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Opinion — Paradiplomacy in Times of Pandemic: The Paths Ahead

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MARIANO ALVAREZ, JUL 1 2020

Covid-19 has produced changes in all areas and will continue impacting the social, economic and political structures. The field of International Relations is no stranger to this phenomenon, where an already beaten multilateralism faces new challenges that further threaten global interdependence. These new global circumstances force non-central governments to adapt and their internationalization (paradiplomacy) is no exception. Although much has already been written about the depth and scope of the effects Covid-19 is producing, this is an issue that will continue to be debated. Although at this stage it would be irresponsible to point out what the world will be when the pandemic finally ends, it is necessary to start asking about possible exit scenarios in order to prepare ourselves.

During this world crisis, paradiplomacy has shown that it has a role to play. The internationalization of non-central governments, especially through decentralized cooperation generates direct benefits for the sub-state entities. For instance, Barcelona (Spain) has decided to spend 400,000 euros to fight Covid-19 in cities abroad, like Amman (Jordan), Saïda (Lebanon), Tetouan (Morocco) and Maputo (Mozambique), among others. Likewise, Frankfurt (Germany) has donated 10,000 euros to its twin city of Milan (Italy) to help in the fight against the pandemic. In South America, which is currently facing winter and probably the worst moments of the pandemic, non-central governments have also turned to their international ties. For example, the province of Córdoba in Argentina turned to its twinning agreement with the Chinese city of Chongqing, to obtain medical supplies. In the same way, the Bío Bío region in Chile asserted its long relationship with the Chinese province of Hubei, to access the essential masks to combat the pandemic.

In parallel to this increase in paradiplomatic initiatives, states have also exercised greater control over areas that, although within their exclusive competence, had been relaxed during the rise of globalization. Under this light, central governments have implemented restrictions to free transit, tightened border controls and amplified their presence in international relations. In this sense, it is worth asking two questions: (1) Has the pandemic contributed to or hindered paradiplomacy? (2) Will these effects endure in time?

Firstly, the internationalization of non-central governments has faced a double dynamic. On the one hand, states have augmented their presence in the international arena through unilateral responses to the crisis. On the other hand states seem to have deviated from multilateral organizations (already in question prior to the pandemic). This has favored the fragmentation of the global scene and seems to have increased levels of competition (for example, for medical supplies). This has also affected non-central governments, which frequently have had to confront their central governments regarding circumstances linked to the pandemic. For example, closure of borders left large contingents of migrants stranded without work in many cities, making the local authorities responsible to handle a situation generated by the central government (as did de city of Iquique in Chile). Also, many sub-state units required their states to declare quarantine in their territories or even went as far as unilateral declaration (as seen in the Mexican state of Jalisco and the Brazilian state of São Paulo).

On the other hand, the pandemic has once again shown that the international behavior of non-central governments does not necessarily follow the actions of their states. In recent months, while global focus turned to the central governments' unilateral actions, international cooperation in healthcare was brought to the attention of the sub-state

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units revitalizing various paradiplomatic initiatives. Several relevant actions were born in this area, such as Cities for Global Health. Likewise, cooperation within organizations such as United Cities and Local Governments (UCLG), UN Habitat, the AL-LAs Project, the International Urban Cooperation and Metropolis, among others, was revitalized through the exchange of experiences to face the crisis in all its dimensions.

Therefore, the pandemic has had a dual impact on paradiplomacy. On the one hand, the presence of states is regaining its prominence in the global scene (both effectively and relatively), this can put in jeopardy the interdependence gained during the rise of globalization and, in turn, hinder the internationalization of sub-state units. On the other hand, non-central governments are also innovating in their links and generating new spaces of cooperation, which is contributing to the development of paradiplomacy.

Secondly, there is the longer-term question regarding how this trend may impact the future of paradiplomacy. At this point it is not possible to affirm with any degree of certainty that the changes produced in the matter of state presence or decentralized cooperation will last over time. However, there is a third component that can generate a substantive change in how non-central governments have so far internationalized: the use of virtual platforms to hold international meetings.

The closing of borders and the reduction of air traffic at the international level, as well as the social distancing and quarantine at the domestic level, have had a direct impact on the congresses, summits, seminars and other face-to-face meetings that were scheduled during 2020. Practically, all these encounters have been canceled, rescheduled or migrated to digital platforms. The latter did have a significant effect on the possibilities of participation that the smaller intermediate and local governments. The emergence of virtual platforms for holding meetings, both ordinary meetings and seminars on specific subjects such as health, gender, transport or economy, makes the paradiplomatic practice available to all non-central governments and not only to those with the resources and times necessary to embark on international trips.

The post-Covid-19 paradiplomacy scenario sets three major questions: (1) Will states emerge with an enlarged international role that further limits non-central governments participation in the international arena? (2) Will the renewed momentum of decentralized and health cooperation networks continue? And (3) will broader participation of non-central governments be secured through virtual platforms? To the first two questions we can only venture opinions, but the third we must actively answer and work so that the pandemic leaves us with a more diverse and inclusive world, at least in terms of paradiplomacy.

About the author:

Mariano Alvarez holds a PhD from the University of Leiden (Netherlands), a MA in International Studies from the University of Chile, and a BA in international Relations from the Catholic University of Argentina. He is Associate Researcher of the Instituto de Estudios Internacionales at the University Arturo Prat (Chile), executive board member of the Red de Expertos en Paradiplomacia e Internacionalización Territorial (REPIT) and consultant for different international organizations. His most recent publications are “Gobernanza y desempeño exportador de los servicios modernos en América Latina y la India” (2020), “La creciente importancia de la paradiplomacia en América Latina: motivos para su abordaje académico y su vinculación con las fronteras” (2019), and “América Latina Global. Estudios regionales sobre paradiplomacia” (2019).