

Open Ending

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This year's last issue of our journal writing about world politics looks like the summing up of what has just begun, with no one knowing when or how it will all end, but everyone wanting to see the end of the chapter.

This year, the world has come to a halt and then got jolted back into action. Changes had been piling up for a long time and eventually amassed to assume a new quality. A push was needed. Much has been said, including in our journal, that the pandemic did not turn the world around, but only exposed and accelerated the trends that had started a long time ago. Much less attention is paid to other, more important, things. The pandemic has essentially scrapped the idea that there are no development alternatives, a phenomenon everyone has got used to not just intellectually, but even psychologically.

For at least ten years there has been talk about the crisis of global-

ization, the rise of new countries and forces, the growing number of conflicts in the world, and so on, which eventually has turned into a refrain. It has become common to forecast events that would plunge the planet into a chaos of uncontrolled changes. But as is often the case, the prophecies of oracles or the insights of pundits were in one dimension while everyday routine and political practice, in a completely different one. The former expected wind squalls, while the latter were almost sure that the storm would pass and no radical change would follow because the reality was not probably fair, but reasonable, at least more reasonable than everything else. Despite flaws and complaints, globalization was viewed as something irreversible. Universal openness (more precisely, the unattainability of closeness) and total mobility seemed to be immutable. By default, it was believed that the costs of changing the status

quo would exceed any benefits from such change.

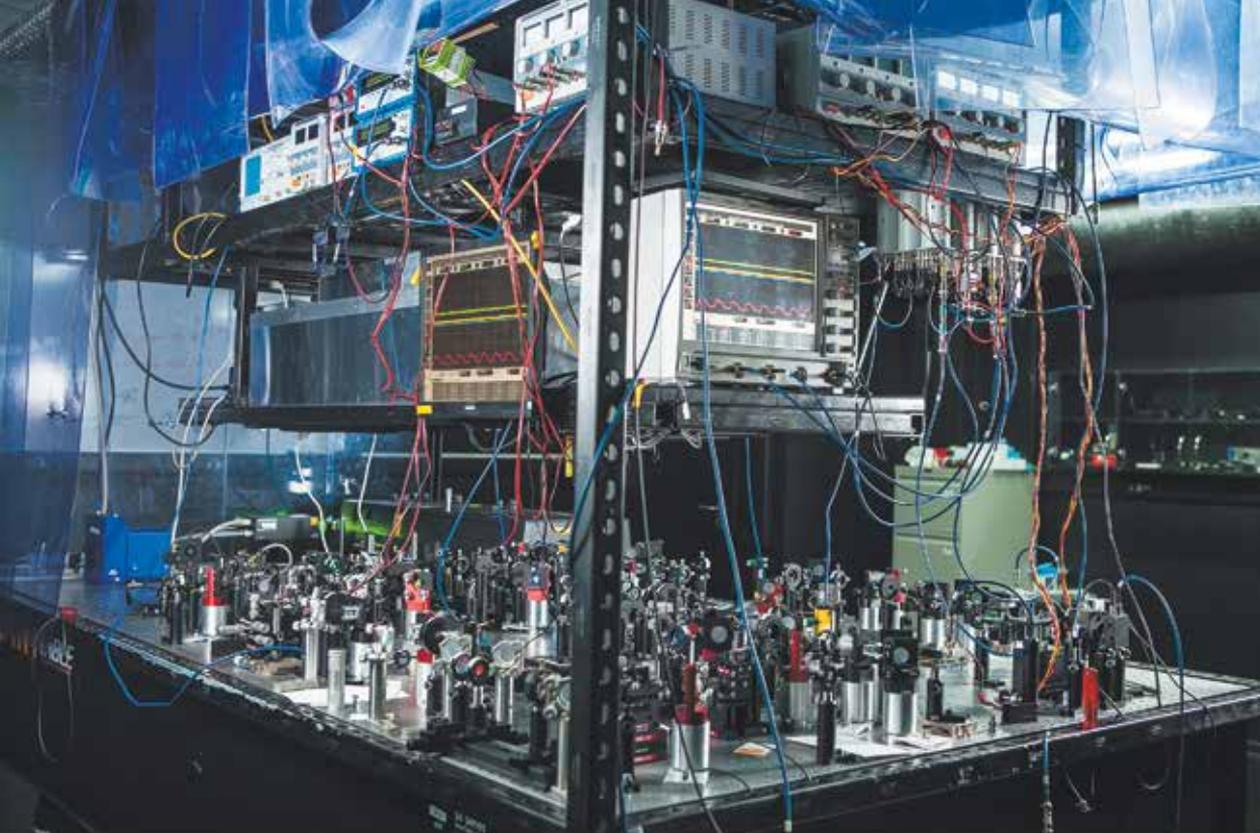
The struggle on the world stage was aimed not at revolutionizing the existing system of international affairs, but at securing a more comfortable place for oneself in it. The pandemic has called all this into question. It turned out that unexpected circumstances could easily seal all borders, block a substantial amount of travel, paralyze a significant part of the world economy, and basically discard values and principles hitherto considered axioms. And what has been condemned (national selfishness and the desire to stay away from interdependence) now appears to be nearly the only rational way of behavior.

