten and left in the lurch – both leaderships lamented that their allies had forgotten them [6]. Macedonian Prime Minister Zaev explicitly said that he had talked first with the Western allies to ask for understanding (i.e. permission) if the government purchase non-Western vaccines. But the Western partners did not totally forget its Macedonian partners: “when there is no Pfizer, there is Schmeisser. A US donation of 1,269 M4 automatic rifles for the Army of the Republic of Macedonia is set to arrive in the country today”, reported the media [7].

Serbia appeared as one of the most successful states in providing vaccines even beyond the region. The surplus of vaccines allowed even the non-popular president Vučić to play the card of vaccine diplomacy and thus increase the country’s soft power in its once hostile neighborhood. The Bosnian foreign minister however openly expressed her dissatisfaction arguing that the vaccines were of low quality and usually used in poor countries [17]. In the otherwise divided Bosnian society, this statement was met with strong criticism for the incompetent minister who believed that Bosnia was not a poor state. The loyal pro-Western activists and analysts from the Balkans were immediately alarmed about the shift towards the East as something that was more threatening than the virus itself [for instance [3; 20].

The lack of global solidarity and unfair distribution of vaccines and other medicines across the world is no surprise. The cries for making vaccines a public good that should be subject to humanitarian principles sound reasonable but at the same time they are just empty words when spelled out by top politicians. In addition to the tragic record of the pandemic, rich countries and benefactors have had a huge number of occasions to save lives from hunger, lack of drinking water, curable diseases, etc. In 2020 Arundhati Roy hoped for a radical change

and a “new portal” for a better world. A year later her words are just proof of failed hopes. The injustice is deeply embedded, both nationally and internationally, in the political, economic, and societal structures. The world’s foundations lie on structural injustice, and the COVID-19 pandemic has mostly affected the poorest layers of any society. People have been discriminated against on various grounds, but the pandemic has proven that class differentiation is the most important (yet least taken into account) line of differentiation between worthy and expendable lives.

From a geopolitical perspective, vaccine production and distribution is just a continuation of the geopolitical clash with different means (but the goal remains the same). The issues are securitized and a war-like rhetoric between the great powers, i.e. the West and the Rest, is thriving. It goes so far to blame the Russian, Chinese, and Iranian sides for an alleged crime against humanity due to their claims that the vaccines they produce are more efficient, less expensive, and more affordable than the Western ones. Yet the geopolitics of the pandemic and vaccines (just like the geopolitics of energy) have confirmed the deep cracks within and among states, which is consistent with the hybrid international system. The struggle between biopolitics and geopolitics give a grim picture of world and its future.

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