There is no point in arguing in a paradigm that has become favorite not only in Russia: Who is going to benefit from this and who arranged it all? But there is no denying that by 2020 international affairs had become completely muddled, and the desire to do something to get out of the vicious circle was in the air. It is probably the logic of history that objectively exigent circumstances inevitably generate an answer.

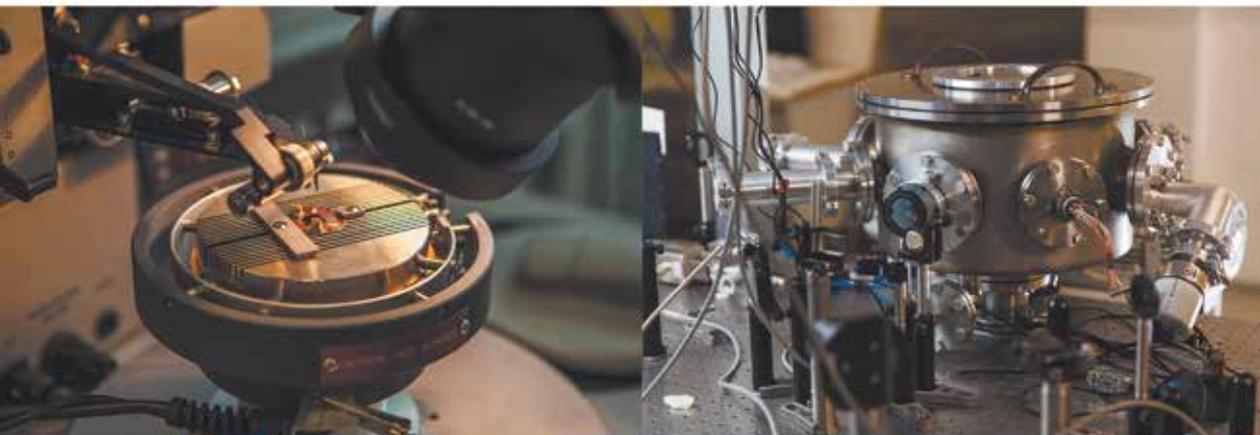
The world express train has skidded to a halt. The pandemic has thrown life off the track more harshly than all the world wars did before. Hopes that it will play the role of such a war and wipe

away contradictions have not been justified—the array of conflicts becomes even broader and more pronounced. But for the first time in a long while the further course of events depends on decisions to be taken by concrete countries. Until now, they were rather drifting with the stream.

The countries of the world shut down abruptly, and, in fact, there was no choice—there is no other way to ward off the spread of infection than isolation. The question is whether to open up again, when, how, and to what extent? There are options. Firstly, decisions are unlikely to be synchronized as each capital will wait for the best moment, guided by its own considerations, not only epidemiological ones. Secondly, solutions may differ since an unexpected stop gives us a chance to think about the course of movement, which was previously considered the only correct/possible one. The universalism of norms and rules did not begin to erode in 2020 but much earlier, the pandemic has just drawn a line under the very idea that everyone should act in the same way because it suits everyone. The new virus has made it clear that in the event of an acute crisis affecting the physical safety of people, each state is responsible for itself and its citizens (and before them), and can effectively rely only on its own capabilities. How to maximize them



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is know-how, if not completely original, then firmly tied to specific conditions.

The moment of making a decision or a choice is a qualitative shift and the end of a more than thirty-year-long era of seeming predetermination.

Many will passionately wait for the New Year holidays just to change the year number in the calendar. But 2021 will not become a new chapter, rather a new spread in this

endless book, with the last page of the previous section on the left and the first page of the next one on the right. In order to understand correctly what is on the right, one will constantly have to check with what is on the left—the plot is interwoven. But its characters will decide what is going to happen next. World politics is again a book with an open ending, which is interesting and scary to read, because no one knows what is in store.